



### What Is It?

Exodus 16:1-7, 13-16 and Psalm 78: 1-3, 12-29

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World Communion Sunday

Today, on this World Communion Sunday, I want to start out by talking about desserts. Now that I have put my feet in all the Finger Lakes, I am trying a new, short-term goal for life up here, and that is to really enjoy some fall festivals and foliage. I am watching the Gilmore Girls for the first time – never watched it, I’m ashamed to say – but for those who know, I think I’ve been waiting for just this moment so that I can really enjoy the Northwest fall aesthetic - pumpkin patches and apple picking and fall colors and just the experience of living in this place, in this community, during this harvest festival time of the year. I mean, we have hayrides down in Texas and everything, but you all do it really well.

And of course, this includes all the sweets. Apple cider donuts and pumpkin bars and.... *What else?*

And partly just feels like that time of the year, you know? The traditional time of the harvest, this time of communion, it’s a time when we like to hunker down and crank up the heat and get together and make sweet things to eat. You all know that I don’t cook but my husband did, and so does his entire family. His mom is a pastry chef, his family won the Memphis in May BBQ Cook-off twice in a row, so they know what they’re doing. And they all have their specialties. His mother, she makes the cookies. The best cookies on the planet. Luckily my stepdaughter has perfected the cookies so we don’t have to rely on hers anymore, but that’s a mother-in-law story for another time.

But her sister, Kevin’s aunt, she is the candy lady. She makes the Christmas bark and the toffee and the fudge, and you know, candy making can be a tough job. I don’t really know how to do it, but I do know that in the Ford household, it involves the right equipment and a big table and several folks to stretch and cool and perfect the candy that we will need for the coming holiday season. And every year the sisters and aunts and uncles come tougher for one weekend, and they make all the candy for the season. It’s amazing. This just tends to be a time of the year when we like joining together, celebrating the harvest, and enjoying the delectable creations that are common to our neck of the woods.

And so yesterday after I landed at the Syracuse airport and was driving back to Auburn, I passed an adorable pumpkin patch set up and decided to stop. And it was everything you could want: a bright sunny day with a light breeze rolling over the lines of pumpkins, little kids picking out the one they wanted to take home, tired dads wheeling giant wheelbarrows of pumpkins to the car, moms catching their screaming toddlers as they slid down the hillside, grandparents enjoying treats in the shade, teenagers giggling and running around in groups, and me – I bought a cider, a pumpkin cookie and an adorable knit hat that you may see soon.

And I sat down and thought to myself, this is the goal of world communion. We want to find a family, a neighborhood, a holler, where we can live your life, do the things that you like and love to do, build the family you want to build, let your kids run around and have fun, curl up in your nook when you want to escape, and feel safe and connected to other people who care for you. That's what people want from their communities: safety and love. Sometimes families can do that for each other, but so many times they can't, and so we seek out our chosen families, our communities, and we try to live a meaningful, harmonious life with each other, complete with harvest festivals and pumpkins and joy and sweet treats.

And then in the midst of all this Gilmore Girls, fall festival merriment, I hear POP POP!! All the heads turn, people instinctively grabbing their kids and looking around and ducking. And then we realize, it's just a balloon, or a bunch of balloons, a tired grandma is trying to clean up after a birthday in the party tent and she's popping what's left of the table decorations in order to fit them in the trash can. But in that moment, in the midst of candy and treats and colors and community – I remember that we live in a country where random shootings can and do happen all the time. We live in a country that has, to an extent, decided that our access to guns is more important than the community we strive to create. And we live in a place where this sweetness, this communion and community, can be crushed at a moment's notice.

And while our gun culture in the United States may be unique among our peers, this threat of community violence is hardly unique to us. On a day when we celebrate communion with people around the world, we are reminded of people in Ukraine and Libya and Iraq and Mexico and Afghanistan and Venezuela and Syria and Mali. The migrants lining the streets of El Paso and New York City, the people crowded in apartment buildings trying to drown out the sounds of bombs – all these places are filled with people just want to go to their harvest festivals, watch their kids play safely, sit in the shade of their trees, and enjoy their sweet treats, their pumpkin cookies or baklava or quesillos or chocolate biscuits. This is the kind of world communion we want.

And this brings us to manna – the bread given to the Israelites from God, given to sustain them in the wilderness. It might not be what you think of when you think of sweets, and it must not have been much to look at, because the Israelites ask Moses what it is, and give manna its name with their question, “Manna? What is it? What is this stuff growing on the ground?” But this bread of life is the miraculous food provided to the Israelites in their wandering, and it’s this bread that sustains them for forty years of life together in the wilderness. God answers the pleadings of the Israelites for food by providing them this substance, and the text says that they ate it as they wandered.

Now, when the Israelites reached the land of Canaan, in Joshua chapter 5, the text says they didn’t eat it anymore and the gift of manna ceased to appear. From then on, Joshua says, the Israelites ate the fruit of the land of Canaan. God had sustained them with manna when they needed it, and provided them with a more abundant harvest when the time of their wandering ended.

