

The Doctrine of 'Enough'

Pastor Laurie Hartzell's Sermon at First Presbyterian Church, Benton Harbor,
Sunday, Nov. 10, 2019

Philippians 4:10-20

I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you have been concerned for me but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. In any case it was kind of you to share my distress. You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. And my God will fully satisfy every need of you according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Exodus 16: 1-4a; 14-16

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. The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said, "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 the wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger. 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."

Now I will go to verses 14-16, which talk about this bread they were to gather each day: *When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. This is what the Lord has commanded: 'Gather as much of it as each of you needs ...'"*

My first memory of the Thursday night suppers at First Presbyterian Church in Benton Harbor is of beautiful Veronica Harmon, Bernadette Carpenter's sister, making a big pot of steaming-hot soup while wearing a pair of fabulous black heels in the church kitchen. It was back around 2004 or 2005, I believe. The Thursday night suppers started about that time. The ministry grew out of our relationship with what was then the Southwest Michigan Correctional Facility, at the

end of Hull Street. In the early 2000s there were dozens of men and women just getting out of longer-term prison sentences, and they were staying there. First Pres had a relationship with the correctional facility through our partnership with the Michigan Prisoner Re-entry Initiative. The Thursday night suppers were a time for men and women to come to church for some good soup and to connect with people from the church who could help them in their re-entry into society with things like getting IDs, connections with jobs, and more. The goal of the supper then was also to offer mentoring, prayer support and a kind of family time. A time when people could be supported and nurtured as they gathered around tables eating food off real plates, not paper, and eating soup out of real bowls, not Styrofoam.

Since then, the Southwest Michigan Correctional Facility has turned into a KPEP facility and the main offices for Berrien County parole services. A few people stay there, but not like the dozens that were there in the early 2000s. Also, state programs have changed, and we no longer have a partnership with a program for prisoners.

We still do have our Thursday night suppers, however. The suppers are now open to the entire church and community – not just people on parole. Each Thursday night people from our community, members of the church and other people who have heard about our supper come together and eat a meal together. We never know exactly how many will come. It ranges between 30 and 80. One time at a summer supper in the last year or so I remember over 100 people being here. We work hard at making this like family time. It's more than just a meal. It's a time for all God's people to gather, surrounded by the love of Christ.

Morton Hill is in a region of our county known as a food desert. Food deserts are places where people have difficulty finding access to fresh fruits and vegetables and other healthy food options. We still do not have a full-fledged grocery store within the city limits of Benton Harbor. Almost always we serve a huge green salad on Thursday night, and many of the entrees are healthy food options that people may not have access to. For a few summers we were able to partner with the Berrien Health Bus and offer fresh fruits and vegetables for people to take home after dinner.

Sometimes people who hear about the meal ask me: How do you plan for this? How do you plan so there will be enough? What if more people come than there is food, or what if you have lots of leftovers? Sometimes we do have lots of leftovers, and a few of our cooks will bring the leftovers to the women's shelter. People can take "to go" containers, and sometimes the left-over food is saved for Sunday mornings.

But in all the years we've been doing the Thursday night supper, there has always been enough. Sometimes, if we have a large crowd and our meal looks smaller, we have to ask people to be mindful that we want everyone to eat, so to wait for seconds until we know everyone has had something. People graciously do just that. And NO ONE has ever left this place hungry on a Thursday night. Sometimes Virginia Maxwell and I say it is like the five loaves and two fishes. We don't get too anxious, because there is always enough. It feels like God always provides enough through us.

Enough.

Now in our text from Exodus today, the people of God are in a kind of food desert, too. Actually, it is also a literal desert. They are out in the wilderness. The word “wilderness” in the Bible can refer to an actual physical wilderness – like a hot, dry sandy desert. It can also refer to a spiritual place of uncertainty and confusion. Like when the rug has been pulled out from under you and you find yourself living with a huge loss or a betrayal. Or like when you are going through a significant change and feel uncertain about next steps. Sometimes the wilderness is just a long loneliness of confusion. Life certainly serves up wilderness times. Well, the Israelites were in both a physical and spiritual wilderness. A couple months earlier God had freed them from slavery to the Egyptians after a miraculous series of events that included the deaths of the first born in Egypt and also the parting of the Red Sea. They were supposedly heading to some promised land, but in our story today we find them in a wilderness region, near some water but wondering how in the world they are going to eat out in the desert.

