

# THE PEOPLE OF GOD AT WORSHIP

NINETEENTH SUNDAY

AFTER PENTECOST ~

SEPTEMBER 21<sup>ST</sup>, 2008

## INVOCATION

*For the beauty and wonder we share,  
for the gift of life we treasure,  
for this community of believers that  
supports and strengthens each other,  
for the blessings we cannot begin to note,  
Let our words and songs to God  
~ this day ~ be only praise!*

## MORNING PRAYER

LORD of all Time and Space ~  
God of Mystery and Wonder ~  
we pray for guidance as we strive to  
follow your Way of Love. We pray  
for patience with ourselves and with  
others as we get lost along the Way.  
We want to be brave, we want to be  
confident, we want to believe but  
there are days we cannot see how life  
will unfold. While we seek your  
loving comfort ~ we rest in the  
promise that your Grace  
and Compassion surrounds us  
in all we do. AMEN

## SCRIPTURE ~ Matthew 20:1-16

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a  
landowner who went out early in the  
morning to hire laborers for his  
vineyard. {2} After agreeing with the  
laborers for the usual daily wage, he  
sent them into his vineyard. {3} When  
he went out about nine o'clock, he  
saw others standing idle in the

marketplace; {4} and he said to them,  
'You also go into the vineyard, and I  
will pay you whatever is right.' So  
they went. {5} When he went out  
again about noon and about three  
o'clock, he did the same. {6} And  
about five o'clock he went out and  
found others standing around; and he  
said to them, 'Why are you standing  
here idle all day?' {7} They said to  
him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He  
said to them, 'You also go into the  
vineyard.' {8} When evening came, the  
owner of the vineyard said to his  
manager, 'Call the laborers and give  
them their pay, beginning with the  
last and then going to the first.' {9}  
When those hired about five o'clock  
came, each of them received the usual  
daily wage. {10} Now when the first  
came, they thought they would  
receive more; but each of them also  
received the usual daily wage. {11}  
And when they received it, they  
grumbled against the landowner, {12}  
saying, 'These last worked only one  
hour, and you have made them equal  
to us who have borne the burden of  
the day and the scorching heat.' {13}  
But he replied to one of them, 'Friend,  
I am doing you no wrong; did you not  
agree with me for the usual daily  
wage? {14} Take what belongs to you  
and go; I choose to give to this last the  
same as I give to you. {15} Am I not  
allowed to do what I choose with  
what belongs to me? Or are you  
envious because I am generous?'  
So the last will be first, and  
the first will be last."

~ SERMON ~

*The Complaint: An Essential Step  
in Knowing God*

*How does complaining lead us  
closer to God?*

**GARY, THE POLICE OFFICER'S SON**

Many of you may remember that my father was in the Army for thirty years. I was with him, traveling with my family from Army base to Army base, around the world, for eighteen of those years before I went off to Penn State.

And for all those years when I was around, my father was in the military police and specifically in criminal investigation.

You can easily imagine how, in my mind, living in the McCaslin house was, at times, a little like living in a fort. My dad was the commanding officer, my mother was second in command, being the oldest, I was like a sergeant and my little brothers and sister were the privates.

When I look back on those years, I realize that because my father was a criminal investigator, words were very important to him and whenever I talked, I had to be very specific.

For instance, there was this game we would play whenever we were driving on any kind of a long trip. I couldn't just say:

*Dad I am hungry*

and expect him to pull over. He hated to stop anyway and would only consider pulling over for a very good reason.

So, when I told him I was hungry, he'd say

*How about if we stop and  
have a big salad?*

*I'd say: No....*

*Well, how about if we stop and  
have a big plate of Brussels sprouts?*

*And I'd say: No...*

*Well, how about if we stop and  
get a dish of lima beans?*

*Once again: No...*

We'd play this game for a while because he knew foods I did not like and there were no McDonalds or Burger Kings or Bob Evans ~ remember this was a while ago...

So often, in the end, he would say,

*Well, what do you want?*

And, by this time, I was flustered and all I could say was:

*I don't know...*

to which he would calmly reply:

*Well, you must not  
really be very hungry.*

**EARLY LESSONS ON COMPLAINING**

It wasn't until I was older and he told me about the times during World War II, when, after landing on D-Day at Normandy and making their way across France, he and his buddies faced many days when they ate the terrible tasting rations that were provided and they ate them without complaining because they were so hungry.

