

WHERE EVERYBODY WINS! Exodus 16:13-21, Matthew 20:1-16
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, January 18, 2009
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Ah! Manna! To a people whose stomachs had been growling for food, their bellies aching with hunger, the manna was heaven sent, wonderful. But Moses tried to tamp down their excitement with a simple word of instruction. "Take only as much as you need for today. There's enough for everyone! Do not hold any of the manna over for tomorrow". But many of them did not listen. They thought, "what if I don't get as much as my neighbor gets?", or "What if I don't get any tomorrow?" So they took more than they needed and stashed it away for the following morning. But on rising for breakfast the next morning they found that the manna had become wormy, foul, rancid. Failing to trust God's promise, some tried to secure their status vis-à-vis their neighbors and/or secure their own future by storing up what they thought God might not continue to provide. And when the manna, God's generous gift, was stockpiled, it turned sour.

At the risk of being overly simplistic, I want to suggest that what we have here is a rather accurate economic description this world we live in. Unwilling to believe that God's creation has sufficient resources for everyone, today and tomorrow, some of us within the human family have amassed more of this world's resources than we truly need, and consequently others do not have enough. Ours is a world turned sour. It is the story of human history. The haves exploit the have-nots, and, predictably, the have-nots are jealous of the haves, with resulting political and military upheaval, violence, and suffering. Yes, of course that's overly simplistic, but there is here, I believe, more than an element of truth.

In this 40th anniversary year of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. we will witness on Tuesday the inauguration of our nation's first black president, in the midst of a global economic crisis. This feels like an historic hinge moment, a time, perhaps, of significant shift in direction, dare I say, of opportunity, for our nation, and I suggest for each of us personally. Before he was slain Dr. King was criticized for straying from his focus strictly on civil rights to address issues of war and broad economic justice. But in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets Dr. King recognized that where there is war and injustice there will be suffering, and that God's intent for human community is what is at stake.

Now life is complex for each of us as individuals, and for the organizations to which we belong, including our churches. As the Church we can celebrate good news and regret bad news. Good news! You can rightly rejoice in the wonderful impact your generosity is making possible in the name of Christ, locally and across the world - ministries of compassion, initiatives of peacemaking, outreach to those who are poor and hungry. But there's bad news, too! Like most Presbyterians, we could be doing far more. Someone has calculated that if all Presbyterians in our country suddenly went on public assistance and tithed 10% of their welfare benefits, their giving in the service of Christ would more than

double! That's sobering, but it's also exhilarating, because it suggests that we have tremendous untapped potential as God's agents for turning our soured world sweet.

We are all tempted to say, "If only I had more I could be more secure, and then I could be more generous." I suggest that our question ought not to be, "How can I have more?", but rather, "Is there enough to go around?" Is it possible for everyone to be a winner? And to that question the gospel says, "Yes!" The gospel says it's not to be a world of haves and have-nots. But it is so deeply ingrained in us, that there are, and even ought to be, winners and losers. 2008 was a big election year, and in November there were winners and losers. Someone suggested at the end of the college football season that Florida, Texas, Utah, and Southern Cal should all be declared co-national champions, because they all had valid claims to that title. Well, that didn't fly! There's got to be a winner! In school some kids get As and they are deemed winners. But the kids who don't make the honor roll, what happens to them? The loser label can be awfully hard to shake. Winners and losers! If you win, great! If you lose, well, too bad about that.

It was into our world of winners and losers that Jesus came with his radical message that in the Kingdom of God everybody wins. And so it is that he tells a parable about laborers who are hired to work in a vineyard. Some of them start at dawn, some at mid morning, some at noon, still others just before quitting time. Guess what! They all get the same wage! Everybody is paid the same! Everyone wins! The owner of the vineyard distributes his resources generously and equally, without regard for who is more deserving or undeserving.

This is a hard parable for us to hear because it is so utterly contrary to our whole economic system and sense of justice. We naturally identify ourselves with those who hired on at dawn and worked all day, and if we were to get the same wage as someone who worked only an hour we'd cry, "It's not fair!" But you see, Jesus is saying fairness is not the issue. Generosity is the issue, the generosity of God, who breathed life into us and gives us all, collectively, manna sufficient to meet our needs, day by day, not because we deserve it or have earned it, but simply out of generosity, expecting that those of us who have more than we need will share with those who need more. To the complaining laborers the vineyard owner says, "Wait a minute! I've paid you what we agreed to when you hired on. So you're a winner. Ok, so I've decided to give from my own payroll account the same amount to those I employed later in the day. Are you, therefore, jealous because I am generous?" It is God's nature to be generous! And God hopes that we will be generous too, so that disadvantaged folks the world often brands as losers can maybe feel like winners too.

If the church is in any sense the Body of Christ, the sign of God's kingdom in the world today, then the church is the community through which everyone can win, where everyone can realize the fullness of life God intends. Think of it! If we are

generous our Sunday school kids will be winners with well maintained classrooms and attractive curricular materials; the missionaries we support will be winners, enabled to share the God's love effectively; our seminaries will be winners, with students prepared to lead the church in the 21st century, unencumbered by a mountain of personal debt; our neediest neighbors will be winners, with food for the hungry and shelter for the homeless; and we could go on and on.

Again, the question is not, "If I had more, so as to secure my social status and my personal future, could I be more generous?" The question is, "Is there enough to go around?", to which the gospel says, "Yes!", because God is generous, and when God's people are generous there are winners all around. One final thought. Against the backdrop of the manna story we are given the sacrament of communion, with all it signifies. Christ invites all who put their trust in him to participate. No one is barred. No one is deemed undeserving. We are all treated equally. If you are a weekly worshiper or someone who comes only for communion on Christmas eve, you are equally welcome. Whether you tithe or put nothing in the offering plate – it won't make a bit of difference in God's generosity toward you. All are welcome at Christ's table, to share the elements of his sacrifice, signs of his generosity. Here we are all winners! Through us may all of God's people be winners!