

"Generosity and Divinity"

Sermon Series: Creating a Culture of Generosity

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

World Communion Sunday, October 1, 2017

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Holy Scriptures: Exodus 16:1-15, 31-36 (NRSV)

Bread from Heaven

The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. ²The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

⁴Then the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. ⁵On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days." ⁶So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, ⁷and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your complaining against the Lord. For what are we, that you complain against us?" ⁸And Moses said, "When the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the Lord has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the Lord."

⁹Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.'" ¹⁰And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. ¹¹The Lord spoke to Moses and said, ¹²"I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning, you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'"

¹³In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning, there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵When the Israelites saw

it, they said to one another, "What is it?"^[a] For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat."

³¹The house of Israel called it manna; it was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey. ³²Moses said, "This is what the Lord has commanded: 'Let an omer of it be kept throughout your generations, in order that they may see the food with which I fed you in the wilderness, when I brought you out of the land of Egypt.'" ³³And Moses said to Aaron, "Take a jar, and put an omer of manna in it, and place it before the Lord, to be kept throughout your generations." ³⁴As the Lord commanded Moses, so Aaron placed it before the covenant, for safekeeping.

³⁵The Israelites ate manna forty years, until they came to a habitable land; they ate manna, until they came to the border of the land of Canaan. ³⁶An omer is a tenth of an ephah.

The MARTA train car was almost full of riders.

I had a coveted seat on the aisle.

Millennials in the aisle leaned over me, reaching up to hold the silver bar above.

My parents raised me to believe that it is respectful, nay expected,

for their sons to stand up and relinquish our seat to a woman or senior citizen.

So, I studied those nearest me on the MARTA train to assess who might need a seat.

The train was full yet everyone around me was younger and seemingly able-bodied.

Inside, I wrestled.

Should I offer to a college-age woman my portion of the orange bench?

What about the thirty-something in the sweatshirt?

At that moment,

interrupting my internal argument of social etiquette and Christian generosity,
a male voice from the far end of the train said, "Atlanta!"

A few responded. "United!"

Undeterred, he said, "Atlanta!"

Now more joined in. "United!"

"Atlanta!"

And in unison we erupted. "United!"

"Atlanta!"

"United!"

When we pulled into Five Points Station,

echoes of "Atlanta! United!" faded into the darkness of the tunnel behind us.

The doors opened, and everyone funneled out to change trains.

I left behind my inner qualms and hustled to catch the train bound for Doraville,

legs and spirit buoyed by the call and response for a united Atlanta.

Such is modern life in our fair city, home of one of the hottest sports teams,

the Atlanta United Football Club, nicknamed the Five Stripes.

Atlanta resounds with shouts of unity and cheers

for first time winners and First Responders alike.

Yet we have also borne witness to divisive behavior and discouraged souls,

maybe those of our neighbors, maybe our own.

How many of us have ceased to listen to the news on the radio?

Or now avoid the morning paper headlines?

Or tune out the evening newscast?

Or look aghast and askance at the latest reports on social media?

Newscasts are akin to a train wreck: we don't want to look, yet we can't turn away.

Thank God for signs of hope.

We feel so good about our congregation and the Good News we're sharing and being.

God is doing an amazing new thing in this church,

re-creating us into new beings,
engaging us to serve and love God's people from all walks of life,
welcoming home the last, the least, the lost,
those longing for a relationship with God and one another,
those living into a bright new day, those cherishing sacred memories,
those looking for a new and better way.

Such is life in this roller coaster age.

There is so much to be thankful for, so many blessings to count, to be grateful for,
and yet...

Yet we feel so blue about being inundated with one crisis after another;

we are on a communal emotional overload,
so much so we relate to the character Evelene in "The Wiz":

"When I wake up in the afternoon

Which it pleases me to do

Don't nobody bring me no bad news

'Cause I wake up already negative

And I've wired up my fuse

So don't nobody bring me no bad news"

And so, we murmur.

I murmur; you murmur; our murmurings gain momentum and volume.

