

ON A STRANGE DIET

--Any of the eating or drinking stories that one finds in our Bible probably have meaningful implications for our understanding of Communion.

In these stories, it's often a very short step from the meal in question to the sacramental meal that we understand to be represented in the elements before us.

That includes the one that we've just read--the strange nourishing of Israel that takes place in the wilderness, as the people continue their journey from bondage in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land.

--What should be noted in the present old story is the specific background for the feeding here. Curiously, Israel will shortly be treated to the strange diet of "manna"--a never-before-seen frostlike thing that will rain from heaven and cover the ground. It is a treat that will come not as a reward for exemplary, faithful behavior on their parts, but in direct response, as has just been read, to their persistent complaining.

"What does God have in mind," they gripe to Moses, "in bringing us out here into the wilderness to die? What sort of bizarre agenda is this? We may be freed from our bondage, it is true, but what good is freedom if our bellies are empty? Maybe it would have been better if we had remained slaves, but slaves who at least knew where their next meal was coming from."

After having been relieved of all the suffering they are alleged to experience under Pharaoh's yoke, they appear in the end to be nothing less than a bunch of whiny ingrates with very short memories.

--It's undeniable. They're a miserable group of people, but God is good, and so they get fed. That's about as much as usually gets preached.

But beyond this, there is a million-dollar issue to be explored: Why, really, does God do it? Why does God feed them? Why doesn't God just walk away and let this demanding, ungrateful bunch of people perish there in the desert? Surely, they deserve nothing more.

Maybe God just buckles under the pressure of all that griping and groaning? It's all more than God can stand, and so God cracks and gives them what they want? Is that it?

That would make God to be pretty weak and fragile. That's not really much of a God.

Well, then, maybe after hearing more than enough of the griping and groaning, God gives what is being demanded in order just to shut them up? Is that it?

That would be an understandable reason to us--and it does shut them up, at least for a while--but that would still reveal God to be somewhat peevish and even hostile. God feeds, not because

they really are hungry and deserve to be fed, but because their behavior is more than can be tolerated. They are fed because God needs some simple peace and quiet. That's not much of a God, either.

--So, what is the motivation? The answer may be as surprising as the manna that they are given to eat. The answer might be, it occurs to me, that God hears all that griping and groaning, and proceeds to feed them, because, well, God gets a kick out of them. For all their dramatic over-reacting and pathetic under-achieving, God genuinely gets a kick out of them.

It's sort of like going on a trip with the kids or the grandkids. You're hardly out of the driveway and ten miles away from the house when it starts. "I'm hungry. Do we have anything to eat in the car? I'm really hungry. When are we going to stop to get something to eat? Are we there yet so I can get something to eat? I'm really starving."

You know how it is. It can go on and on like this. And what are you going to do? Are you going to collapse before these kids the first time you hear the desperate pitch? No.

Are you going to pull over immediately and shove something into their relentless little faces just to shut them up? Maybe you're tempted, but probably no, too.

You're going to find something to address the need--maybe it's a pack of crackers that you just happened to have in the car for such emergencies, maybe it's a quick run to a drive-through along the way--all the while chuckling up your sleeve about the behavior, which leaves you loving the kid, for all of her or his immaturity, not less, but more.

--I think that's where God comes from where Israel is concerned--and therefore where we are concerned.

We can be impulsive, and exasperating, and irascible creatures. And all of that behavior, which makes us near-crazy having to deal with one another, has God loving us all the more. There is an irrepressible quality to us that is hard to ignore. Our rawness, our crudeness, our roughness, are, for God, part of our charm.

Now, there's a real God. And it is a God who easily looks past the irritating behavior--just as any kindly parent or grandparent would do--and who loves the endearing creature beneath it.

This is the God who hears Israel's grumbling on the road and feeds in the most surprising and remarkable way. This is the same God who hears our grumbling on the road and, despite the worst that we often bring to the relationship, without reservation offers to feed us just as amazingly.

Look at the altar and what is prepared for us.

Tricky bunch of people that we are, we are lucky--are we not?--to be in the hands of such a God?