

“Never Ourselves Alone”
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First Congregational UCC, Asheville
Exodus 16; John 6:1-14

Thank you for the opportunity to be with you this morning. It’s always a blessing to be among you, in this sister church.

About a decade ago, I had the wonderful opportunity to travel to the Holy Land. One of the most memorable events of that trip was a journey in Egypt’s Sinai wilderness. We got up at 2 a.m. and drove to St. Catherine’s Monastery in the desert, the birthplace of ancient monasticism. Camels were waiting when we got there. Mine was named Whiskey. A young Bedouin boy led him as I rode up what is believed to be Mt. Sinai, under a broad canopy of stars and an eyelash of a moon.

We had to get off the camels and scramble on hands and knees over boulders the last third of the way. We found a cleft in a rock at the top of the mountain, crawled in out of the brisk wind, and waited. Soon there was a pinpoint of red on the eastern horizon, and before long the sun appeared as a huge red ball and flooded the valley with light.

I thought it was a good time for a profound thought, some deep reflection on the meaning of life. But all I could think was that I would have murmured and grumbled too. When the Israelites, our ancestors in the faith, were finally freed from harsh bondage in Egypt, they came to this wilderness and stayed for forty years. And they complained. A lot. And I understood why. Never had I seen such barren, rocky, desolate land.

In that place, they survived on manna provided every morning by God. Manna means literally, “What is it?” It is described as a “fine, flaky substance.” As a child, I pictured it as the Borax soap flakes we had around the house. When I learned that manna was sweet, like wafers of honey, I imagined those little rectangular, orange-ish waffle cookies with icing in the middle that we ate. Eventually, I noticed the description that manna is like coriander—which, as you know, is the seed form of cilantro. So they were actually eating Mexican food. I felt much better about it then and wondered what they were complaining about.

In that wilderness, the Israelites learned to trust God and one another. They had to; they had nothing else. There, they lived justly. Everyone got just as much as they needed—and only that much. If they hoarded, scripture reports, the manna “bred worms and turned foul.”

In that wilderness, God commanded that they keep the Sabbath, a day of rest. A reminder that they were no longer slaves; that they were more than what they produced. And God also ordered that the Israelites keep a measure of manna in a jar, to be a reminder throughout the generations, for years to come, of how God had sustained them in the wilderness.

I had the great privilege of teaching a course this past summer with Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann at Columbia Seminary. One of his many wise observations was that the Israelites needed this forty-year “wilderness school” before they could enter the promised land. In the wilderness is where they were formed into a just, trusting, covenanted community of faith.

But how quickly they forgot. That jar of manna must have been stuck on a dusty shelf somewhere. Once they were out of the wilderness, they began hoarding and accumulating, they went into debt, they enslaved the debtors. Some became rich, and others became poor. Some were satiated, while others died for lack of food.

And so God stepped in. God gave them a remedial reminder about the wilderness school and said, “OK, every fifty years, you have to make things right again—forgive all debts, set all slaves free, return all land to its original owners.” In other words, live justly again. Live committed to the common good.

This was the Jubilee year. It’s the year Jesus referred to in his inaugural sermon in Nazareth, recorded in the fourth chapter of the gospel of Luke. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Jesus declared that the Spirit had anointed him to “bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives...to let the oppressed go free; to proclaim the acceptable year of God’s favor.” The Jubilee year. The year of justice.

Brueggemann says that we must make the journey from Egypt to the promised land over and over—and the only way there is through Sinai. We have to keep moving from captivity to an empire that runs on violence, greed, and gluttony—and most of all, anxiety—to freedom in the wilderness.

According to Brueggemann, persons living in anxiety and fear—orange alert!—have no energy for the common good. He made a distinction between prosperity—the enrichment of a few—and abundance—the enrichment of all through the sharing of goods. Which is the only path to true security.

I have a friend in Seattle, who works in a university there. During orientation week for incoming students, there was a lavish buffet. A new student piled his plate with an array of food—more than he could eat. He turned to the young man sitting next to him—a foreign student from the African nation of Namibia—and said, “I guess my eyes were bigger than my stomach.” The Namibian looked at his eyes—and then at his stomach—and was clearly confused. No such idiom exists in his culture. So the American said, “Don’t you have a word that means taking more than you can eat?” The Namibian thought a moment and then said, “Yes. We call it stealing.”

The CEO of the Walt Disney Corporation—in salary, benefits, and stock options—makes the equivalent of \$97,000 per hour. Workers in Haiti who make Mickey Mouse hats and toys earn 28 cents an hour. The world’s three richest families have more wealth than the world’s 48 poorest countries. How quickly we forget the lessons of the wilderness.

Most of us aren’t CEOs of major corporations. But all of us live in a world in which the vast majority of people—billions of them—live on less than a dollar a day. Most of us make more money in a week than the majority of the world’s people make in a year, yet our nation is plagued with fear about financial security. We have access to enormous abundance in this country, and yet often we have a mindset of scarcity—fueled by rumors of recession, myths about self-sufficiency, scare tactics to convince us that

we're not saving enough for retirement, a constant drumbeat about terrorists and others who want to take what we have. Those who live in anxiety and fear have no energy for the common good.

I think it's easy in such a world to think of giving to the church as exchanging some of what we have for some good programs—like mission outreach and uplifting music and Christian education for our children—and the hope of a visit from a pastor or a deacon when we have a crisis. These are all part of being church. But I'd like to invite you to recognize this morning that giving to the church is something far more radical than buying programs or pastoral care.

