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St. James', Mt. Airy
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Pentecost 16/Proper 20A
Exodus 16:2-15
Psalm 105:1-5, 37-45
Philippians 1:21-30
Matthew 20:1-16

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

*Give us today our daily bread,
and dear God, forgive us our ungrateful hearts,
that we might embrace the transforming love you freely extend.*

That could very well be a prayer offered up by both an Israelite a month into the wilderness of the Exodus journey, and a worker from the vineyard after being paid at the end of the day.

Both of these stories tell us something of what it means to trust and depend upon God, but more importantly they show us something we seem to need to be reminded of over and over again – the generous nature of God.

God does not operate on the same economy of merit, of winners and losers, insiders and outsiders, honored and shamed, as our human systems do.¹

No, God models for us the true nature of generosity, and when we embrace such generosity as a starting point in our lives, then our hearts are transformed and we are able to live not from a place of **scarcity**, but from one of **abundance**.

¹ *Feasting on the Word Year A, Volume 4, Proper 20.*

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What does it mean to be generous?

The following way of defining generosity comes from a book called *The Family Virtues Guide: Simple Ways to Bring Out the Best in Our Children and Ourselves*:

Generosity is giving and sharing. It is giving freely because we want to, not with the idea of receiving attention, a reward, or a gift in return. Giving freely also means you give without concern for what someone does with your gift.

Generosity is a quality of the spirit. It is an awareness that there is plenty for everyone. It is seeing an opportunity to share what you what you have and then giving just for the joy of giving. It is one of the best ways to show love.

I appreciate this way of understanding generosity because of how multi-faceted it is, and because I believe it shows us what it can mean for us to try and embody God's generosity.

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In our reading from Exodus we encounter the Israelites at the start of their trek into the wilderness – that time in between their settled lives in Egypt and settling down in the Promised Land. In short, the Israelites were in a time of transition – which brought with it both the expected joy and frustration of something new.

Today we hear mostly about the frustration. A month in and the only thing running lower than the initial rush of adrenaline from their flight out of Egypt is the supplies they brought with them. As reality sets in, so does fear.

This **fear** is focused around the idea of **not enough**. And it is a fear that transcends time and culture. When this fear is the central well from which we draw, then we understand the world in terms of scarcity and competition.

God, however, offered the Israelites a different option – one of **enough**.

Every day at dusk their camp would be covered in quail, and every morning they found a flaky substance, identified as manna, on the ground, which could be used to make the day's bread.

In the verses immediately following where our reading stops today we hear further instructions about this food from God:

This is what the LORD has commanded: “Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.” ¹⁷The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. ¹⁸But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. ¹⁹And Moses said to them, ‘Let no one leave any of it over until morning.’ ²⁰But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them. ²¹ Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed.²

It was a learning curve – the people, still initially operating from a place of scarcity – tried at first to save and stockpile even though they all gathered as much as they needed.

² *New Revised Standard Version*, Exodus 16:16:21a.

But over time, over forty years, they learned and re-learned **enough**, so that *morning by morning they gathered it, as much as they needed*. Daily bread indeed.

God's generosity in this story is about the one who gives from a place of love and mercy, not merit.

The grumbling of the Israelites – their proclivity to look back, not in reflection, but with rose-tinted glasses for something that never truly was, and their initial inability to imagine a future beyond the wilderness – made them question their trust in God.

Yet God met their questioning, their lack of gratitude for all they had been given, not with anger but with generosity. He did not *give them what they deserved* for their so-called lack of faith.

No, this story tells us something essential about God's justice, and it looks very different than the justice we would often choose to have God wield.

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The issue of justice appears to be at the center of today's Gospel parable. I say appears, because just as with the story from Exodus, this story also holds at its heart generosity.

We hear the tale of workers hired in the morning and promised a fair daily wage by a landowner who then returned to the marketplace throughout the day continuing to hire workers, promising them all compensation.

When the work is completed and it comes time to pay the workers, they are paid from last to first – and all receive the same amount. This naturally led to grumbling on the part of the people of God.

It's not fair! I was paid the same for working sun up to sun down as the person who joined me in the fields an hour before dusk.

This parable is clearly not about a fair wage or just recompense for work done.³

What it **is** about, is radical love and generosity. It isn't fair, but it is abundant.

All the workers began in the marketplace, and all the workers were offered the opportunity to work. All they had to do was say yes to the call. Their recompense was not given on the basis of what they deserved – or did not deserve – but instead on the condition of saying **yes**, and entering into the labor alongside God and their neighbor.

Our reward for living a life of faith, then, is not based on how long we've been baptized, who's been here the longest, or who has done the most work in any particular ministry.

Our reward is that through our **yes**, *whenever* that may be, we fill our lives with God's generous love – a love which serves as our daily bread, sustaining us daily for the journey.

³ *Feasting on the Word Year A, Volume 4, Proper 20.*

When we allow our gratitude to push out our envy, then we live from a place of abundance. We understand **enough** and share freely – recognizing that all good things come from God.

This is a parable of grace – where God’s embrace of others does not detract from God’s embrace of us. “**Enough**” for all is the justice that God offers, and when we follow in Christ’s steps this is the justice we offer the world.

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At the beginning of the summer they Vestry and I began a new practice of opening our meetings with a simple chant: *All we need is here.*

I love hearing our blend of voices – those who love to sing and those who don’t but who lift their voices just the same. Even more than that, though, I love that before we begin to talk numbers or dream big and plan for our life together St. James’, we are rooting ourselves in the truth of God’s generosity.

It is a proclamation of abundance, not scarcity. And it is a reminder not to let the daily-ness of the vineyard become a burden, nor get lost in fear in the desert, but instead to see all of life for the gift it is.

Today and this week, think about how there is always more than enough. Ponder that in your own life, and look at those around you. God’s grace comes from a well that never runs dry. Drink deeply, and maybe you’ll offer an invitation to someone else who is thirsty. There is always more than enough.⁴

~ AMEN ~

⁴ Scott Gun, *Forward Today*.