

What Us It?

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, February 22, 2009 Exodus 16:11-20

If you had asked me twenty years ago, I would have said that it could never happen – and I would have been wrong. I'm talking about the incredible popularity of sushi in the United States. Two decades ago, this Japanese delicacy was hard to find outside California. Now it is found in grocery stores and at "sushi bars" even in small towns of the midwest and south, in places where hardly anyone of Japanese ancestry lives. Millions of pounds are consumed each year.

In case you still haven't tried sushi, let me give you a short tutorial. Most Americans think of sushi as raw fish. Technically, sushi is pickled rice which is commonly wrapped in raw fish. The Japanese name for the raw fish is sashimi. Various other ingredients complete the treat and it is popular food among young adults in Europe, the U.S. and Great Britain, as well as in Asia.

I confess I still haven't tried sushi myself. Raw animal protein is kind of a turn-off to me. On the other hand, I eat some other strange things that members of my own family find (and I quote) "disgusting." Chief on the list would be morel mushrooms. I do cook them first. Still, I'm sure a lot of people recoil at the idea of eating fungus. To each his own, as they say.

We all have our own likes and dislikes when it comes to food – things we have tried and love, things we have tried and didn't like, things we haven't tried but would like to, and things we haven't tried and don't want to. But get hungry enough, and we might be willing to try some things we otherwise wouldn't.

So it was for the Israelites as they crossed the great wilderness after leaving captivity in Egypt. Food supplies grew short, and they complained to Moses. Back in Egypt, they had been kept well-fed so they could work. And they came to look back on those days with nostalgia, especially for the food. In the Book of Numbers we hear them longing for "cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic" they used to enjoy. As food ran short in the wilderness, they asked, "Did God just bring us out here so we could starve to death?"

The answer was, "Of course not." In answer to their complaining, God provided food. Flocks of quail in the evening and some strange flaky stuff each morning. Evidently, the flocks of quail were somewhat tame. Otherwise, how could they have captured enough to eat? However they

managed to do it, there was their protein.

Their carbohydrates came in the form of the flaky stuff, which has traditionally been called “manna.” But the first thing the Israelites said when they saw it laying around was, “What is it?” It was different from anything they had seen or eaten before. Still, they figured out how to use it. They ground it up into flour and made it into “cakes” which were baked.

So God provided for the people as they crossed the wilderness toward the Promised Land. But along with providing this food, God also provided some instructions: “Each one is to gather as much as he needs. Take an omer for each person you have in your tent. No one is to keep any of it until morning.” That seems simple enough, but people being people, these simple instructions were not followed. So there were consequences: “Some of them paid no attention; they kept part of it until morning, but it was full of maggots and began to smell.”

It is never easy for us to learn to live within limits. We rebel against them, however reasonable they may be. “Why only that much?” we ask. “Why not just a little more?” Like the Israelites, we gather more than we need today so maybe we can avoid having to gather tomorrow. But in our unwillingness to accept limits and in our gathering of more than we need, we create immense problems, for ourselves and for others. If we doubted this two years ago, it was understandable. Our consumer driven economy just kept getting bigger and bigger. People buying more and more things drove the stock market up, up, up. Housing values skyrocketed. People borrowed against the increased value of their homes, and kept on spending.

Now, as my grandmother used to say, “The chickens have come home to roost.” We are learning the hard way about the problems that result when we ignore limits and try to accumulate not only more than we need, but more than we can afford. This global recession (some are saying depression) is spreading rapidly and devastating families, communities, even countries. Like the manna the Israelites tried to hoard and keep, suddenly our economy seems “full of maggots and [beginning] to smell.” Howard Davidowitz, chairman of Davidowitz and Associates, a consulting and investment banking service firm, said Wednesday that the changes this crisis is bringing about are likely to be permanent. We are seeing a permanent change in our standard of living, he says. We will have less discretionary income, so we will be buying fewer things – fewer clothes, shoes, cars, electronic gadgets, recreational equipment; smaller homes and more energy efficient appliances; less expensive cosmetics and fewer meals out. The watchword for years to come, he says, is less.

As followers of Jesus, it will be our calling to keep our eyes out for how we can help those in most desperate need in the coming years. But the church as a whole, especially the church in the United States, will also be called upon to repent, because many churches encouraged more and more consumption, while nearly all turned a blind eye to it. Very, very few spoke out in a prophetic voice, and dared to ask openly and often, “How much is enough? What harm are we doing by always seeking more and more? What are the consequences of all this going to be?” By speaking up, the church might not have been able to help the world avoid the crisis, but we would have been more faithful to who we are and who we are called to be. And just maybe, we might have prepared others, in some small ways, to begin to come to terms with the nature of the world we live in and the necessary limits found in it.

And the irony is that we had the resources to carry out this task. Many parts of scripture help us think through the question of how much is enough, or warn us of the dangers of trying to have too much. The story of the manna is just one, but it is so simple and straightforward. It is a story we should have told, over and over. It is a story we need to be telling now, not just among ourselves, but to the world.

Because there are still people who need to learn that there is such a thing as enough. Some people think, “If some is good, more is better.” But it isn’t always true. There are too many people who, like the Israelites, want to go back to the old, familiar ways of spending and buying and owning and using as much as we can get our hands on. But, as it was for the Israelites, trying to go back is a mistake. We need to help people see that the old way wasn’t the Promised Land. The old way was Egypt. The Promised Land is up ahead, undiscovered as of yet, but surely very different.

We need to help the world, and especially the developed world, to learn the lesson of the manna. We need to keep making people aware that while creation is good and much in it is to be desired and enjoyed with thanksgiving, there are built-in limits. We are welcome to take what we need. But when we take more and more and more, something is sure to go terribly wrong. We will wake up one day to find all our precious accumulation “filled with maggots and starting to smell.”

The lesson is in scripture, but the examples are all around us. Let’s go back to where we started, to sushi. The popularity of sushi has produced enormous profits, but at the same time generated enormous problems for the environment. Some of the most desirable fish used in making sushi have been driven almost to extinction. International limits are being set on how many may be taken from the sea.

A prime example is the southern blue fin tuna. Considered a great

delicacy among sushi aficionados, the southern blue fin has become critically endangered. Demand has driven up the price of blue fin 10,000 percent! The current rate is over \$40,000 per fish! But if the blue fin goes extinct, it will most likely be catastrophic for other sea life as well, because they play an important role in the natural balance.

Concern for creation is a legitimate and necessary part of faithfulness. And concern about the consequences of people trying to have too much is a direct continuation of the work of Jesus. After all, when Jesus walked the earth, he was not afraid to confront the issue. In his great Sermon on the Mount, he addressed the problem head-on: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal,” he said. “But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Can we learn to live within limits? Can we learn to curb our appetites? Can we learn to recognize the danger of trying to have too much? Yes, we can. But only with God’s help and as we support and encourage one another. So let us not look back, or dream about going back to Egypt, but let us press on toward the Promised Land. Let us press on toward a future in which creation will be restored by respect for its limits and a future in which everyone will have enough.

Amen.