

**The Rev. Victoria Kirk Mouradian
Sermon for All Saints by-the-Sea
Sunday, September 21, 2014**

Readings: Proper 20 – Year A: Exodus 16:2-15; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

Manna from Heaven

A young woman has hit a wall of despair. She can no longer make ends meet from her poor paying job because it was discovered that one of her roommates was involved with drugs and management required the roommate to leave. Now the remaining two roommates must find affordable housing. They find something doable for a short time but of course there are moving expenses, new lease expenses, and on and on. Stretched too thin, one roommate decides to move home for a while to try to save. The other roommate is faced yet again with more moving expenses, new lease expenses, a back log of medical bills, car problems, the cost of living, a dwindling savings account and no home to which she can move back in. Faithful, she continues to pray for help and guidance but edges toward utter despair. She pleads with the Lord, “What am I going to do? I thought I was doing everything right but I just don’t know how to continue!” And then one day, as she feels at the end of her rope, an envelope from her aunt appears in the mail. She opens it to discover a remembrance from her grandmother who has passed away. She falls to her knees dumbfounded and cries in relief. She thanks God because now she will be able to move and find a new job. Manna from heaven.

A man, sickly from birth with lung problems and living on borrowed time, travels to America from Germany to tour the southwest with a friend from home. Not at his best, the trip drains him of precious energy and at one particular sightseeing spot, the man declines to get off

the bus. Feeling that perhaps he might be being rude to his friend and tour guide, he reconsiders and steps off the bus. He is not quite sure where he is but recognizes that he is at an old church site near Santa Fe, New Mexico. As he enters the outer gates of the structure, he is forever changed by what he thinks is a blinding flash of light. In an instant he knows he is healed. The place of this miracle is the famed Sanctuary of Chimayo, a place long considered a holy site of healing. Manna from heaven.

A band of freed slaves make their way across a wilderness. There is no food to sustain them and they are afraid they will die of hunger. Tired and anxious they begin to complain to their leader that they were better off in slavery; at least there they had food even if existence was brutal. They feel their faith being challenged. How could God rescue them only to let them perish in the wilderness? Emotions are running high. But God did hear their concerns and their anger. Their leader instructs them to draw near to the Lord and as they do, God reveals his glory to them in a cloud near the wilderness. Through their leader, God lets it be known that they will receive meat at night and bread in the morning and the freed slaves will know that it is the Lord their God who provides. Manna from heaven.

The poorest of the poor, day laborers, seek work. They pray that this day they might be hired. Standing for what could be hours, they wait to be approached by someone who needs them. A vineyard owner approaches a few and the chosen are elated that they are hired. Those who are not feel despondent. The vineyard owner, realizing that more help is needed, seeks more help a few hours later. A few more laborers are hired. Those remaining feel their loss twice. The vineyard owner returns two more times. Each time some laborers are elated and some

feel more rejection. At the end of the day, the vineyard owner finds more laborers who had not been hired that day. Looking upon them, he tells them to go to his vineyard for work. When evening comes, he tells his manager to pay all the laborers the same wage, regardless of the number of hours worked. Manna from heaven.

So, what do the young woman, sickly foreigner, band of freed slaves, and day laborers all have in common? God's grace. God's intervening grace. These stories may be separated by thousands of years but God's grace never ages. In an instant these lives are transformed and they know moments of unconditional love and mercy.

God is the great equalizer, the one who sees past rich or poor, slave or free, male or female, sick or well. There are no boundaries to his love and no way to earn it. His sense of justice and fairness can be at times a challenge to our understanding of such concepts. We don't always understand his generosity. When we are the recipients we are humbled, but when we see it bestowed on others we can be envious. It is something humankind wrestles with and does not make us proud. I'm sure if we give it some thought, we can think of times when we tried to be happy for friends or family but deep down inside have said, "It's not fair, why can't it be me?" Instead of counting all the blessings we have at the moment we think, "Why are they earning more money than I? Why can't I meet someone? Why did they get picked for promotion?" Somehow we can turn someone else's moment of grace into something all about ourselves.

Most of us are familiar with the story of the Prodigal Son. In it, the younger son demands his share of inheritance from his father. He then proceeds to move away and live a

reckless life, squandering all he has. On the other hand, his older brother does not ask for his inheritance, respects his father, and remains home to faithfully work beside him. He is investing in his future because one day what belongs to his father will be his. The younger son becomes destitute and hires himself out to care for pigs, not even earning enough to live. He realizes that his father cares well for those who work for him and decides to return home to ask his father for work even though he is ashamed. When his father sees him returned, he is overjoyed and filled with mercy. He orders a banquet for his son so that all might rejoice. His older son cannot rejoice and is filled with envy that such a deadbeat brother would be treated so well while he, who was so dedicated, never had such a fuss made over him. His father explains, "But son, all I have is yours and you are with me always." That didn't help.

The envy the older brother feels for his younger brother is the same kind of envy we hear about this morning when Jesus told the parable about the vineyard owner and the day laborers. When the first hires discover that the last hires will be given equal wages to theirs, they hardly rejoice. They feel that they have not been treated fairly; being merciful is not on their minds. The vineyard owner, on the other hand, saw the opportunity to be merciful. No matter what hour of the day he returned to the place of the laborers, there were those who still hadn't been hired. The vineyard owner knew how poor these men were for in the time of Jesus, they were the poorest persons in society. They were usually landless peasants who were either non-inheriting sons or men who had lost their ancestral lands through debt. They drifted into cities and villages looking for work. Usually loss of land meant loss of family and the supporting network that implied, so these men were often desperate; survival a bitter struggle. The vineyard owner was moved to mercy. He knew that his generosity could make a real difference on

whether or not these men could even eat. Unjust as it might seem to the first hires, he could not turn his back on those so desperately in need. He did not care about company policy, he made all the laborers welcome to earn on an equal basis that day. Manna from heaven.

This morning we also heard of God embracing the cries of his people in the wilderness, we notice that God didn't single out any among the freed slaves to be the most deserving of his mercy. They were all deserving of his mercy. It did not matter how rich or poor they had ever been or what rank in society they had ever held, all were all equal in God's eyes. He had called them out of Egypt collectively under Moses to become a great people; his people who would draw others to the love and light of the one true God. All were needed to make a great nation. And he fed them, showered them with just enough food day and night so they would not be in want, and just enough daily food so there was no need to carry it with them. When they were in despair, God showered them with mercy. Manna from heaven.

Do we recognize our manna from heaven or only that given to others? We need to rejoice and be thankful for those God moments when we know we have been given unexpected grace. We need to rejoice as well for family and friends who have received their moments of unexpected grace. If God can give us such unconditional signs of love, we need to try giving away such an unconditional signs of love as well. When God sheds his grace on us, that doesn't mean others are undeserving. That means that God has chosen to shed his grace on us in a particular way in a particular moment that has specific meaning for us. His grace is given to others at particular moments that are specific to them. We need to mindful of such mercy and

give away our share of mercy as well. As we walk in God's ways we come to learn to expect the unexpected and that God's mercy endures forever. **Amen.**