

Peter Bankson: Manna- What Is This Stuff?

Seekers Church: A Christian Community

In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour

Peter Bankson

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Manna: What Is This Stuff?

Summary

Reflecting on the stories of manna and the Canaanite woman who asked Jesus to heal her child suggests a relationship between hunger and learning:

- Hunger invites focus.
- Focus invites mindfulness.
- Mindfulness invites learning.

Scripture

And the whole congregation of the people of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and said to them, "Would that we had died by the hand of God in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

Then God said to Moses, "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may prove them, whether they will walk in my law or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather

daily.” So Moses and Aaron said to all the people of Israel, “At evening you shall know that it was God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of God, because God has heard your murmurings against God. For what are we, that you murmur against us?” And Moses said, “When God gives you in the evening flesh to eat and in the morning bread to the full, because God has heard your murmurings which you murmur against God – what are we? Your murmurings are not against us but against God.”

And Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, ‘Come near before God, for God has heard your murmurings.’” And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of God appeared in the cloud. And God said to Moses, “I have heard the murmurings of the people of Israel; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat flesh, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread; then you shall know that I am the sovereign your God.’”

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning dew lay round the camp. And when the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as hoarfrost on the ground. When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, “It is the bread which God has given you to eat.”

Exodus 16:2-15

And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And a Canaanite woman from that region came out and cried, “Have mercy on me, Sovereign, Son of David, my daughter is severely possessed by a demon.” But Jesus did not answer her a word. And the disciples came and begged Jesus, saying, “Send her away, for she is crying after us.” Jesus answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and knelt before Jesus, saying,

“Sovereign, help me.” And Jesus answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Sovereign, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their owners’ table.” Then Jesus answered her, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

Matthew 15:21-28

Introduction

[Pass out bowls of gofio. Invite people to take a bit, and taste it.]

What **is** this? What is this powdery stuff, which looks like flour, but tastes like burned crackers?

At this time last Sunday, Marjory and I were on our way back from two weeks on the small island of Santa Cruz de la Palma, the northwest frontier of the Canary Islands, about 200 miles off the coast of Morocco. We had spent our time visiting German friends from two decades ago, who have retired there – touring the island, climbing its rocky dorsal fin, settling into its Spanish rhythms.

The island is tropical, and rugged. The central, volcanic spine rises to 8,000 feet above the beach, and falls again to sea level within 20 miles. It is the most rugged place on earth for its size. There are barren mountain peaks, alpine forests, vineyards, banana plantations and azure beaches within ten miles of each other.

It is a self-reliant island, as well. The mountains catch moisture from the westerly trade winds, and the Palmeros have built aqueducts that ring the island, bringing water from the highlands down to the desert coast, turning the sharp lava into fertile fields for tropical fruits, and grapes, and potatoes and corn.

But food was not always plentiful on the island. In a tourist guide to Palmero cuisine, I read:

“Gofio is a kind of flour made from toasted and milled cereals. It is very nutritive and it must be added to any other kind of food, mainly to milk: when children drink their cup of milk before going to school or before going to bed, their mothers add 2 or 3 spoonfuls of gofio to it. It was a substitute to bread and nowadays it can be mixed with it to cook tasty dishes.”

Since I was already thinking about manna, I was immediately curious about gofio. When I asked about it, I heard many stories, but we couldn't find it in restaurants. But there was a full shelf of gofio in the local market – wheat gofio, rye gofio, corn gofio. Now they even have “seven-grain gofio” on la Palma, and a special brand made for mothers to add to milk for infants – “gofio formula. Then I got to the point: gofio was discovered during a time of severe hunger on la Palma, a time before there were aqueducts to catch and share the water falling in the mountains.

“The manna of la Palma!” What started as a defense against starvation has become a mainstay of infant nutrition.

“In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning dew lay round the camp. And when the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as hoarfrost on the ground. When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, “It is the bread which God has given you to eat.”

As I thought about gofio and manna, I came to three points I want to share with you about our lessons for this week:

- Hunger invites focus.

- Focus invites mindfulness.
- Mindfulness invites learning.

Hunger Invites Focus

Hunger starts with food, but means much more. We hunger for safety and identity, for a sense of autonomy, for a clear call and the support we need to live it out in this time.

