

## **Holy Trinity and Parkside Churches**

**Pentecost IX – August 2, 2009**

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### **FOOD FOR THE FAITHFUL**

Marcion was an early Christian who wanted to eliminate the Old Testament. He said that since we had the New Testament that was all Christianity needed. His suggestion was dismissed readily by the Church Fathers, and he was declared “non-kosher”. The early church realized that Christianity was nothing without its roots.

We have a good example of this in today’s gospel lesson because it relates directly to our first Scripture lesson from Exodus. It is the story of some of the five thousand men whom Jesus had just fed, who continued to follow him because they had many question. They wanted to know what sign he was going to give them so that they might believe in him they said that their ancestors were given a sign - they were fed with manna in the wilderness.

They are referring to the story in which the Hebrews are getting angry with Moses because he led them into the desert after they escaped from Egypt - and they had no food. They claim that they are worse off now than when they were slaves. They are complaining because when they were in Egypt – where they had been for four hundred years – they ate well even if they were the captives of the Egyptians.

Actually many of the Hebrews had been assimilated into the Egyptian culture over those four centuries. Remember that Joseph even rose to the level of Prime Minister in Pharaoh’s court. Archeologists have found Hebrew names on bank buildings in ancient Egypt.

So here they are – presumably freed from their captors, but finding that freedom had a price tag on it. Being set free doesn’t necessarily mean that you are free.

I had a conversation with the Lutheran Pastor of St. Nicholi in Leipzig soon after the wall came down. His Lutheran congregation hosted the East Germans when they were meeting to see what they could do about their Communist oppression. Their efforts – always peaceful – were instrumental in bringing down the wall.

The Pastor said that the East Germans were having difficulty adjusting to their new freedom. He said that they were like a bird that had been let out of its cage, and it didn’t know what to do.

The Hebrews who escaped from the Egyptians were also confused. They complained that Moses led them to freedom, but now he was trying to “kill them with hunger.” Moses is getting really nervous about this rebellion and asks God for help. God says – not to worry - he will provide meat and bread. In the morning the camp is filled with quail, and the ground is covered with “a fine flaky substance”. They don’t know what it is until they are told that it is bread from heaven. Some have speculated that it was like ambrosia – the food of the gods. Although, to me it sounds a lot like tofu.

As in many biblical stories, what appears to be supernatural often has a factual origin. That is the case here. There actually is a tree in the Middle East that secretes an edible substance like the biblical manna. It is not produced in the quantities that are described in the Exodus story, but there is such a food and, as you know, people who tell stories are licensed to exaggerate.

The bread from heaven is explained by the natural secretions from trees, but what about the quail? Well, quail migrate, and the place where the Hebrews were would be about the place the birds landed after an extensive flight. They would have been exhausted, and easily caught.

The Hebrews are told to gather only food for the day. Not surprisingly, some didn't have the confidence that God would provide this daily bread, so they took extra. But they found that if they kept it over night maggots grew in it and it stank.

There are still questions you might ask about this story - the Jews certainly did, and there are volumes written about it in Jewish commentaries. But it is important to point out that when we come up with these possible explanations for the miracle food in Exodus, we do not negate the point of the story.

The point of the story is God's caring for his people. The point of the story is the constant awe we have in the presence of God the creator. Just as we can explain many things scientifically today – from the marvelous systems we call our bodies – to the unfathomable vastness of the universe - those explanations do not challenge true faith.

For instance, one can describe the complexity of the human organism, but holding a baby confirms the miracle of creation. You can be captivated and intrigued by an anatomy and neurological lesson, but you still stand in awe of life. In fact – the complexity of nature adds to its wonderment.

When you teach science in school there is no need to add God to the equation. If one isn't in awe of what one finds out about the world in a lab, telling them about God won't help – in fact it might confuse the issue!

As I noted, the rabbis often reflected on the meaning of these Bible stories. In probing this story from Exodus for its meaning, they noted:

**God interrupts the natural order to establish once more the ideal relationship between himself and man – the original and pure relationship between master and servant, in which the former takes total care of the latter. (The master) feeds...his people as God fed Adam and Eve, and (God) continues to do so...**

But now we pick up the gospel lesson. Jesus tells his listeners, **Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. (I am) the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever. (John 6:48-51)**

It is no wonder that the primary ritual of the Christian faith is the Lord's Supper. Food is often a part of religious celebrations – it is part of virtually every religious tradition. But in most traditions, the people make sacrifices to god – and the Hebrews did so as well. If you visit the Hindu Cultural Center, you will often see food placed in front of the stature of the god.

But Christianity turns that whole concept around. It is God who makes the sacrifice, and it is the people who are fed.

In our country where the major disease seems to be obesity and the dominant sin seems to be gluttony, our tradition of Holy Communion takes on added meaning.

Because, the Sacrament reminds us of our dependence on God and we are reminded of the folly of always looking for more - thinking that more will make us happier. It reminds us that being filled is different from being satisfied.

John's gospel reminds us that Jesus is the bread of life, and whoever comes to him will never be hungry again.