

“Bread from Heaven” August 11, 2024
(Exodus 16:2-4,9-15; John 6:23-35) Rev. James Koyama
We make things

One of the things we all do as human beings is we make things. We make buildings. We make food. We make music. We make speeches. We make vacuum cleaners and widgets. We make theories. We make stories to help us understand the world around us. And together we build cultures and civilizations.

And whatever we are making involves creating and using recipes. We select ingredients from what is available to us and combine them into something that will be both pleasing and that will best fit our needs. And if it is a good recipe, we hang onto it.

Making Food

And one of the best ways to think about how we make things is to talk about food. Food is about as basic a necessity as there is. And there are basically two kinds of food. There is material food, like apples and lettuce, grains and meat and water, that nourishes our bodies.

And then there is “spiritual food” that involves the experience of receiving and giving love and having prayers answered; that involves

having a life-giving connection with something greater than ourselves. Both kinds of food are necessary for our survival. And as with everything else, we depend on recipes to make the most out of the food we eat.

God-Given

And one of the things that every recipe has in common is that it starts with God-given ingredients. This is one of the main points in this morning's readings. Everything we need for life begins as a gift from God. The people are in the wilderness, where there is no food available. And they are hungry for food and spiritually exhausted. And so, God provides them with manna from heaven to satisfy their hunger.

That this food falls from heaven is highly significant, because it comes from a place that is completely beyond the reach of human hands. Even if we were to stand on tippy toes, we couldn't possibly reach a shelf that high. And so, it can only be with the aid of some mystery beyond our own capabilities that this food comes to us.

And this leads us to understand that our food is first and foremost, a gift from God. No matter how sophisticated we become, no matter how wonderful the recipes we put together, we are forever wholly

dependent on the mystery of how God provides the food we need in order to survive and thrive.

It is true that we can make plants and animals grow faster and bigger, through interbreeding and various modifications. But we can't give them the life without which they wouldn't be able to exist and grow in the first place.

And so a poetic way of making this point is to say that all the basic ingredients that we depend on for life come as a gift, like manna that falls from heaven. We can't save ourselves.

But we can participate in our salvation, and in the salvation of the world, as "coworker's" with God; by combining the ingredients God provides and turning them into recipes that can highlight and bring out all the life-giving qualities that are already present, but not necessarily obvious in what God has already provided.

For example, there are a lot of good bakers out there, who can bake an amazing loaf of bread that sends a delicious smell wafting out of the window, a loaf bursting with goodness that tastes even better with a pat of melting butter.

It takes some skill and training to bake a truly amazing loaf. (I know, because I lack that skill). It doesn't just happen by itself. And part of that skill involves having a recipe that won't get in the way of, but will bring out the goodness that is already there. And this applies not just to cooking, but to everything we make.

When the Bible says that we are "made in the image of God," I think that part of what it is telling us is that God purposefully created us in such a way that we too could share God's own delight in making things. God wants us to experience the joy of having made something and saying "It is good!", just as God felt after creating the heavens and the earth, and then stepped back and said, "This is good!"

Sin and Mediated Grace

But then, as the story goes, the snake whispered the mystery of sin into human hearts.

I'm not sure there would even be a need for sermons were it not for the reality of sin and the need to be aware of its destructive power.

There are different ways of thinking about sin. One way to describe it would be to say that sin is the result of fears and anxieties we experience as creatures with limitations; that when we give in to our fears and anxieties, we lose touch with the goodness of the creation God has put in front of us.

As Paul puts it, we see only as though into a mirror dimly, and we are prone to misinterpreting what lies in the shadows. And so we respond with fear. We fear that God will not be there for us and we easily convince ourselves that the only thing that we can truly rely on is ourselves.

And so, hiding behind our fig leaves we take what God has given us freely and graciously, and we create new stories, flawed “recipes” that pretend to point to God’s goodness, but are secretly designed to put our own needs first. And in doing so, we lose sight of the grace that is the true source of our nourishment, and we grow hungry and sickly in body and soul.

Snow on the tongue

There is no question that we live in a sin-sick world. And yet, in the face of this depressing fact, our Gospel reading this morning makes an

astonishing claim. The claim is that, in Jesus, we have the bread of life; the manna from heaven; the original goodness of God for which we hunger; the goodness from which good recipes are made.

Do you remember when you were a kid, or as a secret pleasure as a grown up, standing outside in the winter time, with snowflakes falling from the sky, and how you stuck out your tongue so that a snowflake could land on it and melt? I think that must be what eating the manna from heaven must be like. It is an experience of unmediated grace, because no human hand came between you and God, to play any part in modifying its texture and flavor.

There is something wonderful about that experience, because there is nothing more life-giving to our bodies than the pure drop of water that makes up the content of that snowflake, and there is no flavor and texture more purely God sent. It is the experience of pure unmediated grace.

At the same time, it may be a bit surprising how unmiraculous and familiar the taste of this pure drop of water can be. Sometimes I have to remind myself that what has touched my tongue is truly a miracle and not just water. Just water! Perhaps how good it tastes depends on how thirsty we are and that only thirsty people really know what they are

tasting. In any case, for that taste from heaven, we can say thank you to God, and no-one else.

Unmediated Grace

Isn't it wonderful to know that we each can receive and taste what comes directly from God, free from all possible meddling by others? No matter how badly the world is corrupted by sin; no matter what recipes are being pushed onto us; no matter what credentials may be used to convince us to rely more on other people's senses than our own; we are capable of experiencing God's grace for ourselves. And we can work on our own personal recipes for how to highlight what we have tasted for ourselves and what we believe is needs to be lifted up. And we can share in the joy God had in making something new.

I think that this experience of receiving our sustenance as directly as a snowflake from heaven, is essential to how we understand the meaning of the manna from heaven in the Bible, and to our understanding of what it means to be touched by Jesus.

Jesus himself asked us ultimately to sidestep anyone in authority who would claim to tell you who he is. He didn't say, "Who does your minister say that I am? He didn't say, "Who do your parents say that I am?" He asked you, "Who do you say that I am?" That is part of the

freedom and the beauty of the Gospel. Jesus doesn't force us to believe or parrot what anyone else says. All he asks is that you and I directly, to taste and eat of his life for ourselves and then give our own honest answer to his question, and not anyone else's answer.

To my mind, one of the strengths of the Congregationalist tradition of which this church is a part, is its respect for that question: "Who do you say I am?" That respect is based on the understanding that God speaks to each of us individually and that faith becomes most real and exciting, when we allow, even encourage each other to create a "recipe for life" based on our own personal experiences of grace and then live accordingly.

So that is my witness to you this morning. I dare to join with this morning's Gospel in claiming that Jesus himself is manna from heaven, direct from God and free of sin. And the recipe each one of us comes up with to lift up his saving power in our lives will certainly be flawed by our personal fears and failings. But it will also be nourishing to others, because it will highlight the goodness of God in a way that can only come from our own direct experiences of grace.