

Enough is Enough
Exodus 16:1-18
October 8, 2017
Northminster Presbyterian Church
Rev. Michael D. Kirby

“Enough is Enough!” It’s the go-to phrase in English for reaching the end of your rope. It peppered the speeches of both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump in 2016. It’s the statement that comes in that moment when exasperation is finally overcome by the desire to do SOMETHING.

This week, the world was filled with “enough is enough.” Ox Fam, the global disaster-response, non-profit organization, said that enough is enough in the war of words going on over the speed and adequacy of the incredibly logistically difficult US response to the Hurricane in Puerto Rico. And they, for the first time in modern history, began providing aid in a territory of the United States.

A number of religious and political leaders took a look at just how easy it was for a millionaire with a still unknown motive to slaughter dozens of people and injure almost 500 more and said, not for the first time, enough is enough with America’s idolatrous relationship with weapons designed to kill and to kill swiftly. It still remains to be seen whether they will actually move from exasperation to meaningful action.

“Enough is enough,” some want to shout at God as yet another hurricane plows into the central gulf coast, with flood surges pouring into Mobile Bay and tornadoes tearing through Mississippi and Alabama overnight and this morning. And the National Hurricane Center says there’s another low pressure area out in the Atlantic that has a 70 percent chance of becoming a tropical storm over the next two days. ENOUGH!

But when is enough actually enough? It’s one of the questions asked by the story that we get part of today, this story of manna and quail. Have you ever been hungry? Not in the “it’s been five hours since I had breakfast” kind of hunger, but the “my brain is not fully functioning because of a week of too little protein, fats and carbohydrates to maintain health” kind of hunger? I never have. I’ve been famished; I’ve had the rumblings of an empty stomach and declared, like most of us, that I’m “starving.” But, in truth, I’ve never faced that kind of hunger. I’ve never not had access to food for more than a day in my entire life.

The people wandering in the desert today are hungry, really hungry, maybe even starving. And it’s not just their stomachs that are grumbling. They now remember fondly the food they had in Egypt. They conveniently forget the whip and the lash, and that Pharaoh tried to murder all of their infant sons, and that he refused to let them go until disaster struck in what scripture calls the plagues.

Moses and Yahweh and Aaron have delivered the people from slavery; they have crossed the Reed Sea; they are free once again, but they are not home. They are wandering in the area that today we call Sinai. And they are hungry. It is a desert after all. They’ve probably consumed all of the meager grain stores they brought with them and they’ve probably

already slaughtered every animal they dare slaughter if they are going to hope to have any beasts of burden to start their new life once they find their way home. And so they hunger.

Today's passage, which is one half of the manna and quail story, is a story of God's invitation to enough. Even though the people have forgotten to be grateful, have forgotten all that God has done for them, God will still provide for them, giving them manna in the morning and quail at night — more than enough.

Today's passage is about the manna, and the rest of the story, found over in Numbers Chapter 11, is about too much. When dissatisfied with the manna, the people longed again for the fleshpots (the meat cookers) of Egypt. And so Yahweh gives them quail, meat in the evening. He sends so many quail in fact that many of them gorge themselves, become sick and die.

So is this a cheat? This enough version of the story? Because it leaves out the hard part, the part where people get more than they need and gorge themselves to death?

I want to suggest that first, we are a people who have both halves of the story, so we can't seriously consider one half without the other. But it's also important to note that regardless of the gorging of some of the Israelites, God is still providing enough for all. To this day scholars are still talking about what manna was. But clearly so did the Israelites. The Hebrew phrase we translate as "manna" is "man hu." In Hebrew it means, "what is it" but not in the form of a question. Like an ancient version of the famous Abbott and Costello bit: "What are we eating? What is it. That's what I'm asking, what is it we are eating? You are correct, sir."

As for what it actually was, the top theory these days looks to a natural phenomenon that still occurs sometimes in the Sinai Peninsula. A type of plant louse punctures the fruit of the tamarisk tree and then later excretes a substance, a yellowish-white flake or tiny ball, which in the cool part of the day is found on many surfaces and which during the warmth of the day disintegrates. It has a sweet taste and is chock full of carbohydrates. Because of its sweetness, it both rots quickly and it attracts ants in the desert. This does sort of sound like Manna.¹

But to be honest, I don't know if that's what manna is, but I know that I have a lot of sympathy for those Israelites who were hard pressed to believe that bread made of bug secretions would be enough. Perhaps we can understand the quail gorging, if that's the only other option.

