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Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; **John 6:24-35**

SPOILER ALERT

Summertime strawberries are one of my great delights. Those pints of dark red juicy berries will stop me in my tracks. There is a major difference between the locally grown berries you find at the farmers' market and those you can get pretty much year round at the grocery store. The local strawberries are smaller than grocery store berries, but they are so much sweeter and juicier. And there is another difference I've noticed. Local summertime strawberries don't last for much longer than a day—even if you put them in the refrigerator. If I don't eat those berries within 24 hours, they start to get mushy and begin to spoil. They are a summertime blessing that must be enjoyed without delay.

In that regard, summertime strawberries are not unlike manna in the wilderness. The passage we read today is about the Hebrew people in the wilderness not long after God has delivered them from slavery in Egypt. Even though they are freed from their enslavement, the people soon begin to complain—for they are hungry. Some of them even proclaim that they wish they could be back under the cruelty of their Egyptian masters than there in the wilderness where they feared they might starve to death. But God responds to their need and offers them a special kind of bread—called manna—a bread-like substance that falls from the heavens. The term “manna” is a pun that comes from the Hebrew words for “what is it” –which was the question asked by the Hebrew people when they first saw the strange looking bread. What is it? Each morning the Hebrew people would awake to find this fine flakey substance covering the ground and they would gather it up and eat it. Modern scientists speculate that manna might

have been the secretions from a desert insect that can be eaten—which sounds kind of gross until you consider that is basically what honey is—which many of us are happy to eat.

Here's the thing about manna. Manna lasted for one day only. God assured Moses that manna would be provided but only a day's portion at a time. When the people ignored these instructions and tried to store the manna for the next day, it spoiled. Manna—like summertime strawberries—was a blessing that had to be enjoyed that day. The Hebrew people had to accept the blessing of bread for *that* day and to trust that the blessing of bread would come the next day. Give us this day our daily bread.

The crowds in the story from John's gospel also want daily bread. Jesus has just fed them in that miraculous story we read about last week, where he fed all 5,000 people with just five loaves and two fish. And the crowds of people ate their fill and were satisfied. But in today's story, this same crowd chases after Jesus because they are hungry again. Isn't that always true? No matter how much you stuff yourself at Thanksgiving dinner, no matter how much you vow you will never eat again, there will come a time in the very near future when you will be hungry again!

We must remember that most of the crowds who followed Jesus were in fact people living in poverty. Abundant food supplies were never a guarantee in their lives. But here they found a man who gave them bread in abundance. Jesus knows that the crowds have pursued him not because they recognize him as a sign from God but because they wanted more bread. And he says to the people, "Yesterday you ate and now you are hungry again. The bread you are chasing after will not last. There is bread that spoils and there is bread that lasts. Strive for the bread that lasts, the bread I will give you."

Jesus was of course speaking metaphorically. The bread he was referring to wasn't an actual loaf but rather he was talking about the nourishment that comes from the way and the truth and the life found in God.

No one can accuse Jesus of not caring about people's bodily needs. Jesus touched the bodies of people who were considered untouchable. Jesus healed people who were ill and disabled. Jesus fed hungry people on numerous occasions. And Jesus taught his followers, you and me, that we needed to care about and tend to people's physical needs.

But Jesus also knew that earthly bread is not the only nourishment we need. He knew we have deep spiritual and emotional hungers. And he offered himself and the way of God as a means to nourish us and to sustain us in this life. When he told the crowds that they should seek the bread from heaven that gives life to the world, the people responded, "Sir, give us this bread always." And Jesus tells them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Jesus is declaring that his way, his truth, the life he offers *is* the bread that will sustain us and nourish us.

The story of the Hebrew people in the wilderness is a powerful one most of us can relate to, for if we live long enough, we will find ourselves dealing with the wilderness times and places in our own lives. Our wilderness journeys bring us hardships and pain, losses and worries, illnesses and disappointments. And what Jesus tells us is that as we slog our way through the wilderness, he is the bread that will sustain us. He is our manna. He is our daily bread. But unlike manna, he is the bread that will not spoil. He is the bread that lasts.

Jesus nourishes us by showing us the way, and the truth, and the lasting life that cannot spoil no matter what takes place in our lives. He nourishes us with the way where the least and the overlooked are welcomed and lifted up. He nourishes us with the way where enemies are

loved and reconciliation is sought. He nourishes us with the way of forgiveness and mercy. He nourishes us with the way of radical generosity. He nourishes us with the way of serving others and extending compassion. He nourishes with the way of knowing the steadfast love of God. This way and this truth are the bread that sustain us and nourish us for this wilderness journey through life.

When the Resurrected Jesus appeared to his disciples, he said to them, “If you love me, feed my sheep.” Jesus tells us to offer his bread to others. Yes, we are to feed people’s bodies but we are also to nourish people’s souls and our own souls in the process by offering the bread of Jesus, by following the way of Jesus, by living the truth of Jesus.

The scriptures teach us an important message: blessings that are stored, spoil. Blessings that are stored, spoil. Jesus offered his blessings with abundant generosity. What about us? What blessings might we be storing up? What blessings might we be reluctant to share? Forgiveness? Kindness? Time? Money? Hope? Service? Outrage and distress about an injustice done to others? What do we do with the bread from heaven that we have been given?

In a short while we will center our hearts around this Table where Jesus offers us the Bread of Life. When we take our strange little communion cups and peel off the top layer, we may echo our Hebrew ancestors in asking, “What is it?” And my answer is--it’s a small wafer that tastes like cardboard! One day, one day we will be able to enjoy better tasting communion bread. But for now, we’ve got these strange tasting wafers. But what they represent is the bread we are given from heaven—the blessings we receive of God’s love and mercy, the blessing of God’s sustaining presence, and the blessing of God’s sustaining, nourishing way of living in this world. The blessing we receive at this table is the bread that does not spoil.