

Epworth Chapel on the Green
September 30, 2018
Pentecost 19
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. 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 ol’ days.” But often the “good ol’ days” are simply the product of a “bad ol’ memory.”

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.

How easy it can be for us to become dissatisfied and discontent with God's blessing in our lives. How easy it can be for us to lose perspective on our situation, to forget how good we have it, *to allow God's blessings to become commonplace.*

How easy it can be for us to become so fixated on what *we* want in life that we would consider making unhealthy and unholy compromises to get it. And to stand in judgment on the children of Israel is simultaneously to indict ourselves. Whether it is 1400 years before Christ, or the year 2018, this kind of carnal dissatisfaction looks the same. *At its heart, the essence of sin is ingratitude.*

Is there any help or Good News to us from this text? If so, perhaps that Good News comes in the form of God's tough love. 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.

And yet in the midst of this, God still is able to fulfill his purposes for his people. Eventually, they do reach the Promised Land.

In a similar way, God treats us with tough love also. 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* -- especially when having it is the only way to show us that it won't satisfy us and that we don't need it.

Now, most of the time, we can learn these lessons, repent, and move on. But I must caution you: If what you want is in the category of inordinate desire or lust, then be truly 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*. Those who survived did eventually reach the Promised Land. But they were 40 years late in arriving.

Be careful what you ask for, especially when you're dealing with the Holy One, the God of Israel.

John Wesley says of the children of Israel here that the real force of their sin was this: "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."

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. So let us give thanks unto the Lord our God, and show forth that gratitude by offering our lives in his service.

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