To this day, when I say to myself,

*I am hungry*

and I am just standing and looking at all the food in the refrigerator and the cupboards and try to convince myself I can't find anything to eat, my dad's words come back to me:

*Well, Gary, you must not really be very hungry...*

My childhood complaining was the beginning of a life long lesson that keeps helping me become more thankful for the abundant food all around me in my life.

I began to appreciate more the sacrifice people in the military make as a regular part of their service.

And as I grew older still, I came to understand that there are many people who really are very hungry and there really is no food to eat.

Some of these truly hungry people are in third world countries around the world and some are right here in Painted Post and Corning and Bath and Elmira.

I've been hungry in my life but those times have been few and most of the time, food has not been far away.

### **BIBLE STORIES ON COMPLAINING**

There are also lessons that start with complaining in our Bible. Today there are some from the book of Exodus.

The entire book of Exodus is the story of Moses receiving the call from God to go to Egypt and deliver the Hebrew Children to the Promised Land.

In today's reading ~ chapter 16 ~ the Hebrew children are out of Egypt, they are safe from the Egyptian army which was coming after the Moses and these former slaves but who now have drowned in the waters of the Red Sea.

At this point, Moses and his flock are totally on their own in the

wilderness and it does not take long before some serious hunger issues arise.

The story says the people were *murmuring* or some translations say the people were *grumbling* but we can feel confident in saying they were definitely *complaining*; rest assured ~ there was not a happy camper in the whole bunch.

And the anger was so bad, this is what's in verse 3:

*If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we ate meat and had our fill of bread ~ but you Moses ~ you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill everyone with hunger.<sup>1</sup>*

Now that they are away from the slavery that was their entire life in Egypt, the people are saying:

*We were better off in the good old days back in Egypt, back when we had food to eat and water to drink.*

Granted they were hungry and thirsty but to wish they were back in Egypt... Moses was no doubt getting a little frustrated.

Then Chapter 16 goes on to describe how God heard the cry of the people and sent quails and manna down from heaven.

The Bible explains it this way:  
*In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. 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,*

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 16:3 ~ text adapted by McCaslin

*"It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat."<sup>2</sup>*

Now quails we can easily picture in our minds ~ small bird, not too meaty and it can be filling... but manna, a flakey substance?

*What is it?*

### GARY IN THE KITCHEN

It's sort of like the dish I made for the Prayer group on a recent Wednesday night.

I had been to a peach orchard and had a half bushel of fresh peaches. I wanted to make a cobbler and the recipe I had was not cobbler but I thought it was close enough.

Then when I was putting the ingredients together, I used mostly whole wheat flour (trying to be health conscious) and did not have butter and had to substitute olive oil and the peaches were a little over-ripe so there was an excessive amount of peach juice and I forgot to add cinnamon so I shook some on over the top when it came out of the oven.

My creation was sitting on the counter when everyone arrived. Now you have to understand, the people who attend the Prayer meeting are a very kind and compassionate group when it comes to complimenting one another's snacks we provide for each other and they were on their best behavior this night.

As they came into the kitchen, they could smell the peaches, but when they took one look at the cooking pan ~ the first comment either written on his or her face or out of each person's mouth was:

---

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 16:13-15

*What is it?*

And it was a fair question, the bread part of the cobbler was a dark brown and lay on the peaches in little clumps, not spread out evenly; it was a little hard to manipulate. And the peach juice was bubbling up from below with cinnamon sprinkled perhaps a little too liberally on top.

*What is it?*

was a legitimate question for this concoction because at first glance, a person could not really tell.

### MANNA DEFINED

It was the same for *manna*.

If you go back to the Hebrew, the word *manna* ~ describing the stuff that came down from heaven each morning and was hidden under the frost for the people to eat ~ can best be translated

*What is it?*

Okay ~ so for food God provided quail and manna or *What is it?* for the people to eat. Now you are probably still wondering

*But Gary what is...*

*"what is it?"*

Later in chapter 16, manna is described as

*like coriander seed, white, with a taste like wafers made with honey.<sup>3</sup>*

and I can give you a long list of biblical commentary where scholars have tried to describe what it might have been that tasted like coriander seed and honey wafers but the best answer I believe is to simply say we just don't know.

