

Sermon: Enough!

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Sep 24, 2023)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The fame Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, once wrote a short story, titled “How Much Land Does a Man Required?” It is story about a successful peasant farmer, named Pahom, who was not satisfied with his lot. The more land he acquired, the more he wanted more. His greed caught the attention of Satan himself, who began to look in closer on this wealthy farmer. In the quest to acquire more land, Pahom soon received a novel offer—For 1,000 rubles, he can buy all the land he could walk around in one day. The catch is by the end of the day, by sundown, he would have to return to his starting point, or risk loosing his entire deposit. Oh, we could see the hand of the devil all over this, couldn’t we? But Pahom was delighted with the offer, believing that he can cover a great distance in this ‘bargain of a lifetime’.

So early the next morning, he started out walking at a fast pace. By midday, he was tired but kept on going, covering more and more ground. Well into the afternoon he realized that his greed had taken him far from the starting point. So Pahom quickened his pace, and began to run back towards the starting point, knowing that he must make it back by sundown or this opportunity of a lifetime would be lost. As the sun began to sink below the horizon, he was at full sprint as he came within the sight of the finish line. Gasping for breath, his heart pounding, muscle aching, Pahom called upon every last bit of strength left and staggered across the finish line just before the sun disappeared.

Anyone care to guess what then happened to him? He immediately collapsed, blood streaming from his mouth, and he was dead shortly after. His servant then dug him a grave. It was not much over six feet long by three feet wide. How much land does a man need? Well, 18 square feet is what is needed for a burial plot.

I am reminded by the words of Jesus in Matthew 16:26, “*For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?*”

Greed is the vice, the particular sin that is under our microscope today. The problem with greed is that people are often unaware of their own greed, that is, the particular things people are greedy for are often thought of, or masked, as if they are essentially needed. People often fail to recognize when is enough. They fail to say enough is enough!

We come to the passage in Exodus 16, where the congregation of the Israelites was travelling in a wilderness, which happens to be called 'Sin' (just a coincidence in the Hebrew name). The Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron, saying, "*If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and ate our fill of bread, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.*"

Let's unpack that statement a little bit: the Israelites were only about 45 days out of Egypt, the land that enslaved them for generations. Yes, they were hungry, and I don't want to belittle the state of hunger, the state of food insecurity, for it is no fun to be in such a state. But only 45 days out, the Israelites were already in a full fledge reminiscence, romanticizing the good old days in Egypt, where they sat around pots of meat and ate their fill. They were not starving yet, not really, for it was only 45 days since their departure, and just to be clear, they never sat around pots of meat and ate their fill of all the food they wanted. That never happened to them, as an enslaved population in Egypt. Rather, we have descriptions of the Israelites being beaten, oppressed, and had their ration halved by the Egyptian masters.

Moses and Aaron correctly discerned these complaints were not directed against them, for these were complaints rightfully directed toward God. Let's look at how God responded, in verse 4-5, "*I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not.*" God was going to, and did provide for the Israelites in the form of mana—a white flaky substance that the people could collect, in the morning, on the ground.

Mana in Hebrew, literally mean 'what is it?', as the people were utterly confounded with this provision from God. They were to grind this white flaky substance to make bread, and it taste delightful—sweet and oily. If you still can't picture what mana is, think of croissant, freshly baked —aromatic, fluffy, and almost melts in your mouth. At least that's how I often picture it. And to top it off, God also sent quill to the Israelites. They

flew into camp every night, like clockwork, so the Israelites could catch them and have their meat.

The image on this week's bulletin cover is a painting from the Leopold Layer workshop, a treasured collection of Slovenian Ethnographic Museum. The Layer family, from the town of Kranj, had been involved in painting for several generations. Leopold was, perhaps the most skillful, widely known as a folk artist. It is said that in the 19th century almost every house in Kranj could boast a painting by him.

A fascinating background story of the Layer family took place in 1809. Kranj was occupied by the French, during the First French Empire under the Napoleonic Rule. Due to general shortage of all necessities, the talented Layers began to counterfeit money, falsifying Austria's banknotes of 10 and 50 goldinars, and making them widely available to townspeople. Leopold and his brother Valentin were soon arrested by the authority. His brother died in prison, but Leopold, upon his release three years later, was commissioned to paint the chapel at Brezje, as a sign of penance.

The image we have on the cover of the bulletin, though not painted by Leopold himself, carries the same tradition of his work. We see a scene of the Israelites rejoicing while collecting mana on the ground. Standing in the middle is Moses, with two horns on his forehead—sometime used by artist to depict the glory of God reflected on the face of the prophet. (It's actually an erroneous translation of the Bible, but that's another story altogether.)

Moses, it would appear, is holding not a staff, but a wand, like a magician bestowing on the people with edible white flaky stuff from heaven, ie. mana. What a fascinating interpretation of this fantastical story. Mana and quill, bread and meat! They are not magical, not grandiose, and certainly not constituting a feast. But these are the basic daily provision that God will go on to provide for the Israelites for the next 40 years.

Here is an interesting question: What are things in you life that are 1) given to you daily; 2) you do not need to work for; 3) that you would not be able to function if you have to go without? I could think of a few: air, water from the tap, breakfast that your parents prepare every morning, their love that you take for granted, or how about WiFi? do you ever say 'enough'?

However, in the provision of Mana and quill, God also tested the Israelites. God instructed them to collect enough portion for the day, and on the sixth day, that is before the Sabbath, they were to collect enough for

two days. Simple instruction, isn't it? Did the Israelites obey? Of course not! In verse 20, we are informed that some tested the Lord and gathered more. The unconsumed portion, portion that was left until the next morning became wormy and rotten, thus unconsumable. However, the portion that was collected in preparation for the Sabbath, was unaffected—still good for the next day. How is that possible, you say? Well, it was the way of the Lord.

So the Lord God, provided for the Israelites, just enough each day. Day by day, for over 40 years, the people of God came to experience, on the most mundane and fundamental level, the provision of God as 'enough'! Why did God do this? Well, the answer is found in verse 12, when God gave these instructions to Moses, God added, "*then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.*"

Know the Lord we do, in the person of Jesus Christ. On his inaugural testing in the wilderness, Satan tempted an awfully starving Jesus after 40 days of fasting. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone.'" It is a quote from the Scripture, specifically from Deuteronomy 8:3, which says, "*He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.*"

Indeed, the words of God is the provision that truly satisfies, that truly is enough for our hungry hearts.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**