

Everyday Matters
January 1, 2006
Saint Paul's UMC, Mark Statler

Introduction: Looking back, looking ahead.

Well, I hope you had a wonderful Christmas celebration. I told you a month before that I was hoping to see Jesus at work this year in ways that I haven't experienced before, and I think that did happen. I know that I was much more intentional about keeping my Christmas focus on the right thing, even though the calendar of events did overwhelm me for a few weeks.

Now, it's New Year's day....can you believe it?! **[insert slide: New year graphic]** Have you taken some time yet to look back at 2005. I mean personally. Not like watch one of the "top stories of 2005" kind of things. But in your life, the joys and wonders you experienced, as well as the challenges and obstacles and pains? It is important, at least for me, to do some reflecting...to look back, not just nostalgically, but in an evaluative and learning mode.

I took some time this week to ask these kinds of questions; *What moments in the past year will I treasure for ever? When did I experience God's presence? What unexpected joys or tragedies came and how was God at work in my life through them? How has my relationship with Jesus changed in the past year? How am I noticeably different than I was a year ago because of Jesus' presence in my life?*

I can certainly share with you that one of the big "God things" that happened in our life this year was totally unexpected. It was coming to Saint Paul's. A year ago today, I did not, could not see this happening. What a blessing that has been for me and my family!! And even though we feel so blessed by being here, the transition was not without its challenges for me, both personally and professionally, so I have taken some time this week to look at how God was at work in bringing us here, and how my faith has grown since arriving.

So this time of year is a great time to use hindsight to our advantage, especially using it to look back at the ways God has been working in our lives. But this is also the time of year that we look forward!

New Year's just naturally lends itself to this swelling of hope in us that life can not just be different, but it can be better! We look at ourselves, our physical shape, our emotional shape, our spiritual shape and we sense that there is more. And it is not about more stuff, it is about a fuller experience of life. It's about being more and doing more and experiencing more.

And so we think about those things and we even resolve our will to working toward the vision we have in our mind. Has anyone here made a new year's resolution this year? Ever?

What is a resolution anyway? Well, in the context of making a new year's resolution, I think it's this: **(slide) A new Year's resolution is looking for a new reality (a long range goal) by making a commitment to daily action.**

Whatever the new reality you're hoping for is...marriage-relationships, parenting, health, or spirituality...you commit to that vision by doing something everyday. At this time of year when we look over extended periods of time in reflection or in visioning, it all still comes down to this; EVERYDAY MATTERS.

You know, it's a pretty good way to look at the Christian life. We are looking to a new reality. We believe God wants to transform the world through his love, and God wants to lead us to truly abundant living, and we believe that one day we will feast at the heavenly banquet, a new reality of eternity with God. We pray for God to bring this new reality to us when we pray the Lord's Prayer. We say, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done."

So our vision is long range: but it takes commitment to daily action for it to come into reality; growing in our day to day relationship with God through reading scripture and prayer; growing God's kingdom through daily acts of servanthood or fellowship.

Everyday really does matter!

I. Manna – God's Daily Gift

Everyday matters to God. And your everyday matters matter to God as well. There is a story from the time of Moses in the Old Testament that illustrates this. God had already sent Moses to the people of Israel to lead them out of slavery in Egypt to a new life in a promised land. At this point, they had left Egypt, but they were still in the desert wilderness, moving day by day to make the vision of the promised land into a reality. Well in the desert, they began to run out of food, so God provided for their daily needs by sending bread from heaven, called manna.

This passage from Exodus describes Israel's first encounter with manna.

[insert slide]

When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was.

Exodus 16:14-15

Whenever I think of manna, I think of grits. They are both fine, flaky things that are no good as leftovers. "Each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day," God told Moses. One day's worth, no more, because manna would not keep. If the people tried to hoard it, it spoiled overnight. In the morning it stank and crawled with worms. When the sun got hot, it melted. So their limit was two quarts of manna per day per person.

The only exception was the Sabbath. Since God meant for the people to rest on that day, there was no manna to be found. God let them gather twice as much as they needed the day before and on that one day a week it lasted two days instead of one. So the people rested on the seventh day and the next day they were back at it again, living one day at a time by the providence of almighty God.

