

## WHAT IS IT?

*September 18, 2011*

Good Morning. So here we are...the few, the proud, the loyal remnants of Union Congregational UCC. Many of our congregation are worshipping this morning at Moon Beach and have spent the last few days learning and reflecting on our purpose as a church and where that will lead us in the 21st century. I look forward to hearing their thinking and their ideas upon their return. Both Chuck and Peggy will be with us next Sunday and we will again have church school and children's activities.

I am Diane Tugel and I have had the honor of preaching here at Union a couple of times over the summer and I look forward to being before you again this morning. As some of you know, I am a ministerial candidate with Union and our Association and I hope to be ordained at some point in the near future, hopefully this next summer. I invite each of you to be with me on this journey and I mean that. The ordination process is a long process of discernment and reflection and I have much to learn. So please share your thoughts and insights with me and let me know what you're thinking in terms of Union Church and ministry and what the future may hold. I believe that each of you is in some sense my Manna.

Hmmm, you may be wondering what I meant when I said, "You are my Manna." No, you are not "my Momma" or "my man," but manna. Well, let me explain. Our Old Testament scripture passage tells the story of how Moses and the people of Israel, in a time of need, rediscover the fact that God is with them and that God cares for them. Moses has led the Israelites out of Egypt, and this was no easy task. If you remember the Bible stories, it took multiple attempts, and petitions, and plagues, and it was a time of great turmoil for the Israelites. At last, however, they are free – no longer oppressed and enslaved. God, or Yahweh as they knew God, has given them the promise of a new home, a new land filled with goodness and opportunity. And yet, here they are, in the desert wilderness, wandering about with little direction and even littler food. The people cried out, "Has God brought us out here only to die of hunger and thirst?" They wondered if they were better off as slaves! They grumbled and moaned. Life was hard, and God was not being fair.

Our New Testament scripture passage tells us a story of how a householder, or landowner, hired laborers to work in the fields. He hired them for a denarius a day – which at that time was a really good wage. Some were hired first thing in the morning, around 6 a.m. Others were hired at 9 a.m., then some more at noon, and some more at 3 p.m. and then some more again at around 5 p.m. At the end of the work day, which it doesn't specify what time that was but it must have been pretty late if some were just hired at 5, but whatever time the work day ended, the land owner's steward called in the last group of workers first and paid them a denarius. The steward continued to call in workers, giving each a denarius until he came to the first group of those hired. They were eagerly anticipating more than a denarius even though that is the wage they agreed to because after all, they had been working for a much longer period. However, they too were given only one denarius. The passage tells us that these workers complained heartily. The land owner was being unfair.

Just as the laborers found no joy in their work, the Israelites found no joy in their freedom. Life is hard; life is unfair.

I am a parent as are many of you. That life is not always just is a difficult concept for children. They have an innate sense of balance and fairness...and they can gripe and whine about it with a passion. When my children were younger, they would carry on seemingly incessantly about how the other had it better, was more loved, and was given more things. We would frequently hear how “he got to choose the movie,” or “she chose what was for dinner,” or “why don’t I get to go?,” or “why does she get to stay up later?” It is difficult to be a parent. Sometimes we don’t have the answers for cries for justice and fairness.

I have shared some of my chaplain stories with you in the past and I would like to do so now. In my work as a chaplain, I have been privileged to meet people from many walks of life and to hear their stories...and to hear their complaints of unfairness. I remember one young man who was filled with grief. He and his wife were in their mid-twenties and had been high school sweethearts. They had married right out of school and had entered her family’s business. They had dreams of raising a family and traveling around the United States. They both particularly wanted to see the mesas of Utah and to hike the trails through the dessert and climb on the rock formations. They read the literature, started saving, and began an exercise program so that they would be in fine shape for their adventure. His wife, Elli began to notice being tired after their runs, really tired and achy. Eventually, as her symptoms worsened, she made her way to the doctor’s office, and then through the myriad of tests, only to find that her body was racked by disease. Together, Elli and her husband James were given the terrible prognosis that led them to our hospice program. When I first began to visit Elli, James would immediately leave to another room. Elli worried about her husband and his anger. As Elli grew sicker, James would stay with me during a visit but rarely spoke to me. When he did, he spoke with a venom. I understood his fury or at least his anger at the unfairness of this. She was so young. She had her whole life before her. They had dreams. Eventually he expressed his resentment with me. Why, he pleaded, why did God do this? Why did Elli have to get sick? Why did Elli have to die? It wasn’t fair. And he was right. He raged at God. And all I could do was rage with him.

