

### **Exodus 16:2-15**

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, ‘If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.’

Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘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. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.’ So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, ‘In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your complaining against the Lord. For what are we, that you complain against us?’ And Moses said, ‘When the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the Lord has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the Lord.’

Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, “Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.”’ And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked towards the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. The Lord spoke to Moses and said, ‘I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, “At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.”’

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, ‘What is it?’\* For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, ‘It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.

### **Matthew 20:1-16**

‘For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage,\* he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out

about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.\* Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage.\* And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?\*- Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?\*" So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'

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The economic news has gotten awfully scary of late, from every angle.

For those who remember the Great Depression, there are all the comparisons to those days, and the hardship they entailed.

For those with investments in companies like Lehman Brothers and AIG and so many others, there's the threat of loss of capital and income, which is especially scary for those on a fixed income.

For everyone, there is the realization that all parts of the system are connected, and the tightening of credit can seriously affect income and prices and everything associated with our economic well-being.

It's hard not to be afraid these days, and the economy is only part of the reason. And to know how the fear can twist reality into strange forms, all we have to do is check into the news of this election season. Sometimes I can't believe my ears at phrases that actually turn the truth on its head. Things are said every day now that are just plain mean.

But these days are not so different.

Our Exodus passage today is an example. The Jews were hungry and scared. Their fear was telling them to abandon their shared vision and hope. They were almost ready to chuck the entire enterprise of freedom and searching for the promised land.

In cases like this, our minds are not our friends. They tell us things that aren't true, and sometimes our minds *shout* these things. These things are really fear masquerading as reality, but if we're not careful, we believe these false "mind-messages."

The basis of fear is that we won't get what we need, or perhaps that something we need will be taken from us. And nearly always, when we believe that the voice of our fear is in fact the voice of reality, we begin looking for who's to blame.

When the Jews in our story looked someone to blame, their fear found Moses and Aaron and, by extension, God. Their response to fear was to blame Moses for killing them with hunger, when it would have been better to die in Egypt.

This is what we do when we're afraid. We find someone to blame. We declare them as something "other" than us. We cast them out of our lives.

The Jews are almost ready to fire Moses when God steps in and shows their FEAR for what it is: False Expectations Appearing Real. They end up receiving exactly what they needed – no more, no less. And when their fear subsides, they again recognize that Moses and Aaron – far from being "the other" who threatened, are again a part of them, and in fact are essential to their survival.

A different angle on the same issue is present in our Gospel story this morning.

The story starts with a group of unemployed people who are all in the same boat – they need work. They go to the marketplace in hopes of getting hired, because if they don't, they and their families will not eat.

At first light, some of them are hired right away. Lucky them. They must feel great relief. And the others who aren't hired? They must feel some fear. Later, though, some more of them are hired. Lucky them.

As the day wears on, the fear grows in those not yet hired. Like the Jews in the Exodus story, some of them must be ready to give up and leave the marketplace. But they stay, and in the end they are hired too. What a blessing! Everyone is working! Everyone will eat tonight.

But then, when the day's pay is distributed, those who were hired early feel cheated. They worked harder and think they should be paid more

than the latecomers. Suddenly, the workers who started late are "the other" and now there's a rift between the two groups.

It's hard not to sympathize with the early workers. In our normal human conception of things, it makes sense that we should be paid more if we work harder. We are raised to value hard work, and that's a good thing. It makes sense that those who work harder should be paid more.

But this story is not about our human conception of things. It's about God's conception of things.

The message is that God's definition of what we need is different from our definition of what we need. The message is that if we want to be happy, if we want to be free from resentment and fear, we need to learn God's definition rather than our brain's definition.

Let's fast-forward to the present day and see how are we doing in relation to these ideas.

There is much reason to be afraid today, and everywhere we turn, we see people blaming each other. The examples are endless, just in our own country: fundamentalists vs. non-believers, conservatives vs. liberals, citizens vs. immigrants, CEOs vs. workers, and on and on. In the wider world, it gets even worse: Sunnis vs. Shia, Georgians vs. Russians, Hindus vs. Muslims. And on and on.

