

Epworth Chapel on the Green
September 27, 2009
Pentecost 17
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Numbers 11:4-20
Psalm 19
James 4:7-12
Mark 9:38-48

There is an old adage that states, “be careful what you wish for -- you just might get it.” How true this can be.

This is the experience of the children of Israel in our Old Testament lesson today. They have been rescued by God from their slavery in Egypt. They have witnessed astonishing miracles like the Red Sea crossing and God’s demonstrations to Pharaoh. They are now on an exhilarating journey where God is leading them to a new future, one day at a time.

But a problem has developed. The problem is that God’s blessings have become commonplace. These people, who should be happy, have made themselves miserable by discontent. Having barely embarked upon their new life of freedom, they begin to crave the trappings of their old life of slavery. Quite simply: *they want meat.*

I like how the King James version renders verse 4: “the multitude among them went a lusting...”

Now typically we associate the word “lust” exclusively with sexual desire. But that understanding is far too limited. Let me give you another definition of the

word “lust”: *a strong desire to be fulfilled at any cost, even to the point of giving up something very important.*

At other places in Scripture, this is called “inordinate desire.” For the children of Israel, their desire (i.e., their “lust”) for meat became so strong that their vision was blurred. In spite of all God had done, all they could see was what they wanted in the present moment. They were willing to trade their freedom for a 12 ounce rib eye (or Quail burger, in this case). They cried “give us the good ole days.” But often the “good ole days” are simply the product of a “bad ole memory.”

I like what John Wesley says of the children of Israel here. He describes the essence of their sin by saying, “they lightly esteemed God’s bounty and manifold blessings, and they slighted and distrusted God’s providence after so long and large experience of it.”

Before we relax in our seats and whisper to ourselves, “the preacher’s talking about lust today, and I don’t have a problem with that,” we should put the brakes on. Every one of us here today has done battle with lust, and even succumbed to it. If not in the typical way we understand it, then we have all had strong desires which we have pursued at any cost, even to the point of surrendering something very important to us in order to see those desires fulfilled.

Like children who frustrate their parents, we have the capacity to frustrate our Heavenly Father, and to make God angry with us. We do this by our ingratitude, and by our selfishness -- our fixation only on what *we* want.

When blessings become commonplace, we can become so fixated on what *we* want in life that we consider making unhealthy and unholy compromises to get it. It would be easy to stand in judgment today on the children of Israel, but to do so is simultaneously to indict ourselves. Whether it is 1400 years before Christ or the year 2009, this kind of carnal dissatisfaction looks the same. At its heart, the essence of sin is ingratitude.

The Good News to us from this text this morning is that God treats the children of Israel like a loving Parent. He sees the inordinate desires of his children. He sees the disconnect between what they *need* and what they *want*.

But God's love is neither syrupy nor sentimental. God does not override human freedom, nor the power of the children of Israel to choose. But precisely because God empowers them to choose, they are *responsible* to do so, and they are responsible for the consequences that result.

In a similar way, God treats us with the tough love of a loving Parent. As our loving Father, he sometimes grants to us what we want in order to teach us that what we want is not what we *need*. Unfortunately, sometimes it is only after we

have something we want so desperately that we learn that it doesn't satisfy us and that we don't need it.

As our loving Parent, God is merciful to us in many of these cases. Most of the time, we can learn our lesson, repent, and move on. But I must caution you today: If what you want is in the category of inordinate desire, and you want it so badly that you are willing to make unhealthy compromises to get it, then be careful what you ask for. For getting what you want might very well destroy you.

If you don't believe me, let me tell you how our Old Testament story ends. At the end of Numbers 11, God grants his wayward children their desire for meat. He floods the landscape with quail, so much quail that you would think it was an Alfred Hitchcock movie.

Then he sends a plague upon the people as they eat it. Countless thousands die. And the writer of the text tells us that the people give the place a name. They name the place "Kibroth-hattavaah," which means *the graves of craving*.

Be careful what you ask for. Especially when your asking becomes more like a demand because you've lost sight of God's goodness, and God's blessings have become commonplace to you.

Fortunately the children of Israel's sin and stubbornness does not have the final word, and neither does ours. God is always merciful, as our collect for today so wonderfully reveals. God was merciful to the Israelites, and they finally did

arrive in the land of promise. It was almost 40 years late, but what's a few years here or there?

As we come to the Table of the Lord this morning, I need not remind you that the word "Eucharist" is the Greek term which means "to give thanks." But I guess I just did. But of the many reasons we celebrate the Eucharist each week, one important reason is precisely because Holy Communion is the *antidote* to ingratitude in our lives. The Great Thanksgiving, which we celebrate in the Eucharist, always keeps before us Christ's work in our lives, and helps us to shape our lives back to God in gratitude and praise.

So come to the table today with thanksgiving. And let your gratitude flow out of your lives and into the lives of others.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.