

How Much Is Enough

Exodus 16:2-32

Read as a straightforward factual account, the story becomes an impossible fairy tale. Written centuries later it has the laudatory purpose of religious education. The emphasis is not so much on the generosity of God. (Of course, that's in the background and assumed.) The question is: How do we respond to God's generosity?

Some people picked more manna, some less, but when they measured it, it all came exactly to one homer each--just enough for each one each day. Paul cites this verse in 2 Cor. 8:15 in urging the Corinthians to share generously in the offering for the poor. Jesus taught us, and we pray constantly, "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11). We don't stop to think of the implications of the prayer in the context of the national and world economy.

Some people wanted to pile up more manna than they needed. The manna turned rotten and inedible before morning, to teach the ultimate futility of hoarding and being selfish.

But when the Israelites measured their picking on the sixth day it was twice as much. It didn't go bad overnight so they could have some on the Sabbath, God's gift of rest to ex-slaves. Some didn't pay attention when Moses said not to look for it on the Sabbath day, and they didn't find any.

The real point is: God makes it possible for everybody to have what he or she needs, but God doesn't deliver it to our doorsteps. It's up to us to see to the proper distribution. It's a challenge to our free market capitalism, which tends to make the rich richer and the poor poorer. As a deity, "The market" is totally unforgiving.

The total text also raises the question of the Sabbath day of rest. In my Presbyterian childhood, Sunday was a worship day and a rest day, a family day. "Sunday afternoon" for us meant a family ride out in the country, or peanuts in the shell we could crack and eat (Dad got them a nickel a bag, six for a quarter, which just fit our number). Maybe a cake mother baked, and we children got to drink a demitasse of coffee. Wow!

Where is our day of rest? Mammon has robbed us of it.

Matthew 20.1-16

For good background read the essay titled "Human Solidarity and the Goodness of God in *God of the Lowly: Socio-historical Interpretations of the Bible* by Willy Schottroff and Wolfgang Stegemann (Orbis 1984).

Jesus dealt with a socio/economic problem of his own day that in many places around the world and in our own land, exists today: day laborers. One denarius was supposed to be the wage for a day, presumably sufficient to support one person (family too?) for one day. No work, no pay. So whether one worked all day or one hour, or not at all, one still needed one day's pay. US agricultural industry depends on itinerant laborers being exploited because they don't know English, understand little about the very few rights they might have, don't dare complain because if they complain they're out of work. That's a really big problem, and sad to say many folks in our churches may be employers who get all hot and bothered when somebody raises questions about migrant laborers they have hired.

In Jesus' parable, the last ones to be hired had stood around all day, not because they were lazy or refused to work, but because nobody hired them. US "welfare reform" claims to get people off welfare and doing jobs, but what if there are no jobs? And what if such jobs as there are don't pay enough to support a family? No benefits, no health, no childcare, no transportation. People still need a day's support for a day's life. Does the rest of society--do Christians--have no responsibility? Would the ancient prophets fail to notice this indifference? Would Jesus?

The landowner went out from time to time to hire more workers, not because he was altruistically wishing to help, but because he wanted to be sure not to hire more than he needed. His generosity in paying all the same is certainly praiseworthy for that day and time, but he was still in total control of the situation. Indeed, one effect of his "generosity" was to set up conflict among the workers, which weakened their position vis-a-vis the rich man. They should have had a sense of mutual understanding and solidarity, but their quarrels made it easier for him to exploit them. According to the Roman Cato's advice (cited in the book I recommend), employers should not hire the same people several days in a row--too easy to get attached to them and endanger one's profit taking.

Isaiah 5:8-9

"Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left alone in the midst of the land. The LORD of hosts has sworn in my hearing: Surely many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant."

In the US both private capital and government subsidies encourage large agribusiness to the detriment of small landholders and family farmers, plus pollution of the land and cruelty to cattle, swine, and fowl. In the Third World peasant farmers driven off the land swarm to cities to live in slums and sell themselves for sweat shop labor.

Ezekiel 34:1-10, 17-22

In the ancient Near Eastern countries, "shepherd" symbolized the ruler and "flock" symbolized the people. Shepherds were to care for the flocks. The prophet condemns the shepherds/rulers of Israel for using their authority for self-enrichment at the expense of the flock/people. Ezekiel expands the metaphor to condemn the stronger members of the flock who oppressed the weaker and degraded their living environment. "I will judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats. Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of the pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet? . . . I will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. . . You pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns, until you scattered them far and wide."

This issue has implications from close at home to the whole planet.

Amos 6:4-8

Judgment pronounced against those who indulge in luxurious lifestyles with no concern for those at whose expense they have become wealthy.

Luke 12:13-21

In his quest for a less complicated existence, Mark Keller makes his home in a shanty he built near Kentucky's Rough River Lake. He spends time daily in physical labor and gets some of his food supply by fishing, and by hunting with simple wood bows he makes himself. This modern example of "Thoreau on Walden Pond" told newspaper reporter Byron Crawford: "I don't know when it happened, but we've erased the line in our society that defines the difference between need and want." (Louisville, KY *Courier-Journal*, Feb. 19, 1995)

Very few of us would go so far as Mark Keller even if we could, but at least we can heed his advice. Every one of us daily faces decisions about priorities among needs and wants--from the New York stockbroker who can't make ends meet on six hundred thousand dollars a year, to the single parent family trying to decide between a better diet or buying name brand shoes for the youngsters. The rich fool of Jesus' parable compares more nearly to the stockbroker. Already rich, and with no indication of effort on his part, he benefited from the abundant production of his land, yet still couldn't be satisfied. The rich fool forgot that everything he thought of as his, even his own life, came as a loan from God. Just when he thought himself at the height of economic security, he heard God recall the loan. The day of reckoning had come!

The Lord addresses every one of us: "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed." In classical Greek, "pleonexia" meant having or wanting more than somebody else. It led to excess, insatiability, avarice, and violence. The philosophers said pleonexia disrupts the harmony of the universe. Elsewhere in Jesus' teaching he said, "You cannot serve God and mammon" that is, wealth, money, property, or profit (*Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*). In many people's lives the idol greed/mammon displaces the true God.

In our day, greed drives the competitive spirit enticing us all to think of life as a battle producing winners and losers. The strong get farther ahead, while the weak fall behind. William McElvaney calls this a predatory system. With approximately 20 percent of our U.S. citizens mired in a marginal situation of economic survival, thousands enjoy multiple homes and bank accounts and virtually an unlimited consumer capacity. That this situation is even possible is a disgrace for a nation of over 60 million citizens who call ourselves Christians." (*Good News is Bad News Is Good News*, Orbis, 1980, p. 68.)

President Bush now suggests we start dismantling many of our nuclear weapons (tear down our old barns) and build "new barns" consisting of a Star Wars weapons in space, eventually costing a trillion dollars. The Department of Energy and the Pentagon propose to build a new facility at Oak Ridge, Tennessee not only to upgrade the existing nuclear weapons but also to develop new ones, at an initial cost of four billion dollars.

Luke 12.21 concludes by suggesting that we can avoid the rich fool's fate by being "rich toward God." Perhaps we can learn what this means, by

[1] recalling that from the story of creation on, the Bible reminds us that our true happiness lies in humbly trusting in the loving grace of God; and

[2] referring to Matthew 25.40—"just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me."

In the immediate context, Jesus' parable addresses us on the personal level of family and neighborhood relations. But when greed drives the citizens of a nation, competition and desire for excess may lead to wars of aggression and conquest, of military or economic dominance of the strong nations over the weak.

Arch Taylor