*What is it?*

---

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 16:31

seems to be the best description for some mystery foods ~ flakey stuff under the frost and some whole wheat peach dishes trying to be cobblers.

### THE REAL LESSONS OF MANNA

Right along with the commentary that says

*we just don't know what it really is* there is an important reminder:

*It doesn't make any difference.*

If we spend all our time trying to find out what manna really was, we will miss the point of the story.

And the main point is this:

*the LORD heard the cry of his people and provided food.*

It is an important lesson that sometimes get lost in the complaining.

And another lesson that goes right along with the manna in Chapter 16 are the conditions that came with delivery each day.

The people were not to collect more than one day's worth of manna except the day before the Sabbath, when they were to collect for two days ~ because there was to be no work on the Sabbath.

It was a little faith test the LORD gave to the Hebrew Children because if people took too much and tried to store even a day's extra ration, the extra they gathered went bad in one day and their pots were filled with worms.

The lesson?

*You just need enough for one day;  
God will provide.*

I think Jesus knew this story well and I believe, in the back of his mind, he used this lesson to help the people pray. People asked Jesus:

*LORD ~ teach us to pray*  
and he gave them the Lord's prayer as a model. Earlier in this service we said the line I think Jesus remembered from Genesis 16:

*Give us this day,  
our daily bread*

He didn't say

*Give me way more than I need  
so I can be comfortable LORD,*

or

*LORD, Give more food than  
I could possibly eat  
to show that you love me...*

No, the lesson in the wilderness and the lesson of Jesus' prayer is

*Bless us with what we need  
just for this day.*

### ARE WE LEARNING THESE LESSONS?

The lessons are coming through loud and clear from the Wilderness to today almost three thousand years later, but I am not sure we are getting the message.

In the midst of the financial crisis here in this country, commentator after commentator on every news show has said the reason for this huge crash of confidence in our stock market is greed; plain and simple greed.

I believe we still have a long way to go before we can say we have learned the lesson of how much is enough.

### LABORING IN THE VINEYARD

The second story that included some serious complaining is our scripture for today about the vineyard owner and his hired hands.

Everyone worked a different amount of time, and yet everyone got paid the same amount of money.

At the end of the day, even those who worked the shortest amount of time, were paid first and paid a full day's wage.

Those who worked all day long were delighted because they figured if the folks working the least amount of time got a full day's wage, then certainly an even bigger paycheck was coming their way.

It was only when they were all paid the same that the complaining started.

Only when the grumbling and complaining were voiced could the vineyard owner then ask the question:

*Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?*

Once again, Jesus leaves the parable open ended and each of us as individuals have to decide on the vineyard owner's economic plan. Jesus says the parable of the vineyard owner is like the Kingdom of God. Can we live there? Could the Wall Street fatcats? Jesus' parable invites a decision...

#### **GARY WITH HIS CHAPLAIN'S HAT ON**

Finally, I come to you with a lesson about complaints I hear as a chaplain and this lesson also continues to teach me.

I have been present at a number of very difficult calls in my ten plus years as a chaplain for the Fire Department and Corning Hospital.

And the more difficult and horrific the call, the greater the

probability is that I will hear one of two comments or both:

*How could God let this happen?*

and

*I am so mad at God!*

*I just can't stand to hear any thing about God right now.*

My answer to the first question is

*I don't believe God*

*"let's bad things happen."*

*I just don't believe God works that way.*

*Yes, accidents happen and we humans do dumb things but God doesn't "let" horrible things happen to anyone.*

And when a person's complaining turns to a furious kind of anger, I have found my most effective response is to just stand back, encourage the person to yell some more and get all the anger out.

Why? Because God can take it.

Just yell and scream and hit something ~ *not* some one ~ and then cry and yell and scream some more.

Getting those complaints out from our insides is the best form of grief therapy and God want us to have only the best.

So yell and complain all you want ~ God can take it.

And in your complaining ~ know that my prayer for this day is for all of our complaining to only lead to a greater awareness of our loving God. AMEN