In the Hebrew scripture for this week, the Israelites were focused on survival. But their departure from Egypt, and their sojourn in the wilderness gave them the opportunity to deepen their relationship with God, to become a people. (But I'm getting a bit ahead of myself here.)

In the Gospel for this week, the Caananite woman was focused on healing for her daughter. Her focused insistence raised a hunger in the disciples: "And the disciples came and begged Jesus, saying, 'Send her away, for she is crying after us.'" They were focused on clearing Jesus' calendar and getting the peace and quiet they had come away to Tyre and Sidon to find. Her insistence on justice and their hunger for vacation brought a focus to Jesus that made a difference.

During their famine, the Palmeros focused on survival. But that focus opened them to a deeper reality that the island that held them prisoner could also sustain them, if they could just figure out another way to live.

Our hungers are different. Unlike the Palmeros of history, we can leave if things get too rough. One central element in the life of this faith community is our hunger for meaning and purpose. We hear it clearly in our call to be church:

"Our call is to be a "Seekers community" which comes together in weekly worship rooted in the Biblical faith, with shared leadership, and disperses with a common commitment to understand and implement Christian servanthood

in the structures in which we live our lives.”

We say we are a Church that supports us in our lives as Christian servants in the world.

But are we hungry for more? Are we hungry for a new home? Or are we looking for the words to name a deeper hunger, a hunger to know much more clearly how to live out “Christian servanthood” in the way we define it:

“For us, Christian servanthood is based on empowering others within the normal structures of our daily lives (work; family and primary relationships; and citizenship) as well as through special structures for services and witness.”

As Seekers, what are we hungry for? Until our hunger for identity is as strong as the Israelites’ hunger for bread, we’ll have trouble getting focused on our future.

Hunger invites focus.

Focus Invites Mindfulness

It may seem paradoxical, but focus invites mindfulness. In some ways, focus means loss of context, narrowing our attention so that we are not distracted. Initially, our hungers may crowd everything else out of our awareness. One thing I’ve learned in a decade of working for troubled youth at Communities In Schools is that pain or hunger can cause us to narrow our focus. I often use a quote from John Wesley Powell to illustrate this: “If you have a toothache, that’s all you’ve got.”

But given time, focus can lead beyond this narrow, self-centered way. Mindfulness is hunger **in context**.

On a diet of manna, the Israelites began to see the desert in a new way. They learned to live and work together in this new home, and became aware of God’s relationship to them.

On a diet of gofio, the Palmeros survived on their island, began to share their resources, and found a new food for their children.

Reflecting on the Gospel, I see Jesus “waking up” to a wider need for healing and forgiveness. I think it took time for Jesus to see clearly and claim publicly God’s call on his life. The insistent, focused need of the Canaanite woman helped with that process. The Gospel story reminds me of the passage in John Greenleaf’s “Servant Leadership,” the source of our name “Seekers Church:”

“The variable that marks some periods as barren and some as rich in prophetic vision is in the interest, the level of seeking, the responsiveness of the hearers. ... Prophets grow in stature as people respond to their message. ... It is Seekers, then, who make prophets, and the initiative of any one of us in searching for and responding to the voice of contemporary prophets may mark the turning point in their growth and service.”

In the presence of a responsive community, Jesus grew into the call God had given him.

We, too, have the opportunity for the focus that invites mindfulness. This is the goal of our spiritual practices, as individuals and as a community. As individuals, we sit with our hungers to discern God’s call. That is the inner journey.

As a community, we seek to “...empower others within the normal structures of our daily lives (work; family and primary relationships; and citizenship) as well as through special structures for services and witness.” Or do we? This summer most of us have had the opportunity to tell others about Seekers – family, friends, and people in the next seat on the plane. What have we told them? What is our **common vision** of this church? How can we tell those stories to each other?

How can we create more opportunities to bring forth the prophetic Gospel?

It is Seekers, then, who make prophets, and the initiative of any one of us in searching for and responding to the voice of contemporary prophets may mark the turning point in their growth and service."

This call to a communal inner journey takes time – together.

