

The Lesson

Exodus 16: 5-7a, 13-20

John 15: 5-17

It seems to me that there is a lesson that God has been trying to teach humanity for time out of mind. It is a lesson so simple in substance that one would think we'd have gotten it long ago—yet it is so hard in practice that we haven't fully gotten it yet.

The times when we have briefly or imperfectly understood and practiced it, humanity has glimpsed the very threshold of the kingdom of heaven...but when we have lost our understanding of it, which has been more often than not, the kingdom of heaven slips away once more.

I don't know how far back the lesson goes—probably as far back as the story of humanity and God...but one place where we can witness God trying to teach it is in the Exodus.

The lesson is this: draw your life from me—do not grasp it for yourself.

Now in the Exodus, the lesson is given in the most basic way possible...each morning, each new dawn, God says to the people, “Here is what you need—life-giving manna scattered upon the ground. You don’t need to search for it, it is in plain sight, and there is enough for today, enough for all of you. Don’t try to gather more, you don’t need to. I will provide for tomorrow as well.”

So immediately, what do the people do? “Let’s keep a little back,” they say. “gather a little more than we need, have a little left for tomorrow.” It seems like common sense, a little extra security, save back some manna for a rainy day...but it changes everything.

And the excess....breeds worms, literally and figuratively. The whole equation is changed.

If EVERYONE is trusting in God, they are dependent upon God and in harmony with each other...nobody is hungry, everyone has what is needed, manna is provided and it is shared EVERY day. No one is worried about himself or herself, with needs provided, each can focus upon his or her family and neighbor.

But if they save up the manna—well then they aren't depending daily upon God's ability to PROVIDE manna, they are depending daily upon their ability to ACCUMULATE it. "I can save up enough manna for tomorrow and the day after that, and the day after that...I can build a manna barn, stockpile a manna 401k, rule over a manna EMPIRE. The eventual result is, I don't need God, I have all this manna built up—the fruits of my labors."

So the relationship with God is fundamentally altered, and trust in God is fundamentally diminished.

And of course, the human relationships are altered as well—competition is introduced: "We don't have as much manna as the neighbors";

doubt is introduced: "Do you think we have enough? For tomorrow? For the next day?"

Anxiety is introduced: "We must gather more."

Family members start eyeing one another's plates—"Am I getting my full share?"

Rival coalitions form—“How can WE get some of the manna that THEY have accumulated?”

Do you see the difference between grace and grasp—how one breeds harmony and the other breeds worms? “Draw your life from me,” says God. “I will provide. Do not grasp it for yourself.”

God’s thought seems to have been—“If I just give them this day their daily bread, then my kingdom will come, my will be done.” But as simple as the Exodus lesson was, we humans couldn’t quite get it.

God would have to teach us the kingdom in another way.

So God said, I’ll walk among them—“I’ll tell them. I’ll SHOW them.”

One of the most consistent messages of Jesus’ teaching is the very same message from the Exodus lesson: “Draw your life from me—do not grasp it for yourself.” Jesus brings the message forward in a dozen different ways.

He tells the parable of the lilies of the field: “Do not be anxious—consider the lilies, they do not toil or spin, yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as one of these. Do not worry about tomorrow—if God so clothes the grass, will God not also clothe you?” But we worry about tomorrow.

Jesus tells the parable of the rich fool, who says, “I will tear down my barns and build bigger barns, relax, and rest upon what I have gathered.” God responds, “You cannot provide for your own security. This very night your life is demanded of you—the things you have prepared....whose will they be? Your grasping is for naught.” But still we build bigger barns.

Jesus tells the parable of the talents...the servant who anxiously grasps what God has given him...ends up with nothing. The one who gives it away, invests it, shares it, uses it...gains everything. But our instinct is to grasp, to hold on, to hold back.

The consistent lesson or message across ALL of these is—I will GIVE life...you do not need to grasp, worry, accumulate, compete...

In Luke 17:33 Jesus even says it plainly and openly: “Those who try to make their life secure will lose it—but those who lose their life will keep it.”

Draw your life from me. Do not grasp it for yourself.

Now all of this is the scriptural background that we need to understand the fifteenth chapter of John’s gospel, because it is just Jesus teaching—ONE MORE TIME—the key to the kingdom of heaven.

“I am the vine—and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. I am rooted in God. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love.

If you are rooted in me, your life will be fruitful—the fruit will simply come. GOD WILL PROVIDE IT.

Your grasping will not bear lasting fruit, your labors will not, your self-sufficiency will not, your anxiety will not, your competition will not...but if you are grounded in me, trusting in me, dependent upon me...then the fruit will come and it will come abundantly.

Draw your life from me—do not grasp it for yourself. My grace is sufficient for you.

It is a simple, simple, basic concept—God has not created God's kingdom to be complex, confusing, elusive or unattainable. But look at how the lesson of the manna impacts everything—and how every good thing flows from it.

Material generosity? If I know in my bones that I have enough—that my needs will be met, that God will provide...then I do not hesitate to give, to share, to pass along what I have been given—I abide in the vine. The fruit will come.

Forgiveness? It is nothing more than generosity of the spirit and it works in the same way. If I know in my bones that my faults and

failings, errors and shortcomings are forgiven...that I will not be diminished, despised or rejected, God's grace is sufficient...then I do not hesitate to forgive. I can release those who hurt me from my resentment without cost to myself—I abide in the vine. More fruit will come.

Love? It is as certain as the manna. I will be loved by God. Every day. Every dawn. Without fail. Without end. I do not need to withhold love, grasp it, hoard it, or accumulate it—I can give it away. More fruit will surely come.

This is my commandment, Jesus says. Love one another, as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this—to lay down one's life for one's friends. Lay down your life—more life will come!

Manna—eat it! Share it! More will come! Draw your life from me, do not grasp it!

Money, possessions—give them, share them! More will come! Find your security in me, do not grasp it!

Forgiveness, compassion—give! Share! More will come! Find your wholeness in me, I will replenish you!

Love—that is what I have the most of. I will fill you to overflowing. So you can love your spouse, your friends, your children. Love your neighbor, the stranger, your enemy. Live with unguarded hearts. Give love, share love more will come!

It is the simplest of lessons, really...but the hardest of tasks.

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s pleasure to give you the kingdom—you cannot grasp it, own it, earn it legislate it, bring it about through force of will or force of arms. But you can receive it and you can share it. When you have learned that lesson fully—then the kingdom will fully come.”

Amen