I believe that God not only hears our rage, but invites to express our rage. We are to be like Jacob wrestling with God. Remember in that Genesis passage, Jacob wrestles through the night, and in the morning his hip is hurt, but he has prevailed. He wrestled with God, and while he was not given the blessing he sought, he was given a purpose and promise – to be Israel and to start a new nation and to lead a new life, to be a different person.

In our passage this morning, the Israelites are wandering in the wilderness and they take their unhappiness to Moses. Moses tells them that he is not the one they are angry with, but that they are angry with God. He tells them to take their anger up with God. And they do. The people complain and express their fear and their anxiety and their rage. And God then provides for them. God provides food for them in the form of quail and more importantly, with bread. Now, apparently quail are a migratory bird common in the Egypt-Palestine region and according to a passage found in Numbers, chapter 11, God blew upon the sea and the quail were blown in towards the Israelite’s camp, and exhausted from their journey, the quail were easy prey for the Israelites. As for the bread, well a natural occurrence in that area is that indeed a sweet, sticky honey-like juice exudes in heavy drops during certain months from a desert shrub. This substance ‘rained’ down and covered the ground with a white flaky substance. The Israelite people woke up in the morning excited with anticipation of finding wonderful bread. They ran out of their tents to see what God had provided and they saw this white flaky stuff and like a

child at the dinner table disappointedly wondered, “**What is it?**” Moses, I would imagine a bit irritated as a parent might be with their child, told them “It is the bread which God has given you to eat.” So they gathered it, and prepared it, and ate it to their fill. They were filled not only with food but with the knowledge that God was still with them and that God did not bring them out of slavery to just let them die of starvation in the wilderness. God did indeed still care for them and, for awhile anyway, they were happy and content.

We know this substance that the Israelites made bread from as Manna – a word that literally means: what is it? God provided for the Israelites and God provides for us as well – and just as miraculously as God did for the Israelites. When we complain and are filled with anger, God does not turn on us. God draws closer to us, drawing us into relationship. God provides food for us – food in the form of Jesus Christ. In John 6:35 Jesus declared: “I am the bread of life. Whoever who comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever who believes in me will never be thirsty.” In Jesus we are spiritually fed and nourished. When the church acts in accordance with Jesus’ teaching and reaches out in mission, we are Jesus; we are the manna, the spiritual nourishment. When we as individuals reach out to our neighbors and strangers and offer a hand of care or comfort or support, we are manna.

Dr. Peter Steinke is a Lutheran minister and systems therapist who travels around the U.S. working with churches to understand and maybe solve their internal conflicts. In his book, How Your Church Family Works, he shares a concept that I find appealing and versatile. He talks about balancing our need for separateness and closeness. He states that when tension rises, when we are scared or anxious or mad, that human nature leads us to one of two things – to distance ourselves from the offending or tension causing party, or to draw closer to that person or group. If we distance ourselves too far, we become isolated or if we grow too close, we become enmeshed or emotionally fused. He advocates for balance; that is maintaining a sense of who we are while also having empathy for others. If we are to be manna, we cannot distance ourselves or become too entangled.

I have a student that came to me quite reluctantly. He was angry, and bored, and about to burn out in his parish ministry. His denominational authority recognized this and required him to take my CPE, or Clinical Pastoral Education course. His first reaction, and maybe yours too, was, “CPE –What is it?” He did not want to take this class, wasn’t even sure what kind of class it was, but he followed his assignment and came to the interview. I explained to him that CPE is a class where we take our clinical experience – be it in the hospital or parish, and seek to understand how our personal stories and personal identity impacts and influences our ministry in those places. He had a choice – to withdraw and be a silent observer of the class, or to be ensnared by other’s stories and not deal with his own, OR to find a balance and find real relationship in engaging in dialogue with vulnerability and empathic inquiry. The other class participants would do the same in return. Well, he is now in his third class with me. He is no longer on the verge of burnout, but both he and his congregation are thriving. When I asked him why, what had happened for him, he said with a huge grin that he had found Christ here, that manna had been provided!

So, manna – what is it? is a metaphor – a metaphor for God’s providence and God’s grace. And so I say that you here today are manna for me. You are God’s provision for nurturing and teaching me to be an able and competent minister of God’s Word. And so I am much blessed.

How else are we as a church manna? As individuals? I believe we are and can be manna each and every day in our living out our faith and thus experience God's patience and God's grace and God's care. Amen.

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