

God Says "No More Manna." What Will God's People Do?

(Joshua 5:10-12; II Corinthians 5:17-21; Luke 15:11-120)

Let us pray. Dear God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord., our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Every once in a while you hear a story and you think to yourself, that simply cannot be true! It has to be one of these urban myths. It's probably just another one of those stories that is making the rounds on the Internet. It appears to be true, but is difficult to verify it.

Here's one such story I came across. In January of 2000, a woman in Austin, Texas, successfully sued a furniture store for injuries she received when she tripped over a small child who was running loose throughout the store. What was surprising about the lawsuit was that the out-of-control child was the injured woman's son. That's right. The jury awarded her \$780,000 for tripping over her own offspring, whom she had allowed to run wild in the store. (1)

Could that possibly be true? She tripped over her—the very one she was supposed to be looking after? And the jury awarded her \$780,000? Have we gone absolutely wacko? It reminds me of something an anonymous poet once wrote:

I went to the psychiatrist to be . . . Psychoanalyzed
To find out why I killed the cat and . . . Blacked my neighbor's eyes.
He laid me on a comfy couch to see . . . What he could find,
And this is what he dredged up out . . . Of my unconscious mind.
When I was one my mommy locked . . . My dolly in the trunk,
And so it follows naturally that . . . I am always drunk.
When I was two I saw my father . . . Kiss the maid one-day,
And that is why I suffer now from . . . klep-to-ma-ni-a.
At three I was ambivalent towards . . . My younger brothers,
And that's the reason why, to date . . . I've poisoned all my lovers.
And I'm so glad since I have . . . Learned the lesson I've been taught,
That everything I do that's wrong is . . . Someone else's fault. (2)

Not a great poem, perhaps, but it is an apt description of the attitude of many people in our society. Yes, there are many of us who refuse to take responsibility for our own actions.

Our Older Testament lesson for today has to do with this very thing. It is about taking responsibility for actions. It's about taking charge of one's own life. It is found in the Book of Joshua. The people of Israel have been wandering in the wilderness. During the time they have been in the wilderness, God has been feeding them with manna from heaven. Our story takes up when they have finally entered the Promised Land. Here is what the writer of Joshua says at that critical point in Israel's history: "The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year."

Do you get the picture? For forty years of wandering in the wilderness, God provided the children of Israel with manna from heaven to meet their physical needs. Don't you imagine they got tired of eating the same thing every day? Scrambled manna for breakfast. Manna sandwiches for lunch. Manna casserole for dinner. Why, the best-selling book of that time must have been 101 Ways to Serve Manna.

Can't you just hear the grumbling? "Oh, man, not manna again." Forty years. I'm sure God made it appetizing for them. But even more important, it kept them going. It met their needs. After all, God had promised them that they would be provided for, and they were. Therefore, on the very day that they could provide for themselves, the manna stopped. I think that God was saying to them, "From here on, you'll have to get your own groceries. That part of it is up to you now. I gave you everything you needed to survive in the wilderness, but it's time for you to take responsibility for yourselves. It's time for you to take more responsibility for your own lives."

Let's shift gears for a moment. Let's look at our Gospel lesson. It's from Luke. It's that very familiar story about the Prodigal Son. It is about that young man who has the nerve to ask his Dad for all of his inheritance in advance. Now, that's one risky proposition, isn't it, parents? Suppose your eighteen-year-old son comes to you and says, "Mom and Dad, I know you're going to leave me an estate some day. I'd like to get it now." After you pick yourself up off the floor, how are you going to respond? Some parents are able to start their children off quite handsomely . . . and that's fine. But I wonder how often it works out well for those offspring? We often hear about children of the very wealthy whose lives are a mess. Some eighteen-year-olds would have the maturity to handle a half million dollars quite responsibly. But my guess is that most of us put in that situation at that stage in our lives would do just what the young man in Luke's Gospel does. He

squanders his inheritance. It's party, party, party. And soon the bank is calling. His checks are overdrawn, the money is gone.

Now, you and I might not be party animals. Well, most of us, anyway. But I dare say that most of us could find other ways to go through the funds. A BMW, Lexus, or a Mustang would be nice. Going on a shopping spree at the mall would be nice too. So would taking a cruise to the Bahamas. It is amazing how fast you can go through money. Just ask a college student who is already going to a credit counselor because of accepting those attractive credit card offers that seem to come endlessly in the mail and often target young people.

Can any of us identify with this young man? He spent his fortune--ran up his credit cards--burned up his allowance in record time--and now he has hit rock bottom. Can't you just see him lying in his dorm room worrying about what in the world he's going to do to get out of the mess his decisions have created?