And yet, the gift of manna did not cease entirely. Although the author of Joshua says that it ceased for the Israelites, I’m here to tell you that the gift of manna never stopped. Because did you know that manna still exists, today? Not just theologically or metaphorically, but in some parts of the world, people still eat manna?

Several years ago I was traveling with a group from Indianapolis in the Middle East, and one of the things we did on our first few nights in Amman was meet with Iraqi refugees living in Jordan. We had a lovely dinner with about 20 of them who shared with us the stories of their lives before, during and since the U.S. forces arrived in Iraq. And of course, many of them shared difficult stories of their life under the rule of Saddam Hussein, but they also remembered the beautiful and special things about the homes they were forced to leave. We heard descriptions of their neighborhoods, their schools, their jobs, and the communities they came from, and we learned about the favorite foods and drinks and customs that are so special in every culture.

And as the dinner was winding down, a woman named Khalood leaned across the table from me and shared in an excited whisper: “Do you know that in Iraq, in my hometown, God is still sending manna? That we still eat the bread that God has provided, just like the people of Israel?” I answered her that no, I did not know that, but she went on to explain to me that in northern Iraq – she was from a town just south of Mosul – that “Manna al Samma” - the bread of heaven – is a food they eat regularly.

And just like the manna in Exodus, this manna has to be gathered early in the morning, because as the sun beats on it, it softens and dissolves. It’s a flaky substance that they

cook with pistachios or walnuts, and then press into a fine, flat bread, similar to what the Israelites might have had to eat as they wandered. One chef says, “There are certain varieties of trees in Northern Iraq which give out sap after being punctured by insects. This sap falls off the tree, covering leaves on the ground; it is then scraped off the leaves, cleaned, boiled, and milled; flavored with cardamom, stuffed with nuts, and shaped into large chewy balls: *Mann al-sama*.”<sup>1</sup> They call it Iraqi taffy. In fact, in the book, “Rediscovering Iraq Without Saddam,” the author Artemis talks about weekend trips with her grandparents to the market in their hometown, and the excitement that came with perusing the different kinds of manna available from the vendors and selecting a treat for the day.<sup>2</sup>

And I was just amazed by this. I had never even thought about what manna was, or what it tasted like, or how it was prepared. And I had never thought about the fact that manna might still exist, that people might still eat it, and that God had never stopped providing it, even after the Israelites didn’t have to rely on it anymore.

Now, we don’t know for a fact that the flattened pastries that Khalood ate are the same things that the Israelites did. Some archeologists and historians and botanists have made cases for different natural substances that could have appeared in the dew. There are many suggestions as to which naturally occurring substance might possibly nourish an entire population for forty years – some say it was a kind of mushroom, or a leaf from the Tammarisk tree, or the crystallized honeydew from an insect common in the region. We have no idea, really. So I guess it’s definitely possible that Joshua is right, and that I’m maybe wrong. It could be that the Israelite manna did stop appearing, and the food that Khalood eats is not the same substance at all.

But it’s not just the similarities in the name or the substance that made Khalood believe that what she ate in Iraq was the same thing God provided to Israel. As we shared dinner together, Khalood said that it was the memory of manna that sustained her in her own wanderings, first as she was forced to leave Iraq and flee to Jordan as a refugee, and then as she wandered in Jordan, a place where employment is forbidden and she is forced to stay with friends as long as they can house her, before moving on to the next place. She said to me, “We too have to wander, just like God’s people did. But I know that God has provided for me; just like God gave me manna in Iraq, God is providing for me now, and God is providing for you.”

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.tasteofbeirut.com/iraqi-taffy-mann-al-sama/>

<sup>2</sup> *Rediscovering Iraq Without Saddam* by Artemis, Trafford Publishing, 2003. p. 16

For Khalood, the question of whether the substance was the same was totally off point. It was the appearance of manna, the memory of this sweet treat that she ate with her friends and family in Iraq that sustained her in her own wilderness. The miracle of God's providing was as tangible for her as the bread on that table. There was no difference between God providing manna in Exodus, and God providing manna in Mosul. The bread is a miracle, and that miracle has never stopped occurring.

We so often think of miracles as only happening in "Bible Land," but the truth is that miracles still exist. It's not just the Israelites who look down to their ground and see something that in all probability shouldn't be there, and ask, "Manna? What is this amazing blessing?" But there are many of us who see the possibilities that God provides, and harvest that manna in miraculous ways.

But thanks be to God that someone has come among us to show us the way, to work miracles in our presence and feed us with the bread of life. Just like Khalood ate the manna that sustained her in her wanderings, we are invited to eat the manna that sustains us for the wilderness. And the miracles in our life, the nourishment we need for the wandering ahead, is as tangible as the bread on the table. We may know the wilderness intimately, but in our communion we are invited to know the miracle of the bread. So if you are hungry, lost in the wilderness and looking for a miracle, stop and ask yourself, "Manna? What is it I am looking for?" Because in Christ we are found, we are fed, we are healed.

"Manna? What is it that sustains us?"

Jesus said, I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry.

On this World Communion Sunday, give us this sweet bread, this day and always.  
Amen.