Whether you are frustrated or angry, fearful or afraid,

believing yourself to be powerless or abandoned or solitary,
hearing only discordant notes, feeling disconsolate,
hungering for righteousness, thirsting for truth,
sensing little or seeing none...

please know this, my friends:

you are not alone, God is with you, we are with you,
you are made good, in the image of God,
and this is not the first time

God has heard such a sound, a cry,
murmurings rising from earth

to the heavens like a collective roar.

The Scriptures inform us and our faith confirms

that the Lord hears the suffering, complaints, frustrations,
the murmurings of God's people.

God said to Moses, *"I have heard their suffering."*

The Lord said, *"I have heard the murmurings of my people."*

When He looked over the brokenness of Jerusalem, *Jesus wept.*

Consider what happened in the wilderness,

soon after Moses and Aaron and the Elders

led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and toward the Promised Land.

They stepped out on faith, trusting in the promise of God.

They became living sanctuaries, carrying the Word into a new world.

Then, then, then they began to be in want.

They hungered.

They thirsted.

They grew frustrated and afraid.

They did what angry and fearful people do: they lashed out.

They looked for a bulls eye.

And they found a target.

Oh boy, did they find one.

In Exodus 16 we learn:

² *The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.* ³ *The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."*

⁴ Then the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day."

In Exodus 17...

The people quarreled with Moses, and said, 'Give us water to drink.' Moses said to them, 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?'

But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?'

So Moses cried out to the Lord, 'What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.'

The Lord said to Moses, 'Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.'

Quails aplenty at night!

Manna from heaven!

Bread for the journey!

Dew to sip in the dawn!

Fresh water from a rock!

Living water for the thirsty!

Food and drink for body and soul!

Instead of death, resurrection; instead of loss, hope; instead of silence, a Word.

God's gifts were right there in front of the Israelites;

they did not recognize or appreciate them.

Before their eyes were representatives of God's liberating power, Moses and Aaron.

All around them was the freedom they had longed for, yearned for, waited for.

Yet they were not satisfied.

Lord knows, some folks can be four-square amid Living Water and still be thirsty.

God loves us anyway.

Like the time a woman and her grandson were at the beach

He was playing in the water when a huge wave appeared from nowhere,
crashing directly where her grandson was wading.

When the water receded, the boy was nowhere to be found.

She lifted her hands to the sky and cried, *"Lord, how could you?"*

"Aren't you proud of me? Have I not been a wonderful mother and grandmother?"

"Have I not given to my church, and bought a million boxes of Girl Scout cookies?"

Suddenly another huge wave crashed on the beach.

When the water receded, her grandson was there, smiling,
splashing around as if nothing had ever happened.

A loud voice boomed from the heavens,

"Okay, okay, I have returned your grandson. Are you satisfied?"
She looked down at her grandson then she looked up and said, *"He had a hat!"*

Morning mists delivered dew that quenched their thirst,

while desert plants delivered manna that fed their bodies.

Moses was told to strike a rock with a stick, and it delivered fresh water.

"My Lord and my God."

What do you call such an overflowing abundance?

Sounds to me like extravagance. Extravagant love. Extravagant giving.

An extravagance of enough.

Yes, for there was enough for all to eat and drink for the day and night.

Yes, for there was enough.

How much is enough?

Author John Updike pointed out that Americans suffer from a lack of a sense of enough.

How much is enough?

Sufficient.

Enough is sufficient. Enough is more than sufficient.

The Apostle Paul heard Christ say to him: *"My grace is sufficient for you,
for my power is made perfect in weakness."* (2 Cor. 12: 9)

Sufficient.

(For those taking notes, hashtag #1)

(#1)

God's grace is sufficient for today, and that is enough.

God's goodness is sufficient for every situation and encounter, and that is enough.

God's generosity is sufficient for this and every need, and that is enough.

(#2) God's generosity satisfies.

At Jacob's Well a woman of Samaria met a man named Jesus.

Indicating the bucket of well water between them, *Jesus said to her,*

*"Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,
but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.*

*The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water
gushing up to eternal life."*

*The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty
or have to keep coming here to draw water."* (John 4: 13-15)

Be satisfied with what the Lord provides.