They start to get anxious and grumble. They said, IF ONLY they were back in Egypt they would have enough to eat. IF ONLY they hadn’t had left that place where there were pots of meat and all the bread they could want. Now, we can be certain that while there were huge pots of meat and lots of bread back in Egypt, the slaves themselves surely weren’t living high off the hog. But their fear and anxiety probably exaggerated their memories. We know about that as we sometimes ourselves remember those “good old days” which, if we are honest, weren’t really as “good” as we claim.

And out in the wilderness, as the people of God are in their own kind of food desert, God makes an astounding promise to them. God promises that God will give them bread to eat each and every day while they are on this wilderness journey. Each morning they will wake up and there will be bread to eat. Enough for that day.

And sure enough, as we read, the people of God wake up the next day and they see this flaky stuff on the ground. They say, “What is it?” It is manna. In Hebrew, the word manna is literally “What is it?” And the people of God obediently gather the “What is it?” for the day.

So, for all the years of wilderness wanderings, God’s people learn that while they cannot take bread with them to the next destination, while it will do them no good to Google what restaurants may be at the next stop, while they don’t even know if there will be a water hole nearby, they can count on God to supply manna, to give them this “What is it?” each day. Enough for each and every single day.

In his sermon about the Israelites and manna, Princeton Seminary’s president, the Rev. Dr. Craig Barnes, says that in looking for manna each morning God was training God’s people to change their attitude from complaining “If only” to looking for God’s provision each day: “What is it?” It was easy for God’s people to complain and look back to the good ol’ days and get stuck in the “If onlys.” But the looking for manna each day – going out and gathering the “What is it?” –

invited them to live into the future. What is it today, God? How are you providing for us today?

As most of you know, next Sunday is my last Sunday serving as pastor here at First Presbyterian Church, and I've been using these last sermons here to talk about things I've learned from and with you as we've partnered in ministry these past, almost 25, years – about 10 years as your pastor and the almost 15 years prior as a layperson.

Now, as we've said, our church is in an area identified as a food desert. Our church is also located in a community that struggles with many of the ailments of the culture of poverty. And as I've heard the stories of this great city, I've heard lots of "If onlys." If only JC Penney and all those fabulous stores were back on Main Street. If only the fruit market was still open. If only so and so was still superintendent of the Benton Harbor Area Schools district. If only the churches were filled with young people like they were back then. If only ... If only ...

It is important to remember the good old days and where we have come from and what God has done in the past, but it is also important not to get stuck there. It is important to keep our eyes peeled for God's provision and leading each day – for THIS day – and ask the question, "God, what is it?"

And, my friends, I've been learning to do that here with you. One of the things I've learned over and over again in my time with you is that we always have enough. God ALWAYS has given us enough to do what God has called us to do. Our part is to keep asking, "What is it?" To keep our eyes peeled and hearts open for what God's provision is for each day and go out and gather it!

People are sometimes amazed when I tell them what this small church does: Food Pantry, Thursday night supper each week, relationships with organizations like the Soup Kitchen, Boys and Girls Clubs, MOSAIC, Harbor Habitat and more, youth support in our community. In my time here we've established a library and supported tutoring programs at Morton School, partnered with Overflow Church in student support at ACA Middle School, partnered in a variety of events on Morton Hill, hosted service learning groups from around the nation, tried a small business development group, partnered in efforts to create dialogue on race relations and white privilege, joined the efforts of the Ministerial Alliance, opened our building to community groups, hosted Pub Theology down at the Livery, sponsored ArtsBridge programs highlighting the arts and bridging the divisions in our community through the arts, and the list goes on. And, my friends, we have fewer than 90 members on our rolls! Our Presbytery gives us some money each year so we can do some of the things, but those resources aren't enough to support all that we do.

Over and over again we've seen how God provides what we need to do what we do – right on time. Oh, the stories I can tell!

Early in my time as pastor here, the Summer Youth Leadership Program began to attract children and youth from Morton School. Some of us began to wonder how to continue engaging these youth. Our members were already so busy with all our ministries that they didn't have time

or energy for yet another thing. And while youth have always been part of the family here and while we have many community resources to connect our youth with, some of us were aware that we needed support in helping those relationships grow deeper. We needed more people to help us nurture these youth God brought to us.