Through your giving, you are turning your backs on the bombardment of cultural messages about accumulation and self-sufficiency—and on the violence necessary to sustain the obscene divisions between those in our world who are secure and those who are starving. Through your giving, you are deciding against captivity to the ways of the world and placing your trust in God and one another, proclaiming your loyalty to, and investing in, God's reign of justice and compassion. Through your giving, by the grace of God, you are choosing to be formed into a faithful, covenanted community. Such a community only thrives when everyone gives generously.

In December 1983, I was in Nicaragua. U.S.-backed forces known as contras were carrying out mayhem there, raiding vulnerable villages, terrorizing, kidnapping, and killing Nicaraguan civilians. I was a member of the first U.S. delegation to journey to Nicaragua as part of Witness for Peace, a nonviolent, faith-based effort that established an ongoing prayerful and protective presence in that nation's war zones.

We were headed to Jalapa, an isolated village near the Honduran border. But soldiers in the people's militia stopped us several miles away at Ocotal, warning us that the contras were attacking the road ahead. We spent a short and restless night on the floor of a Baptist church, which we shared with refugees—mostly women and children—who had fled their homes scattered throughout the mountains. The night was punctuated with the sound of gunshots in the distance, and the cry of frightened children up close.

We awoke before dawn and washed our faces in the rain barrel outside, ready to push on to Jalapa. The refugee women had risen even earlier. Firewood was stacked in the dome-shaped clay oven, and the women were already slapping out tortillas when the sun made its appearance.

They had fled with their children and little more than the clothes they wore, but they invited us to partake in their meager breakfast. I was profoundly moved by this simple gesture. These women—many of whom were widows from the war, some of whom weren't sure if their soldier husbands were still alive—shared everything they had with us, affluent strangers from a country that was sponsoring a war against them. They didn't know where their next meal would come from. They simply lived for each day and shared all that they had, trusting that God would provide. Our breakfast of tortillas and coffee at dawn was a sacramental moment, a holy communion.

The generosity that I experienced in Nicaragua 24 years ago has been repeated in many other parts of the world. As I've traveled, I've noticed a distinct pattern. Those who have the least are often the most generous with what they have. And I, who have so much, am never thankful or generous enough.

It was while sharing reflections on scripture with members of a Christian base community in Nicaragua that I first heard a new interpretation of this morning's gospel passage, the story of Jesus' feeding of the crowd. The folks in Nicaragua said something like this. When the people left home to go see Jesus, clamoring for his healing and teaching, they would have known that they were going to be gone all day. There's no way they wouldn't have packed their lunches. And since they didn't know when they'd be getting back home, they would have thrown in a little extra.

When it got late in the day, Jesus' disciples went through the crowd looking for food. And people thought to themselves, "If I tell them that I brought bread, they'll make me share it. I don't have enough for everybody, and if I speak up, I might lose it all and have nothing for myself." So they kept quiet about it, shaking their heads or looking down at their feet as Peter or Philip or Andrew passed by with their empty baskets.

But there was this young kid who just didn't know any better. So when one of the disciples asked him, he piped up, "Sure, I've got these five barley loaves and two fish." His mama had probably packed them for him, wanting to make sure he didn't go hungry that day. So Jesus took that meager offering and held it up to heaven and blessed it. And he probably said something like this: "Thank you, God, for this kind and generous boy who shared all that he had, who has shown us what it means to be part of the reign of God."

Well, people started getting a little uncomfortable then about their own lack of generosity. They started looking around, and slowly they began pulling yogurt and goat cheese out from under their cloaks, and olives from their picnic baskets, and loaves of bread and salted fish from out of their sleeves. And there was such abundance that, after everyone had eaten, there were twelve baskets of food left over.

That's the miracle. It was a miracle of Jesus, to be sure, prompted by his invitation to participate in a reign marked by generosity and compassion.

I heard a similar interpretation of this story a decade later from a homeless friend in Atlanta. People living on the streets get it. There are some hoarders, to be sure, but over and over I've witnessed people with next to nothing sharing what little bounty has come their way. Jesse, a man I met in a shelter in Washington, D.C., fed a whole homeless encampment under the Francis Scott Key Bridge for months on boxes of air raid shelter biscuits that had passed their expiration date, which he found in a dumpster behind the State Department.

But most of us don't get it so easily in this country. It's all too clear how steeped we are in a culture of independence rather than interdependence, how difficult it is to live lives of sacrificial generosity. We've bought the myth of self-sufficiency, swallowed the lie that we're being irresponsible if we acknowledge that we need one another. How sad that we're investing so much in retirement accounts and so little in nurturing the relationships of mutual care and trust that would give us true security.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus points to the birds in the air, which don't gather into barns, and the lilies of the field, which don't toil or spin. "Therefore I tell you," says Jesus, "do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear...for God knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the reign of God and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

I immediately want to protest, “But people starve – even good and faithful people.” And then I am reminded that “righteousness” means “right relationship.” It means living justly and generously with one another. This promise of God’s isn’t a promise to individuals. “Never Ourselves Alone.” It’s a promise to the community. We have all that we need. The only question is whether we will share it, so that all are recipients of the bounty. If so, the promise holds. If so, this audacious word is trustworthy.

I don’t know how to be as generous as those Nicaraguan women were toward me. But I do know that Jesus demands nothing less than all that we have, and all that we are. I also know that we need each other to be able to live this way.

So I picture myself in that crowd following after Jesus; and I have to ask myself, What’s up my sleeve? What am I holding back?

What’s up *your* sleeve? What’s in *your* wallet? What are we afraid to leave home without? What is Jesus inviting us to let go of? And what is he inviting us to embrace?

God is at work in this community. Your faith and your good works are well known. You have been bold in your witness to God’s compassion and inclusion and justice. May you be bold as well in your stewardship of your time, talents, and tithes—living with grateful and generous hearts, trusting God and one another. With such trusting generosity, God can do miracles. May they abound among you.

Amen.