

Manna for the Common Good
Exodus 16: 1-18, 31
October 8, 2017
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We are in the midst of our stewardship campaign, Live Generously is our theme, and we are moving towards Consecration Sunday on October 29th. On Consecration Sunday we will take time in morning and evening worship to fill out Estimate of Giving Cards that will indicate how we will support First UCC's ministries in 2018. We will dedicate our gifts to God, and we will ask God's blessing on our ministry.

I'm very excited about our ministry as a congregation, and as the Council does it's work discerning God's call for this congregation, there are some specific places where we feel our ministry is called to grow. We'd like to see our worship ministry continue to grow, and we have room for growth in our evening service. We are very excited about our ministry with youth and the difference that it is making. We would like to grow our capacity to minister with youth, inside and outside of our walls. We are excited about our ministry that is working to transform our community and our state. Focused on our values, the common good, meeting the needs of the most vulnerable. We want to grow in our ability to build relationships with other churches and other faith communities, as we are inviting more and more churches into this work.

Stewardship campaigns are very important and they are very practical matters. Important because 85-90% of the ministry we do depends on the annual gifts we receive through this campaign. Sustaining and growing the vital ministry of this church depends on this campaign and our gifts. So you will hear some practical things in the next few weeks. On the 22nd, I'll share some about a biblical approach towards giving that influences how our household approaches giving, and I'll be specific about what our family has given and will be giving in 2018 to First UCC. And yes, Sara is in favor of me doing this. I'll talk more about what more we can do as a congregation as our giving grows. Next week, our Conference Minister, the Rev. Shari Prestemon will be with us in morning worship, and she will talk some about the ministry of the wider United Church of Christ that First UCC supports very generously through Our Church's Wider Mission. You will have an opportunity to designate giving to the Our

Church's Wider Mission of the United Church of Christ through our Live Generously Campaign as well. Over these next few weeks, I invite you to be prayerfully considering your gift to First UCC's ministries.

Today I'm going to talk more about where our call to Live Generously comes from. It's a good thing to do, many people believe in it. We are not the only ones. We believe in Living Generously because of our story about God. That God, the Ground and Source of Being is generous, and therefore we are free to be generous too.

The best book I read this summer while I was on sabbatical was *Money and Possessions in the Bible* by biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann. I enjoyed it even more than Big Data Baseball and The Cubs Way, two essential books for any baseball fan. I enjoyed it more than the spy novels I read. Here's an important sentence from the book, "The memory of exodus, wilderness, and manna assures that one's wealth will be regarded as a gift to be shared." Practicing our faith, staying rooted in these stories will help us live generously. So let's remember Exodus, wilderness, and manna and see what pops into our minds."

The Hebrew slaves are suffering in Pharaoh's Egypt. God, the love that is in our midst, wants to deliver people from their suffering. God calls Moses, and sends Moses to Pharaoh, to the center of empire, to the heart of a political system with a sickness. And Moses goes.

Brueggemann argues that coveting is the Bible's central problem, the central sin. the 10th commandment, "do not covet" is the core story of the Bible from the beginning, from Adam and Eve to Moses and Miriam. Coveting is not "only an attitude of *wanting* what belongs to someone else but also an action of *taking* what belongs to someone else."

Pharaoh's problem is turbo charged coveting, supreme selfishness. More grain for his barns, more territory for his empire, more buildings to be built to display the power of his name, and he is willing to grind people up and throw them away for his purposes, he is willing to take whatever he can for his own selfish goals.

God confronts Pharaoh and Pharaoh's selfishness through 10 plagues and the deliverance of the Hebrew slaves. Through the plagues and deliverance through the Red Sea, God doesn't just put on a magic show, God dismantles Pharaoh's selfish economy and the army on which the empire depends.

God pulls apart Pharaoh's whole selfish way of life, and now God needs to create something else, something different for the people of Israel. Today's story of the manna is the beginning of that project.

The people of Israel are in the wilderness. Their old world has fallen away, but their new world has not yet come into being. They are anxious, they are hungry, they are complaining. They can't see how anything could possibly be different.

Then something extraordinary happens. They receive gifts. Everyone receives gifts. The manna story is a story that comes alive when we hear it as a story about how God is, about what the world is like.

As much as Pharaoh is selfish, God is generous. God provides enough. Pharaoh provides food only if you have produced some bricks, and then there is not enough, and there is only food for a few. The food from God is grace. It does not have to be earned. The manna story is saying that the heart of reality is fundamentally generous and gracious.

This is the story we practice week after week. This is the story we increasingly see as we live in the world. We start to see the differences between Pharaoh's world and God's world. In Pharaoh's world, the center is selfish, there will never be enough for everyone, never enough for anyone. But when we can step away from Pharaoh, we start to see that this, that life, is all gift. There is an abundance of gifts. God never stops giving gifts. When we stay rooted in this God of love and generosity, it starts to loosen our hold on our possessions. We live with less of the fear that drives accumulation and trust more and more that at the heart of everything is a generous source that will provide enough.

But something else very important happens in the manna story, that speaks to how the world is. God provides enough manna for everyone in this story, but the manna must be shared. The generosity of God only works when everyone gathers what they need and nothing

more. Not everyone has the same amount of manna in the story, but everyone has what they need. Later in the story when people try to gather extra, try to accumulate extra manna for themselves, going back to Pharaoh's way, the manna spoils. God's generosity needs our willingness to share as a partner. Manna is provided not just for a special or chosen few, but for the common good. God's generosity is for the common good.

This story of the manna is repeated in the feeding of the five thousand. Through the power of God, when the five loaves and two fish are broken and shared, there is enough for the whole crowd. This story is repeated whenever we gather at the communion table. Bread broken and shared, has the power for life. We practice this way of generosity. We take it in, and then we go to share it with the world.

The manna story is the beginning of God building a new economy and a new way. God is building a new way and a new life that has a generous source and center, that needs generous partners.

I feel a greater and greater sense of urgency around this message and with anything that creates generous people. We live in a world that needs generous communities.

I'm reading a book by a Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard, titled, *Altruism: The Power of Compassion to Change Yourself and the World*. Ricard says something I agree with completely, "Selfishness is at the heart of most of the problems we face today: the growing gap between the rich and the poor, the attitude of "everybody for himself," which is only increasing, and indifference about generations to come."

As I've been watching the news from Las Vegas this week, I've been thinking about the human selfishness behind this tragedy. In my view, the reason common sense gun safety legislation hasn't been enacted after other mass shootings is because gun manufacturers are very good at protecting their profits through the work of the National Rifle Association. It is good for them and them alone when more people buy more and more guns designed for killing human beings. Even though innocent men, women, and children are dying, this selfish protection of profit continues. At the heart of the tragedy this week is a spiritual problem much deeper than whatever turned the gunman toward violence.

The list can go on.

Christian faith is deeply concerned about the common good. At the heart of our story is a generous God who depends on human beings to be generous with one another. It is out of this that we are led to live increasingly generously lives. Any act of generosity towards the church, that strengthens our ability to tell this story, or any act of generosity toward anyone or any organization that is strengthening the health of the neighborhood, the common good, is of critical importance right now.

We stay rooted in a generous God that assures us that we can be generous and there will still be enough. And we find that living generously makes a difference. It makes all the difference. Amen.