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September 21, 2008

Recipe for disaster: add greed and stir

Exodus 16: 2-15; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

Filling the headlines and the airwaves this week was news of the crisis in some of the top financial institutions: billions and billions of dollars worth of crisis. And Uncle Sam to the rescue on some of it, while economic analysts wrung their hands, and the presidential candidates tried to find something to say. And it left many of us regular people scratching our heads and wondering what happened.

Several words and phrases keep coming up, however:

Too much risk. Gambling with bad loans. Borrowing against money that wasn't there. Debt out of control. Plain old greed. There I said it. Greed. In a competitive business where it was harder and harder to find new opportunities in

profit-making, loans got riskier, deals got more complicated, the shell game got faster and looser. I'm angry that it got to this—I would've liked for there to have been a few rules so that my taxes wouldn't have to go to pay for someone else's greedy dealings. My dad, who's supposed to be able to be done working by now, is worried about his retirement fund because the stewards of it seem to have held him in little regard. Shame on them. Shame on any of us when we go overboard at someone else's expense.

How refreshing to hear in this morning's lesson from Exodus a story whose main theme is Anti-Greed. The Israelites are now free from slavery in Egypt but are living a hardscrabble life as refugees in tents out in the rough country. They complain to Moses and Aaron, even to the point of yearning to go back to bondage in Egypt where at least their stew pots were full and they were given bread to eat. We heard the portion this morning where God sends quails as well

as a fine flaky substance, manna, as bread, to the people. In the next verses it goes like this:

‘Moses told the people, This is what the Lord has commanded: Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents. So the Israelites did, some gathering more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. And Moses said to them, “Let no one leave any of it over until morning.” But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them. Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed”.

The Anti-Greed story. Manna rains down from heaven each morning, just enough for the Israelites to scrape off the ground and last them *for one day*.

They each got one omer—which essentially means just enough for one day’s

calories and nutrients. Even when they tried to gather up more, when they got to the measuring omer, it seemed they had just an omer. If they were unable to gather enough, when they got to the measuring omer, it seemed they miraculously had a whole omer. Anti-Greed. I mean, greed didn't work at all. Neither did hoarding. If they tried to save part of it for the next day, well, it just rotted with worms and foulness! Similarly, if they tried to go deeper into the desert to scrape manna off the ground, they would risk becoming lost, isolated, dehydrated, dead. No. They were instructed in Anti-Greed. Depend on God. Take just enough and no more. Meet your tent and family's needs and no more. The next day: depend on God. Take just enough and no more. Meet your tent and family's needs and no more. The next day: depend on God. Take just enough and no more. The next day and the next and the next.

Lord, give us this day our daily bread. That's what that part of the Lord's Prayer means. Manna is the idea here. Daily bread means just enough for today. No greedy scraping. No hoarding. No dealing. No gambling. No venturing out into

the unknown, complicated wilderness to get more, more, more. It will all rot anyway, foul with worms. Daily bread. That's what we need, that's what we ask for in the Church's favorite prayer.

And what about today's gospel parable from Matthew? This story Jesus told is in my top ten. It's essentially about the kingdom of heaven and a denarius. The denarius is a wages and payment concept we don't have in America. If you go back to Jesus' time, the Roman "denarius" coin wasn't currency like we use dollars and cents. Here's how it worked: the peasant reality was that one worked a daily job and took home one denarius. The denarius was the standard coin of both a daily wage and a daily food voucher.

There was no way to ever get ahead. You worked a twelve-hour day then you got a coin that served as a food voucher for the next day. Very few, if any, of us in this room have ever had to live like that. Even migrant workers in America today usually have a bank account and set a family budget. Even the working

poor can choose to buy food *or something else*. But there are people in this world and even in this country, even in Chicago, that subsist hand-to-mouth, day to day, on essentially the denarius system, and we might only imagine their despair on days when no one will hire them.

At first glance, the parable of the late workers getting the same pay as the ones who worked all day seems grossly unfair. And by the world's standards, it is unfair. What kind of boss would you be if you paid people the same thing who worked for you a twelve-hour day as you paid the people who only worked for an hour? I mean, clearly, you'd have an uprising on your hands. Is God not just? Don't we expect God to be just?

Here's the secret of the parable about how God is and how the kingdom of heaven works. God cares that people receive their daily bread *no matter what*. God is free to love and care for whomever God chooses. God dispenses grace on the hungry, weak, late, and ineffective every bit as much as on the hard-working and strong. God rained manna down in the wilderness of Sinai on the

people who were following Moses around and even when they gathered too much, or too little, God gave them each an omer of manna anyway.

In fact, we Christians proclaim a God that actually shows a *preferential option* for the poor. That means simply that God prefers the poor. Would we want it to be any other way?

If you want to hear something different, you won't hear it here. Jesus told his home synagogue that he came to proclaim good news to the poor. He tells the parable of poor Lazarus finding eternal comfort in the bosom of Abraham while Dives the rich man sweats in a fiery netherworld across the fixed chasm. Jesus told the disciples that it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus loved the brother who did all the work, and he loved the brother who squandered the inheritance just as much, and celebrated his return even more. The last shall be first and the first shall be last. God loves the responsible and punctual. God

loves the late and the lazy. God especially cares about the despairing and the tired and those without. And in the kingdom of heaven, everyone gets an omer of manna; everyone gets a denarius.

Can that possibly good news to us North Shore overachievers? Can that possibly be good news to A and B students? I believe that it can be, and that it is. Week by week we come to this place and celebrate that very strange justice of God. We re-enact the vision of heaven that Jesus laid out for us. We each come to the table with hands outstretched to receive what our Lord offers, the same size piece of bread, the same size sip of wine.

Some have been searching since the early hours, some haven't even begun to search. Some have labored in the vineyard for many hours, some for only an hour. This celebration of that radical kind of justice in the Eucharist is good news -- in fact one of the most celebratory moments of my week.

We are invited to experience the Eucharist as a living metaphor for the kingdom of heaven. Then we pray for that radical notion to manifest itself in our real, flesh and blood, work and wage lives. We are free from scraping and scratching and grabbing and hoarding. We are free from climbing and clawing, gambling and greed. In God's kingdom, those don't work. The spoils just spoil.

Depend on God. Take just enough and no more. All are welcome here.