God's gifts of life and love, community and provisions satisfy, gushing up to life eternal.

This is not about protecting or hoarding; this is about being sated.

Charles Dickens wrote, "Be thankful for the gifts you are given."

Be satisfied, and trust that it is enough.

Be satisfied, not greedy, hoarding, grabbing, claiming more than you truly need.

Be satisfied with enough, and, like the Israelites in the wilderness,

you will discover in your own wildernesses the joy of God's generosity.

(#3)

God's generosity grows exponentially, accretes, accumulates, accelerates.

The Church is an example of the accretion of God's generosity.

Accretion is defined as an increase by natural growth or by gradual external addition; growth in size or extent.

God's generosity begets a generous spirit, which in turn increases gratitude,

which fosters grace upon grace.

As love is shared and expressed and made real, the Body of Christ expands and evolves.

(#4)

God's generosity stands on its own, independent of our actions or desires or wants.

God's generosity is not contingent on our actions or inaction, deeds or misdeeds.

God's generosity is not given based on merit; it cannot be earned.

God's generosity isn't earned, can't be lost, and doesn't end.

It's not based on right behavior that is addressed,

or wrongs that need to be redressed,
murmurings that reveal degrees of stress,
or harmful behavior that needs to be confessed.

(#5)

God's generosity empowers the whole people of God.

God's generosity blesses followers with the power and will

to act for justice with mercy, to build the Beloved Community.

Remember how God listened to the raised voices of suffering people,

folks murmuring, expressing hurts and hopes?

So, too, are the beneficiaries of God's generosity to listen & respond.

On September 18, 1918, Eugene Deb was convicted of violating the Sedition Act.
In his statement to the court Eugene Deb said:

*"Your Honor, years ago I recognized my kinship with all living beings,
and I made up my mind that
I was not one bit better than the meanest on earth.
I said then, and I say now,
that while there is a lower class, I am in it,
and while there is a criminal element, I am of it,
and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free."*

God's generosity is sufficient, satisfies, accretes, stands on its own, empowers.

Such divine generosity gifts us with knowing when not to be satisfied.

The Church will not be satisfied with indifference or intolerance or inequality.

We will not be satisfied with anyone's greedy and boorish behavior.

We will not be satisfied while voting rights are threatened or stripped away.

We will not be satisfied with racial injustice or discrimination based on who you love,

when next door neighbors and neighboring nations
are broke or broken through no fault of their own.

We will not be satisfied while our sisters and brothers in Puerto Rico are in dire straits.

Let's give God praise for Rose Bianca Szymanski for taking the point
to raise both our awareness and supplies for our sister church in Bayamon.

The Holy Scriptures teach us and our faith affirms

that whenever the God who delivers and liberates is not satisfied,
that the time has come to speak up and act for the collective good,
then neither should we be acquiescent.

We are a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world,

empowered by the generous call of the One Who Created and Creates.

The generosity of God overflows and sustains our overwhelmed lives,

filling us up and sending us forth to do good
and to be kind and to speak the truth in love.

This past week at an Atlanta area high school girls' softball game,

the infield umpire was a retired US Marine.

The National Anthem began to play over the stadium loudspeakers.

The umpire stood still, ramrod straight, and saluted the American flag over yonder.

Something out of the corner of his eye made him glance over toward third base.

A high school girl in uniform was taking a knee.

When the anthem's last notes echoed over the stands,

the umpire walked to home plate,
where the other umpire was adjusting his facemask.

He said, "*See the third base player who took a knee?*"

I fought for and served my country so she could have that right."

Atlanta! Unite!

The Red Sea waters are parting before us. Beloved Community beckons.
Move forward together, through the mud and muck. Do not be afraid.

Atlanta! Unite!

The manna is provided. All are welcome at Christ's Table.
Share, partake Bread for the journey. Be strong.

Atlanta! Unite!

The rock has been struck. The Cup is filling up & spilling over.*
Drink deep of the generous Spirit of God.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

*A nod to Chris Williamson's "Waterfall"