Still, if the manna was what was needed, the quail was abundance, not only slaking hunger but also going beyond. Noted food writer M.F.K. Fisher in *The Art of Eating* notes that one of the only universals of every human being is that we all get hungry. She then notes: "It seems to me that our three basic needs, for food and security and love, are so mixed and mingled and entwined that we cannot straightly think of one without the others. So it happens that when [we speak] of hunger, [we are] really [speaking] about

¹ Data on this theory was contained in The Well (Richmond) 2017 paper of the Rev. Anna Pinkney Straight.

love and hunger for it, and [security] and the love of it and the hunger for it...and then the warmth [of security] and richness and fine reality of hunger satisfied...it is all one."

If Fisher is right, then this story of God meeting needs and desires with manna and quail is about so much more than food. It's about love and security; it's about God's loving provision of enough.

Have you seen the stories, the frustrated leaders sharing stories about little or no food or drinking water in some remote parts of Puerto Rico? The joyful stories about churches across Houston throwing "forget Harvey" community meals with money donated just for that purpose by people across the country? The inspiring stories about restaurants in Key West and Beaumont throwing open their doors to cook all of the food that otherwise would have spoiled and inviting any and all to come and eat? The stories of people and restaurants bringing mountains of food to the Las Vegas convention center where the families of those killed and injured have been gathered for the last week — bringing so much so that local governments finally asked people stop bringing it?

These are all stories about love; they are stories about security and community — or, in one case, the lack of it. All of these stories are about how food, or the lack of it, is a sign of our love and care for one another, just as God's providing food is a story about God's love.

The old joke in churches is that "if you feed them, they will come." That may be true, but the reality is "if you feed them, they will live. If you feed them they will know love. If you feed them they will know security and community."

So what does all of this mean for you and me? After all, most, if not all of us, have enough food and water. And we are part of a lot of different ministries that feed people and help them feel safe and secure. Certainly there are always more who need help, and we trust that our Mission and Social Justice Committee will keep reminding us of ways we, who have more than enough, can care for those who don't yet. And, as important as that is, I don't think that's the biggest message for us here.

God gives the people wandering in the wilderness enough to meet their needs. God provides a way for all to surrender their anxieties about surviving for tomorrow and learn the lesson about the dangers of hoarding and gorging in response to those anxieties. Remember all of those things I mentioned back at the beginning of the sermon — all of those things that are making us say ENOUGH IS ENOUGH, something needs to be done?

What if the story of manna and quails is a reminder that God provides us enough for those things too? As we wander in the wilderness of the second decade of this century, God provides enough. Enough foresight to begin to prepare for a world where storms are getting worse, and enough determination to change our ways of living if we are contributing to that. Enough courage and faith and common sense to confront the idolatry of weapons in our society that paved a way for last Sunday's killing spree in Las Vegas, and enough self-awareness to know that access to weapons is only one of many problems this tragedy reveals about America today. Enough compassion and passion to respond to tragedies and conditions that leave so many in want. Enough wisdom to see the folly of

our current “I must win, you must lose” political landscape that leaves systems broken and trust in institutions in tatters.

In the midst of each cascade of tragedies that seems to have filled the news cycle in the last months, if we look for them, there have been stories that give us glimpses that we already have enough, already are enough by the grace of God.

Stories like Lynette Brinkis of Laguna Beach, California. She was there in Las Vegas last Sunday, up on a VIP viewing position away from the folks who were being targeted. She and her husband fled the roof and prepared to flee to greater safety. And then she saw a young woman who had been shot struggling to make her way out of the concert ground and something clicked in Lynette. She had served as a nurse for seven years much earlier in her adult life. Now in her 50s, that was part of her past until that moment. Over the course of the next 10 hours she would tend to dozens of victims, some who survived, some who didn't. Lynette could have fled to safety but God had given her enough—enough skill, compassion and bravery to see need and meet it. And hers is one story of thousands from Houston to St. Maarten to Florida to San Juan to Las Vegas.

We face enormous challenges here in Evanston, here in the United States, here on this planet. But there is one thing I'm confident of — we have already been given enough by a loving and gracious God to face them all. And we can state with confidence more than anger or frustration that indeed, enough is enough. Thanks be to God.