On La Palma, I re-read "Living Buddha, Living Christ" by Thich Nhat Hanh. He offers another image of how focus invites mindfulness. He says:

The body of Christ is the body of God, the body of ultimate reality, the ground of all existence. We do not have to look anywhere else for it. It resides deep in our own being. The Eucharistic rite encourages us to be fully aware so that we can touch the body of reality in us. Bread and wine are not symbols. They contain the reality, just as we do." (pp 31-32)

...

The living teaching expressed by the lives of the Buddha and Jesus should always be the models for our practice. ... To receive the true teaching, we must emulate the work of the Buddha himself. The same is true of Christianity. The Gospels in their written or even oral form are not the living teaching of Jesus. The teachings must be practiced as they were lived by Jesus. (pp 69-70)

...

If while we practice we are not aware that the world is suffering, that children are dying of hunger, and that social injustice is going on everywhere, we are not practicing mindfulness. We are just trying to escape. (pg 83)

Mindfulness is hunger **in context.**

As our hunger grows for a clearer common story of our identity, our awareness of the context can grow as well. While I was gone, **my** stories of Seekers included the vision of a new home on Capitol Hill. I had Pennsylvania Avenue in mind, even though I know we seem to have lost our opportunity to move there. But the vision of Seekers in that context is still alive within me.

I got back to the office to find a note from a colleague who knows the Capitol Hill neighborhood well. He's the developer of the Ellen Wilson project at 5th and G Streets Southeast. Ed referred me to Hal Gordon, who has spent the past decade ministering to the homeless in that part of the city, through a program that sounds a lot like Hope and a Home. Hal has just bought another building to house the administrative offices of his ministry. Ed thought he might be interested in sharing his space with a faith community.

I called Hal. We had a great conversation and will be getting together this week. The call lifted my spirits. It satisfied my hunger for some sense of new possibilities. It was a fine, flake-like thing, left on the face of the wilderness after the dew went up – manna. Not a long-term diet, but an invitation to mindfulness.

Focus invites mindfulness.

Mindfulness Invites Learning

Learning happens when old facts take on new shape. That's what "paradigm shift" really means. It's what Jesus brought to the people of Israel. That's why we can trace our tradition to the people of Israel, and why we can dare to believe in forgiveness. But old facts don't take on new shape easily or instantly. It takes focus – and mindfulness – and time.

The Israelites began to see themselves differently, but it

took 40 years, and a new generation of leaders before they were ready to see themselves as a people and claim the land God had sent them to.

The Caananite woman helped Jesus and the disciples see Jesus' good news for the gentiles, but it took the disciples a long time, and the arrival of Paul-the-convert, for the facts of Jesus' life and ministry to take shape as the Christian Church of our tradition.

The Palmeros learned they needed to catch and share their precious water, but it took until the 1930's (and a big push from Franco) for them to get a clear vision of universal irrigation, and build the massive water-sharing system they have today.

And us? What are we hungry for? What is the new vision of Seekers Church being offered from within? Who is God really calling us to be? David Lloyd has been one voice among us calling Seekers to a wider witness. I'm listening, and eager to help.

We'll need to stay focused on our hunger as a community, and mindful of the context in which we live if we expect to see ourselves more clearly in this new time. But the good news is that we have each other for companionship on the journey. And that may be our manna during these times of change.

Conclusion

When the people of Israel said, "What **is** this?" they may have been asking how to eat a strange food, but the deeper question was "Who are **we**, that we must survive on **this**?" Manna isn't the problem; it is a sign pointing to God, just enough to keep us going and invite us to focus.

In "Living Buddha, Living Christ" Thich Nhat Hanh reminded me of the old Buddhist maxim, that "the teacher's finger pointing

to the moon is not the moon.” Manna was not the problem. And neither is our hunger for a new home. The “hungry question,” the one that seizes our attention like that toothache Father Powell talks about, is the finger pointing at the moon. It’s the story of Jesus’ teaching in the Gospel lesson of the Caananite woman.

The real question behind “What **is** this?” is “Who are **we**, and what is God calling us to in the future?” Gofio isn’t bad, but I wouldn’t want it as a steady diet. And I don’t want to spend forever looking for our new home. The good news is that, if we learn the lessons of the manna, we won’t have to. Hunger invites focus. Focus invites mindfulness. Mindfulness invites learning. Amen.