That's where Luke continues the story. He leaves us with five critical words. Luke wrote, "When he came to himself . . ." And those are some of the most important words in Scripture. That's right, "When he came to himself." Suddenly this young man knew it was time for him to take responsibility for himself. It was time for him to take charge of his life. Sure, this parable of Jesus is about sin and grace. Of course, it is about a father's love for his wayward son. But it is also about a young man who suddenly realizes his strategy for life isn't working. He knows he needs a new plan—a new course of action.

And this is the practical truth about life that all of us had better come to realize sooner or later. God does not intend to provide for us that which we can provide for ourselves. God expects us to take charge of our lives. Sure, we are taught that we will always need God and that God will always give us what we need for the journey. But God does not intend to just automatically dispense to us that which we can provide for ourselves. We were not created to be merely passive recipients. We were created to contribute our part.

I wonder if God doesn't get tired of listening to some of our prayers. "Lord, help me get an A on that test." Well, God might well ask, did you study? "Lord, help me get that promotion. "Well, have you done your part? Do you go into the office with a great attitude? Do you give more than required? "Lord, help me get a better paying job." Well, did you fill out any job applications? Did you go from store to store asking the owners if they were hiring? It's amazing. Do we really think that God will keep doing for us what we refuse to do for ourselves?

Our scripture readings for today don't seem to think so. You see, God loved Israel. God sustained Israel in the wilderness, but as soon as the Israelites were out of the wilderness, it was time for them to look after more of their own needs. The father loved the prodigal son, but it was necessary for the father to wait and let that foolish young man make the choice for himself. The father couldn't do it for him. And that is what maturity is all about.

It's even true of salvation, of our spiritual maturity. Second Corinthians 5:17-21 is one of Paul's loftiest passages: "So if anyone is in Christ," he writes, "there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new . . ." It's a wonderful passage. And all the way down in the last part of the twentieth verse Paul writes, "So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

Here we go again. In Joshua the people have enjoyed the providence of God to provide for their daily needs. In the story of the Prodigal Son, a young man has lived all his life in the safe shelter of his father's house. Now Paul says to us that God has done everything needed to reconcile us to Himself. He writes, "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself . . ." God loves us. God has done far more than we ever imagined. God sent his only Son. Now, says Paul, it's time for us to do our part-- "We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

In other words, it's time for us to take charge of our lives. It's time for us to come to ourselves. God has provided spiritual manna during our time of wandering in the wilderness, but now it's time for us to take responsibility for our lives and to do what the prodigal son did--be reconciled with the Father.

When I was a kid, one of my favorite books was the Choose Your Own Adventure books. In the books, the reader was given the option of controlling what would happen to the characters. It would say, "if you want to do this, turn to page 23" or "if you want to do that, turn to page 54." Based on your decision, something bad or something good would happen to the characters. That is the way it is with life

Ideally, when we take responsibility for ourselves or take charge of our lives, we move closer and closer to God and to God's throne. However, that is not how things always go. Sometimes when we take responsibility for ourselves or take charge of our lives bad things happen. We sometimes end up taking our inheritance and leaving God like the Prodigal Son. We spend our inheritance on things that are totally useless to us. We go away or wander away from God's true purpose for us.

The good news is that our God is a loving and gracious God. When we come to our senses, God will be there waiting for us with welcome and loving arms.

Margaret Jensen tells about her life as the daughter of a poor pastor. In spite of her family's limited resources, they always found a way to take in and care for those in need. One of the people they took in was a young man named Barney. Barney had fled his home in Norway after his young wife died, and he found comfort and healing in Margaret's family. Through her father, Pastor Tweten, Barney became a Christian. Both Margaret's parents wanted Barney to find a good wife and settle down, but he had a weakness for women that kept him from marrying. Finally, Barney married a good and faithful woman, Mildred, but he couldn't seem to restrain his carousing. When Barney finally confronted his sin against God and his wife, he was overcome with shame and grief. He threw himself at the feet of God and begged for forgiveness. But the shame wouldn't go away. Finally, Barney decided to kill himself. But as he stood on the Brooklyn Bridge, contemplating his death, Pastor Tweten stepped out of the shadows. His warmth and caring melted the shame away. Barney returned that night to his wife. She welcomed him with a spirit of love and forgiveness. With a renewed sense of God in their lives, Barney and Mildred went on to become shining examples of love and integrity in marriage. Barney was never a bad man. He just needed to take charge of his life and to move closer to God and to his wife.

How about you? How will your Choose Your Own Adventure book turn out? "We entreat you on behalf of Christ," writes Paul, "be reconciled to God." Amen.

-- Zachary Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; March 14, 2010