We know this is *not* the way to live. In fact, it's being brought home to us increasingly that this is not the way to *survive*. The more isolated we

become... the more we shut each other out... the worse it gets. Distrust begets distrust. Blame begets blame. And violence begets violence.

In this day of globalization, where we cannot escape the interrelatedness of the economy and so many other systems, it is more necessary than ever that we recognize our interrelatedness as people.

This is true at every level of our lives.

We can perhaps see it most clearly in our personal relationships. When I hold on to a resentment against someone else when I feel they have wronged me, I may feel justified, and maybe everyone agrees with me, and so I withdraw from the person who has wronged me.

Who is hurt by this? Surely not just the other person, from whom I have withdrawn, but me too. I have hurt myself just as much, because I have suffered the loss of the relationship as much as they have. Perhaps I have suffered more, because my resentment is sure to affect me badly in other ways too.

The same dynamic applies at the cultural level, or what I increasingly hear termed the "tribal" level. Let's say I think your "tribe" holds to dangerous beliefs. If my response and my tribe's response is to avoid you and your tribe, we have lost all hope of reconciliation. We have stolen from each other and the world any hope of learning from our differences.

The truth is, we *are* our relationships. We do not exist outside of our relationships. It is so easy to forget this, but the fact is we utterly depend on each other.

If this sounds far-fetched, I challenge you to think of something you need that you obtain all by yourself, outside of a relationship with others.

No, we don't exist outside our relationships. Our well being depends utterly on the health of our relationships, and therefore – because we are all connected in a matrix of interdependency—the truth is that our well being depends on the well being of our fellow humans.

*This* is why we have to work harder at getting along with those we otherwise might call "other."

But how can we do this?

Let's look again at the early workers in the Gospel story. They call the late arrivals "other" because they have gotten something for nothing. But what do the first workers know about the experience of those others? Do they wonder what it was like to wait in the marketplace all day in fear that their families might not eat that night? Have they thought that the latecomers' families also might go hungry if those workers got paid only for the short time they worked?

We need to be careful about comparing ourselves to others. There's a saying I like which cautions me not to compare others' outsides to my insides.

Someone else may look like they're sitting pretty, but how do I know what they're wrestling with that I can't see?

So there's one tool for tearing down the walls that separate us. Refrain from comparing their outsides from our insides Trust that others have their own challenges. Ask how the world looks through their eyes.

Another tool is valuable in lots of situations. It's simple gratitude. It's easy to confuse what we need with what we want. We have so much to be grateful for, and if we turn our attention to this, we won't build walls of envy or judgment.

We need to be careful in these things because we *need* each other. Each and every one of us. We *need* each other.

Sometimes our need is close to home, as when we're in some kind of pain and we need a sympathetic ear. We need someone who recognizes our pain because they've been through it too.

We need to recognize each other. We are not isolated individuals or groups. We are all parts of the same body. We are members of families and congregations and tribes and countries. We have the same needs and the same fears and the same joys and sorrows. Ultimately, we are all parts of the whole human body.

Humanity is truly one body. When we cut ourselves off from one another, we cut off the circulation of blood in our own body. All parts need the blood to flow to all other parts, because each part needs all the others to *live*.

So let us go from here asking questions like these: How can I try to improve my understanding of someone, or some group, who seems like "the other." How can I help to heal the body of which we are all a part? What can I be more grateful for?

As we ask these questions, there's one thing we can be very grateful for – our shared faith tradition that *exists* in order to help us break down the walls and help each other. Our ministry, as declared by Jesus, is to love one another, as God love us. Our scriptures are full of stories and teachings to help us do this. Here in our own congregation, we have innumerable examples of this love in action.

You might say that helping to heal our whole human body is why we are here in the first place.

Amen.