**October 1, 2017**

**Exodus 16-17:7**

After generations of slavery in Egypt, and a dramatic escape led by Moses, the Israelites found themselves finally free of suffering… Except not… Just when their dreams of freedom were realized, they found themselves suffering in new, unpredictable ways. They were hungry. They were thirsty. They were tired. They had no home. They had no purpose to shape their days. So they started complaining (and wouldn’t we?). *This* new life wasn’t what they wanted. They *had* dreamed of freedom with a new home and a settled space and gardens growing their own food, but out here they were wandering around in a wilderness wasteland. The Israelites wanted to trade in and trade up.

From a different perspective, things weren’t *so* bad. They weren’t slave labor anymore. They had freedom to do what they pleased each day. And they had enough. No more. No less. They had enough food, enough water, enough time, enough energy, enough people to do and go and care and be.

God gave them what they needed. God gave them daily bread and meat and water. But it couldn’t be stored for potential disasters. It couldn’t be set aside for a rainy day. It could not be hoarded in an accumulation of wealth. In fact, the manna God gave them established equality amongst the community. It came in such a way that each person – old and young, strong and weak – had just enough – no more, no less. It forced them to rely on God’s sustenance each day. It forced them into a spiritual discipline of awareness and acceptance.

Remember that last week’s parable in Matthew told a story of another people who were given the work they sought, then complained about their reality. Like the Israelites, at the beginning of the day, they were glad to receive something. And also like the Israelites, at the end of the day, they were sorry they didn’t get something else. The vineyard owner gave the workers exactly what they needed: a daily wage that was just enough to sustain them through that day. The wages were delivered, like the manna, in a way that established equality. Each worker received the same payment, regardless of how long or how hard they worked, or how much they accomplished. It forced them to rely on grace.

God gave what was sufficient for their needs, not what was sufficient for their wants. Even though the Israelites asked in plaintive, whiney tones, even when the Israelites actually said that slavery was better than *this* kind of freedom, God did not withhold. Even when the Israelites didn’t respond with obedience and utter gratitude (and even though God knew that would happen), God did not withhold. God gave them what they needed. God gave them enough.

And so God gives us what we need. God has not forgotten us. God cares for us and provides for us. And while we stamp our feet and pray that God will give us more, God continues to give us *enough*. It forces us to rely on God’s sustenance each day, not our own ambitions or accomplishments.

Unfortunately, we don’t always know what we need. Unfortunately, we never know what creation needs. So our prayers and actions are centered on what we want, not knowing the difference between that and what we need. We want some ideal in our minds, not understanding that ‘just enough’ is a gift, too. Then, when our prayers do not produce the answers that we want, we become disappointed – not by God, but disappointed by our *expectations* of God. And prayers like these become the order of our day:

* “Thanks for the rice and beans, Lord, but I’d prefer a steak dinner.”
* OR “I’ve worked really hard for the past 40 years, God, so bless me with enough money to retire and do fun stuff.”
* OR “I’ve been a church member way longer than these guys, God. I hope you see how much I’ve given for you…”
* OR “I’ll follow you if you just do **this** for me…”

These prayers are far different from Jesus’ prayer to “give us this day our daily bread.” Give us today what is enough. Give us today what we need to survive. Give us today your grace, O Lord.

Perhaps because our prayers are not what God would have them be, perhaps because we are not what God would have us be, we need to be transformed. Our prayers need to be transformed. And thus, we need to enter the wilderness.

When people went to the wilderness in scripture, something big was about to happen. The wilderness became a time to discover what they were made of. It was a time to strip off human entanglements, and invest in the essentials. It was a time to be content – not just content, but delighted – with *enough*. It was a time when God could not be forgotten, but must be faced. A time when God could not be denied, but must be reclaimed and affirmed.

The Protestant church today (to include the Presbyterian church) is wandering in our own wilderness. We thought we were in the Promised Land in the 1950s and 60s. When children filled our Sunday Schools and families centered their lives on the church schedule, when stores were closed on Sundays and sabbath was a secular and sacred practice, we thought we would always be in the Promised Land. We worked together and dreamed together and slowly saw our reality shift from an abundance to a sufficiency. Now people do not automatically get up for church on Sunday morning. Now adults do not want to attend committee meetings after working all day. So we don’t have extra hands to spread around, we only have enough. We can’t take on extra tasks, but only do the essentials. We have just *enough* volunteers to unload pumpkins. We have just *enough* people singing in the choir to fill out the parts. It’s not nearly as much fun as when we had an abundance. A quartet is different from a huge orchestra chorus. We find ourselves bemoaning our condition, we think we have lost our way...

If the Protestant church, and we at Sweet Hollow are wandering in the wilderness, how might we use our time differently? Instead of bemoaning our situation, and wishing that life could just be what it *was*,could we enjoy the lack of distractions? Could we give thanks for the provisions we have, instead of wishing for what was, or wishing for more and abundance? Could we focus on the overwhelming, almighty presence of God instead of the whining, nagging voices within our heads? AuGUStine, a 4th century bishop, said that God’s justification – God’s setting us right – is a healing activity in which God pours love into our sinful hearts and thus redirects our desires from earthly things to godly things. (repeat) Justification – God’s setting us right – is a redirection from what we want to what we need. … May it be so, Lord. May it be so.

Today is World Communion Sunday. And while we talk about the feast that God sets before us, it looks like just crumbs and a few drops. Surely this will not stretch to feed the entire congregation? Surely this table is not big enough for all of us, for all of the Church? By the grace of God, there is enough. It is sustaining. It is transforming.

May we be so bold as to use these texts as a mirror in our own lives: seeking God’s will (not our own) in our own lives and the life of the world, and trusting that God gives what is sufficient for the day. May we be even so bold as to pray that God would set us right, and pour love into us until we cannot help but see God’s goodness all around us. Thanks be to God! Amen.