

"The Beautiful Chaos of God"
A meditation on Exodus 16: 2 – 15 and Matthew 20: 1 - 16

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I gave up on cooking last year. I decided that being in graduate school entitled me to resign. Besides, I'm not really good at it. After you sit down at the table and hear your family say, "What is it?" a few times, you decide it might be a good idea to hang up your apron. Here is the list of things I can cook: an awesome meatloaf (which is really weird because I hated meatloaf when I was a child), pancakes with your initials in them, a really fine grilled cheese – tomato and basil optional, and my personal favorite, "toad in the hole" or "eggs in a basket" as some establishments prefer to call it. But "toad in the hole" is so wonderfully British. If you want something else, ask my husband. He's a much better cook, although he has a tendency to set things on fire. On the occasions that he doesn't set things on fire, he *destroys* the kitchen. I'm not kidding. When he finishes cooking, it looks like a small bomb went off. But out of the chaos, so much gastronomic beauty... I can't really complain.

Nor can I fault the Israelites for their "complaints," a word we heard 6 times in 14 verses. They had every right to complain. Their people had been slaves for 400 years. They had known one month of freedom, and they were in the middle of nothingness. They were afraid and discouraged and all they wanted to do was go back to the only home they had ever known. That is a definition of desperation: when slavery is an appealing choice. It's easy for us to see that, with our 20/20 vision, but how many times have we longed to go back to that unhealthy relationship, that "wrong" job, that easy daily pattern, simply because the big picture of the unknown future was so overwhelming?

God knows their heartache; knows their complaints are valid. God knows they need enough grace to just get through this day. So here's what this tender hearted God does: God sends a message to Moses. Tell them not to worry for I am going to pour down so much grace, that they won't be able to miss it. I'll rain down so much food that they will be walking on it!

Then Aaron delivers this message: "Look, I have an invitation here from God! God is calling us home to supper. God is setting a table for us in the wilderness." The people hear this invitation...and make a choice. Look what happens next – verse 10. "As Aaron spoke to the whole Israelite community, they *turned to look toward the desert*, and *just then* the glorious presence of the LORD appeared in the cloud. The host of the feast was there before these hungry and wandering guests. The whole community, hanging on to Aaron's words, hoping against hope that God would rescue them, as a body, they turn to look *toward* the wilderness. They had been facing *backward*, *back* towards Egypt, perhaps even debating whether to pack it in and show up on Pharaoh's doorstep, begging to be re-enlisted in the brick making business. So unsure if God's promise of home and food could be trusted. So many voices in their heads. They know that freedom does not exist in Egypt, but where is freedom? Somewhere deep in their gut, they find the courage, and as a body they face into the wilderness and it is there that God reveals God's self to them, a glorious presence. That is a wonder filled moment. What made them turn? What made them accept the invitation? Somewhere, deep down, they knew that God had not set them free to allow them to die.

They celebrate their renewed faith with the wonderful feast of quail, just as God promised. They swap their favorite recipes – quail poppers and cream of quail soup. Deep

fried quail and quail kebabs. And they go to sleep, dreaming of the glorious presence of God, and a home on the other side of the wilderness, a home where the table overflows with milk and honey.

When the morning comes, they don't mind waking from their dreams, for this promises to be a good morning! They are eager to find the bread which Moses said God would give to them. They trust it will be right outside the entrances to their tents - right along with the morning scroll. But instead there is this strange, white, flakey stuff... everywhere.

"What is it?" they ask. *What is it??* God's grace blankets their camp, but they can't recognize it. "What *is* it??" they ask, as they nudge a piece with the toe of a sandal. And Moses puts on a brave face...again, scoops some *off the ground*, and like a parent trying to convince a child that lima beans actually taste good, says, "Why, it's bread, of course! Taste and see that the Lord is good!" The Hebrew people know a lot about bread, and this doesn't look like any bread they have ever seen. But of course it doesn't. This is God's bread, fresh-from-the-earth bread. Unending supply bread. They are completely stumped, unable to come up with a name for this substance, so they call it "manna." I always presumed "mannah" must have some wonderful meaning...like "sweet honey cakes from God," but it literally means "*what is it?*"