This lasted for forty years, or fourteen thousand six hundred days. Manna was the Israelites' food in the wilderness. They ate raw manna, boiled manna, baked manna, and fried manna. They made it into manna cakes, manna mini-muffins, and banana-manna meringue pie. It was how they survived until they came into the land of Canaan, so that manna became for them the symbol of God's very practical, physical care for them. It was sign for them that they mattered to God, everyday. Long after their journey in the desert was over, they remembered their manna meals. At God's command, they kept two quarts of it (a day's provision) in a jar right by the tablets of the law as an everlasting reminder of their dependence on God, who gave them each day their daily bread.

You know, we pray that very prayer each week in the Lord's prayer, don't we? "Give us this day our daily bread". It's saying, "Lord, just give us what we need for today." It's a simple prayer asking God to remember us and provide for us each day, acknowledging our dependence upon God for what we need, and even for the daily gift of life itself.

Most of us, however, are just a little out of touch with this dependence upon God thing. We can easily get into habits of not depending upon God for our everyday matters! Most of us have such tremendous resources at our disposal. If we need something, we just go get it. When we're out of milk, I just go to the store and get it, along with 13 other things we don't need!!! There may be a few of us here today who know what it is like to wonder where your next meal is coming from. Most of us, however, have refrigerators that are so full that stuff falls out when we open the doors. Sometimes our food stays in there so long that it is not recognizable when we throw it away. And it is not just food. We so easily get out of the habit of depending on God for shelter, clothing, health, transportation, and security because we can use our resources to provide.

The spiritual problem is not that we don't need God's daily bread in life...we do. The spiritual problem is that we often don't recognize daily bread or acknowledge that it comes from God.

That's why God had the jar of one day's provisions of manna on the altar by the tablets. God wanted them to always remember to depend upon him.

II. About our daily bread...

There has been a good bit of speculation over the years about exactly what manna was. The Bible says it was "like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it

was like wafers made with honey. (Ex 16:31). It's original name comes from the question the people asked when they saw it. The Hebrew *man hu* means "What is it?" If you go to the Sinai peninsula, you can find out exactly what it is.

The Bedouin who live there still gather it and bake it into bread, which they still call manna. The flakes themselves come from plant lice that feed on the local tamarisk trees. Because the sap is poor in nitrogen, the bugs have to eat a lot of it in order to live. They excrete the extra in a yellowish-white flake or ball of juice from the tree that is rich in carbohydrates and sugars. It decays quickly and attracts ants, so a daily portion is the most anyone gathers. Does that sound familiar?

Some believers reject the notion that the Biblical manna and this manna are the same, thinking that it takes away from the miracle, but I wonder about that. First, the miracle of manna may have been more of a miracle of quantity. Second, does manna have to come out of nowhere in order to qualify for a miracle? Or is the miracle that God heard the complaining of hungry people and fed them with bug juice – something it would never have occurred to them to eat? Or to put it another way, what makes something bread from heaven? Is it the thing itself, or is it the one who sends it?

How you answer that question has a lot to do with how you sense God's presence in your life, with how much God matters to you everyday. If your manna has to drop straight from heaven looking like a perfect loaf of butter-crust bread, then chances are you are going to go hungry a lot. And when you don't get the miracle you are hoping for, are you going to think that God is ignoring you, or worse – that God isn't there? Do you start comparing yourself to others and wondering why they seem to have more than you do?

Meanwhile, you're going to miss a lot of other things God is doing for you because they are too ordinary – like bug juice – or too transitory – like manna, that fine, flaky substance that melted as soon as the sun got hot.

If, on the other hand, you are willing to look at EVERYTHING that comes to you as coming from God, then there will be no end to the manna in your life. Grits will be manna. The bag of peas that falls out of your freezer every time you open it – manna. Your ability to work – manna. Your retirement account, manna. Time in prayer – manna. Serving someone – manna. Coming to worship – manna. Someone to share your triumphs and trials with, manna.

Because it is not what it is that counts, but who sent it, and the miracle is that God is always sending us something to eat. Day by day. Everyday matters. God is made known to us in the simple things that sustain our lives – some bread, some love, some breath, some wine – all those absolutely essential things that are here today and gone tomorrow. God gives us enough for today – it is our daily bread.

I have learned something about daily bread from the people of Nicaragua. From them I have learned that being dependent upon God produces joy, generosity, and gratitude. Nicaragua is the second poorest country in all the Western Hemisphere. **[slide: picture “rural living”]** The national average income is less than \$800/year. In the rural areas, it is less than \$500/year.

