

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15 (NRSV)

2 The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. 3 The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." 4 Then the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not.

9 Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, "Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.' " 10 And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. 11 The Lord spoke to Moses and said, 12 "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, "At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.' " 13 In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. 14 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. 15 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, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.

Someone most of us have never met or read influenced a great deal of our habits today. I'm speaking about the habits of buying and selling, the marketing techniques our businesses use, and the inherent human longing for whatever is just out of our reach.

I'm talking about a man by the name of Charles Kettering, the director of General Motors research. In 1929 Charles Kettering wrote an article titled, "Keep the Consumer Dissatisfied." In this article, he claimed that the goal of industry is not to meet the needs of the consumer indefinitely, but to convince them that the product outside of their grasp is better than the current one. He wasn't arguing that companies make items that fall

apart; rather, he was arguing that companies sell an emotional ‘product,’ with their toasters, cars, and shoes, too - the product of dissatisfaction, the product of ‘never enough,’ the product of ‘when can I buy another model.’ Kettering took a page out of the Exodus playbook, it seems: bank on people’s inherent yearning for something else, something more, something different, and you can convince them of almost anything. Today’s alternative Old Testament reading from the lectionary today is from Exodus 16. This passage is one of many sequences of the wilderness journey that the people of God start after Pharoah releases them from captivity. In the previous two chapters, the Israelites have gone from slavery to freedom. The Sea of Reeds, usually called the Red Sea, swallowed their enemies after Moses parts the waters so they can caravan to the other side. When the people cry out for freshwater, Moses places a piece of wood in the water and it becomes drinkable. Moses and Miriam lead the community in songs of praise, deliverance, and thanksgiving. Moses performed miracle after miracle as they began their journey through the desolate landscape, displaying God’s grace and provision again and again.

But as our old friend Charles Kettering said almost one hundred years ago, the secret is to keep the customer dissatisfied. I disagree with him. I do not believe people need much convincing to be dissatisfied. I think people are very good at being dissatisfied without much help from corporations or marketing plans. People don’t need much help with grumbling or unhappiness. I think people are quite good at sharing their grievances. He’s talking about taking our built-in satisfaction barometer and exploiting it. What people aren’t naturally inclined to do is choose acceptance and redemption.

*The Exodus journey has a different story to tell - one of freedom and grace, one of redeeming our flaws rather than manipulating them.*

*We need help remembering this radical truth: God provides us with enough. And when we embrace this truth, we consume something quite different than the food of our grievances. We partake of the bread of heaven - the bread of freedom.*

As we pick up in the Exodus journey, Moses and the people have left the oasis of Elim where Moses turned the bitter water sweet. Exodus 15 says that there were 12 springs of water and 70 palm trees there. They had a beautiful place to camp and relax after the harrowing experiences they'd already had. They camped and had their fill of water there. But soon, it was time to get on the move. It was time to continue on the journey to the promised land, to the land that God promised them.

They set out on the next part of their journey, and it didn't take them long to start complaining. They have the boldness to say to Moses in verse 3, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

Because once they know what true freedom tastes like, there is no going back. There is no going back to the rich food of the enemy, the food that tries to make them forget their purpose and their identity. And yet, the part of them that longs for the familiar and the comfortable can't help it. They can't help but fixate on what they know. It's easier that way, sometimes. Complaining can be self-satisfying. It keeps them paying attention to the problem rather than seeing what's directly in front of them. In the

case of the people in this text, to use Kettering's word, it keeps them 'dissatisfied.' Now that they've tasted this freedom, they still would prefer the familiar. Sometimes the chains that we know are more satisfying than the freedom that we are afraid to embrace.

And how does God respond to this outrageous statement? What does God do in the face of the people's claim that God has led them out into the wilderness to die?

Well, God draws near to the people in the midst of their complaining. God does not ignore them, argue with them, or redirect them. God does what is in God's very nature to do: God answers their request, and does it in the quintessential Exodus way: through a display of grace and provision.

God provides them with food to get them through their journey and God tells them to 'take only what they need.' The food that God provides them has proven puzzling to Hebrew scholars to sort out. The Hebrew word for manna is not the common Hebrew word for bread. It's actually a question- they ask, "what is it?" when they see it on the ground that morning. Rather than turn back to God and say, "We're not eating it," their hunger kicks into gear. The Israelites gather the food. They receive it as the gift God has to sustain them. They don't need an answer to their question in order to know it will nourish them. They accept the promised manna and trust God's grace towards. Our lectionary passage ends at this cliffhanger verse, but if we were to continue in chapter 16, we'd learn that some of the Israelites do indeed try to gather more than they can eat and try to keep some of the manna for later. This does not go well for them. Actually, it goes terribly. The manna rots. There truly is enough for the day, and

that's it. There is no dissatisfaction or overeating in this scenario. Instead, there is enough.

In Exodus 16, God teaches us how to practice the freedom of enough. In a world that declares the only ways to live are either in scarcity or abundance thinking, God proclaim a third option through enough thinking. In this kind of framework, freedom thrives. When people believe and behave like there is truly enough to go around, it can change them. Believing and practicing the profound simplicity of enough grounds us in the goodness of God's grace. [What would our world look like if we believed in the practice of enough? What would this do to the ways we talk about our community members, share our resources, and treat the people around us?]

Like the people in this passage, it can be hard to believe that God truly has enough to go around. And, in a world of growing income inequality and increased division, this is no surprise. But this passage is here to remind you of this simple truth: God does have enough. When we stop paying attention to our complaints, and instead focus on where God has us right now, in this time and place, then we are off to living out our own 'manna' moment. Sometimes, I whine at God. Sometimes I turn around and ask, "what is it?" when I encounter something holy. Sometimes, I can't see God's grace starting me directly in the face.

Kettering said that the future of capitalism depended on keeping consumers dissatisfied. But we have a different narrative in this room. We do not need to maintain that myth. Our future depends upon feeding our hunger for freedom more than our hunger for fear. Your wilderness journey is not in vain, and God draws near to you. Your

work for justice matters and makes a difference. No matter who you are or where you come from, you have pieces of manna to gather. Whether you are the chief complainer or the first rejoicer, the bread of freedom is for you.

You may have noticed God didn't require the people to prove anything before they could gather what they needed. And God didn't reserve the best manna for some and give the mediocre manna to others. There is no such thing as a scale of quality for this provision. Rather, God gives them enough. Whatever they gather is enough.

This passage challenges us to live into the radical truth that God provides us with enough. And in this truth is a kind of freedom. We are no longer captive to our regrets, our mistakes, or our sin when we believe in enough. Much like grace, the manna that God provides in the wilderness shows up again and again each day for us. We don't have to worry about this grace running out, or try to hoard it for ourselves to have later. God doesn't bank on our dissatisfaction with grace in order to keep us returning for me.

Rather, we live with a different kind of dissatisfaction. We are dissatisfied with injustice. We are dissatisfied with corruption. We are dissatisfied with bigotry. We are dissatisfied with division. We are not looking back from where we came from historically, wanting to head back like the people in this story. We are hungry for God's grace, the kind that shows up every day, the kind that gives us what we need so we can keep going. We live open handed, gathering God's grace with all sorts of people, and continuing on the journey towards justice.