Funny thing, the Hebrew word for manna, "nm" (pronounced "mawn") can also be translated "who?" As much as they were wondering *what* lay before them on the ground, perhaps they were also wondering *Who* this was that had sent it? As they placed the first flakes on their tongues, as they turned to each other, amused by the honey like flavor, perhaps they began to digest the glorious presence of God. This God who promised to gift them with bread each morning. This God who called them to turn their faces to the unknown wilderness. This God who says, you think you know what grace looks like...I'll show you grace like you've never seen. Perhaps, you have to be in the wilderness to see grace in this light. For in the wilderness, grace will completely surround you. You will not be able to avoid it. You might need a Moses to explain what it is. But once you understand, you might as well eat it, because God's not going to give you anything else until dinner time. You might spoil your appetite.

Grace in abundance. Grace in disguise. Grace that causes us to ask not only "*What is this?*" but "*Who is this?*" These are the questions that confront us in Matthew's parable of the vineyard. Did you notice who was doing the hiring in this story? It wasn't the manager. It was the *landowner*. That should catch our attention, for it's not the landowner's job. But this landowner goes out in search of every one, anyone. This landowner goes out five times in one day. First thing in the morning, some workers are hired. Workers are hired again at 9:00 and noon. Sounds reasonable. But then, don't we start to get uncomfortable? For the landowner goes back to the marketplace and hires workers at 3:00 and 5:00, almost the end of the work day!

Who would be the first ones hired? The eager ones, the ones who are healthy and strong? The ones who have transportation and can get there early? Our protestant work ethic says that the others must be lazy or hung over or something. But maybe there are other possible back stories: family members to care for, a young child to feed, an ailing brother. Perhaps these workers have physical challenges of their own, making it difficult for them to get to the market place, much less be hired for a demanding job. Perhaps these laborers had been fired one too many times and word had gotten out...so what was the point if no one would hire you anyway? Maybe they are the elderly. Or they don't speak

the language and can't find the way to the marketplace. Or maybe they just overslept...it happens to the "best" of us.

We, who typically think of ourselves as those eager workers, the ones hired first thing in the morning, we can find it very easy to label the others: lazy, incompetent, foolish. So when every worker gets paid the same, no matter how long they worked, we are disgusted. What happened to being paid a fair wage? But the "all day" workers complaint in this story is not that they didn't earn additional wages for the extra hours of labor. Their complaint is this: the landowner has treated everyone as *equals*. *Equals?? We're better than them. We worked harder. We got up earlier. We endured the hot sun. How could we be lumped in the same category with them??* The landowner has blanketed the vineyard with grace, and grace levels the playing field. The early workers see a hierarchy, but in God's realm the boundaries are split apart.

This grace works both ways. It works for the ones hired last, and it works for the ones hired first. So before we complain to the landowner, demanding order and logic, reason and fairness, we better consider the implications. In demanding fairness, we bring judgment down upon ourselves. For we, too, have days when we are late to the marketplace, days when we desperately need grace in abundance. Actually, that would be *every day*, wouldn't it? The truth of the matter is *we all are those laborers hired at 5:00*, the ones that the landowner came searching for one more time. The ones who could have been ignored and forgotten. We do ourselves a serious injustice when we see ourselves in first place. For in first place, you can't even see a need for grace. None of us deserve the grace which we have been freely given. None of us can do anything to earn the grace which leads to abundance. It looks like chaos if you see yourself as the early worker. But it looks like hope if you're the last one hired. We have to be willing to accept the beautiful chaos of God's realm. Can we face into this wilderness? Having tasted grace, can we walk in Moses' sandals? When you wake up in the morning, will you open your eyes to recognize the grace that God has rained upon you? When you meet someone, who is waiting in the marketplace, will you take the time to scoop grace up off the ground and say, "Taste it with me. Taste and see! The Lord is good." Expect and believe that in the sharing of this feast, you will glimpse the glorious presence of God.

P.S. - I hope you can come to dinner at my house some time! I can promise that Lou will be cooking. But don't say I didn't warn you about the chaos. In our house, no feast is complete with out it! Thanks be to God. Amen.

Benediction

Look to the wilderness ahead of you, for there you will see the glorious presence of God. Taste the bread of heaven, for it is the grace of Christ, offered for you in abundance. Listen for the Spirit, inviting you into the vineyard...whatever the hour may be. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Amen.