About the same time, I preached a sermon up at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Grand Rapids. After that sermon, a young woman came to me through a leader there and said, "I think God is calling me to Benton Harbor." My first question to our Julie was, "Have you ever been to Benton Harbor?" Her answer was, "No!" Westminster helped finance her move here for an initial six-month contract. Seven years later she is still here with us. She was one of those pieces of manna God gave us to help us live into our ministry, and we are able to support her with funds from the Presbytery, Westminster Grand Rapids, and Knox Presbyterian in Naperville, Illinois. Each fall we have to look for money to keep her, and each fall it is given to us. Enough. Manna. For 2020 the Session has decided to expand Julie's role so that she not only supports our youth but begins to support our ministry to young children. This will cost us more money, and we've already received a new grant to help support us and her in this expanded work. But it is not fully covered yet and is still a leap of faith! But we believe God is leading us in this and trust that manna will be provided. Maybe even through the likes of you. And I must also say that when Julie and the youth want to do something, they just ask you. And the manna flows. Snacks, rides to places, funding support, support for Camp Henry, and more. There has always been enough. More than enough.

And the Open Wide Our Front Door campaign? I don't need to tell you that story again. The craziness, really, of a small church our size trying to raise over \$600,000 to fix our building and expand our capacity for mission. How proud I was to walk with you – not in the despairing "If onlys": If only we had more people. If only we had more money. If only we were in a better location. If only ... If only ...

No, we don't do the "If onlys" – at least not most of the time. We do the "What is it?" And we heard clearly. The "What is it?" for the past number of years was to continue our mission and live into the vision of Open Wide Our Front Door. And God provided. We had to go out and do the hard work of gathering. But God provided. Manna. Amazing manna for this time.

Oh, the stories I can tell – over and over again of how God has provided. Enough.

And it isn't just financial and physical resources. I started out here with you as a brand-new pastor. I've had the privilege of traveling with you in the highways and byways – in times of joy like graduations and weddings and new babies and rejoicing in successful programs and partnerships in the community, and in traveling with you in times of loss, hardship, community trauma and confusion. Sometimes we've tried things we felt God calling us to and they fizzled. My seminary training and my life experience before becoming a pastor helped in preparing me for my role here, but surely not completely. Bob Judd and I have this ongoing joke about all the things I could add to the "They didn't teach me that in Seminary" book. Often, if I'm telling you the truth, there were times when I didn't know what I was doing or didn't think I had the wisdom

or words. And over and over again you have told me that things I said and did were just what you needed at any given time. It is an incredible thing to be used by God – to have my presence and words be used as manna. To know that God will give me what I need to live into what I need to faithfully serve in that day.

In a few minutes we will ordain Charase Dorsey as a ruling elder of the First Presbyterian Church. When I read her charge you will hear these words that were spoken to me when I was ordained as a pastor and that we say to all pastors and elders when they are ordained: “The grace of your baptism is sufficient for your calling because it is God’s grace.” I love those words. They remind me that I always have what I need to do what God has called me to do. I always have ENOUGH, not because I have it all together, but because God’s grace is enough. And as I look back, my friends, God’s manna and grace have been there to give me what I need over and over again, to give *us* what we need over and over again.

And oftentimes that manna has showed up in the likes of YOU. Often a text or a word or a hug or your presence at just the right time is manna for the day. Oh, I can’t wait for you to see the Advent devotional Jan and Gloria have pulled together that you have created together. So much spiritual manna for Advent – more than enough!

My friends, we serve a God who always gives us enough – enough of what we need each day.

In a week or so we will be parting ways. And as we live into the days ahead, we will surely be rejoicing in all that God has done, won’t we? In times of transition it is easy to get stuck in the if onlys. I may be saying to myself, “If only I was back in Benton Harbor.” Or you may find yourself saying, “If only Laurie was here.”

But let’s not get stuck in the “If onlys” in this transition the way that the people of Israel did way back then. Let us remember that the faithful people of First Presbyterian Church have lived into a new day for over 127 years now. Let’s focus on “What is it?” What is the manna God is bringing us each day? What is the manna God has for us now? Let’s go out and gather it. I will gather it in Grand Rapids. You will gather it here. Keep your eyes peeled for that manna. Keep gathering it!

And we can be confident that whatever we are called to do in the days ahead, God will supply our need according to his riches in glory, as Paul writes.

So, “What is it?”

The good news, the very good news my friends, is that whatever it is, it will be enough!

Amen.