In my three trips to Nicaragua, I met people in three different rural areas who literally depended on God for their daily bread. They didn't know where their next meal was coming from. Their homes are huts that can't protect them from the rain or the critters. **[slide: pic “rural fam”]** They would have every reason to believe that God had forgotten them.

But that is not what their faces or their stories say. **[insert slide: pic “children”]** I have never witnessed such a sense of joy or gratitude or generosity anywhere else.

On my last trip (February 2005), we arrived at our work-site on the first day, and were immediately met by a group of four girls, roughly ages 6-10. **[insert slide: pic “four girls”]** One of the girls, whose name is Berlin, had one of the “clacker” toys from the 70's. Do you remember those? It was a toy I remember from my childhood, but have not seen since. Anyway, Berlin had one of those toys. I was horrible at it when I was a kid but I asked her if I could give it a try. They laughed at how bad I was, good-naturedly, of course. Off and on through the morning they would come by my work-site and I would try again and again. And I would visit with them.

Now I've been in several of the homes like the one Berlin lived in. **[insert slide: pic “hut”]** I have seen what these kids have and don't have. Many don't have shoes. Toys of any kind are rare. And by the way Berlin played with this toy, I knew it was a beloved toy. She was really good at it!

The next day we arrived on the site again and I began visiting with the girls again and playing with the toy. As we were leaving that day, **[insert slide: pic “berlin”]** Berlin came up to me and gave me her toy. I had to call the interpreter over. She said she wanted me to have it. Can you believe that? I thanked her over and over, and told her that I did not want to keep her toy.

I will always remember that gift that I did not take, and that it came from someone who wouldn't have any way to replace it. That is the spirit of generosity that comes from daily depending on God to provide. It was food for my soul that day. It was daily bread.

III. Jesus is our daily bread.

Ever since then, I've been on manna alert, and of course, it is about way more than food. There is a story in John chapter 6 about Jesus feeding five thousand

hungry people in the wilderness. After he fed them, they stuck to him like glue. The miracle of the loaves that were multiplied reminded them of the manna stories they had heard and they thought they had their very own Moses to work miracles for them. Testing their premise, they asked Jesus to prove himself by producing bread from heaven on the spot. They wanted the butter-crust loaves, but he knew they needed more than that, so he gave them himself instead. Well, to the people there that day that sounded like eating bug excrement.

They wanted food to eat, not a relationship with this ordinary looking man. He honored their hunger even as he corrected them. It was not Moses who gave it to them, he explained. It was God who gave it and God who gives the true bread from heaven, the bread that gives life to the world.

“Give us this bread always,” they said, and that is when he let them know that they were looking at it. “I am the bread of life,” he told them.

Jesus is God’s manna for us. He is the one who reminds us that everyday matters and that we live because God provides not what we want, necessarily, but exactly what we need: some bread, some love, some breath, some wine; all found in a relationship with the ordinary looking man, who comes from heaven to bring life to the world.

So the next time you need a gallon of milk and you run to the store to pick it up, along with the 13 other things you really don’t need, or you pull in to put gas in the car, or a friend calls just to visit, or you hold a child in your arms... pause just long enough to remember the source of all your blessings, to say “Thank you, Jesus, for being my daily bread, everyday!

Prayer: Lord, teach me about everyday matters, especially to learn to depend on you and acknowledge your daily provisions for my life. Forgive me Lord for being so easily convinced that I can provide for myself, for acting like I don’t need you in my life. As we look into the upcoming year with hope for what you want to accomplish through us, give us the sustaining power of your holy spirit. Be our daily bread, Lord.

The Lord’s prayer:

Intro to Communion:

Jesus said, “I am the bread of life. Come to me, and you will never go hungry again.” Jesus was reminding us that God is made known in the simple, everyday things that sustain our lives – some bread, some love, some breath, some wine. In a scene that must have reminded his friends about the day he fed 5000 people and told them that he was the bread of life, Jesus took another simple loaf of bread and held it up before them. It was the night before he would display God’s love for all of us by his sacrificial death on a cross. And in the power of his resurrection, he shares victory over death with us all.

He and his friends had gathered in a room to celebrate the Passover meal. Jesus took bread and broke it and said to them, "eat this. It is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

After supper he took the cup, blessed it and said, "Drink this cup. It is my blood which is poured out for all people for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in remembrance of me."