

“Our Daily Bread”

The prospect of preaching on the weekend does strange things to the way a person thinks... at least to this person it does. Perhaps that observation is a variation on the old saw, “Knowing you’re going to be hanged in the morning does wonders to focus the mind.” But I think it’s more than that. In any given week the upcoming scripture lesson becomes a lens through which preachers view the world. All this week I’ve been thinking about the story of the manna from heaven—how God nurtured the children of Israel each day in the wilderness; how one day at a time they got precisely what they needed. It may well be that thinking about this lesson contributed to the extraordinary experience I had on Wednesday evening.

I was in the northwest suburbs of Chicago this week, attending an Alban Institute workshop on staff team alignment. I drove over early Tuesday morning, we started in at noon, had sessions all afternoon and evening, all the next morning and afternoon. So since at that point we were pretty much brain dead they gave us Wednesday evening off. I didn’t have enough energy to go out drinking with the Methodists and Baptists who were away from home. And I didn’t feel like doing battle with the expressways to drive into Chicago proper. But since we were in the general neighborhood, I decided to drive over to Wilmette, for the first time in more than thirty years. Once upon a time, I had lived in Wilmette.

“Once upon a time” is about the right way to say it. I was eleven when we moved to Wilmette, and we lived there through my graduation from high school; the years, in case you’re keeping score, were 1960-1967. For many reasons I don’t think of those Wilmette years as happy years. The North Shore of Chicago is really money and status oriented, and we never had much money. I had grown up in Pittsburgh; so for the first couple of years kids made fun of the way I talked. My high school, New Trier, had 5,000 students; and although I was pretty good at a number of things, at New Trier I excelled at nothing... everything I could do lots of people could do better. And throughout our Wilmette years my mother’s mental illness became more and more evident. My sisters, five and four years older, soon went away to college, and I was the last child left behind. When I started college at Grinnell my parents moved into an apartment in the city of Chicago; so after I went away to college the home I had known went away, too.

Most of those Wilmette years I negotiated the local streets on my bicycle; so I really wondered how things would look to me, and whether I would still be able to navigate by landmarks, particularly after dark.

I drove east on Willow Road to Green Bay Road, then south to Lake. It hasn’t changed that much. The houses have somehow grown smaller and closer together, of course. But everything is still there. Some of the streets are still paved with bricks.

On impulse I took a detour to see the park where I used to swing on the swings with Carol Christensen. I went past her house (her family hasn’t lived there for decades).

I saw the front porch steps where we sat when she told me where things stood between us, which was nowhere.

It's just a couple of blocks from there to the village center of Wilmette. I parked the car and walked around. It's upscale and trendy now. The five and ten is gone; Starbucks and various bistros have moved in. The Red Owl supermarket is now a bunch of candle stores and boutiques. But there is still a Laundromat in the same place; for some reason it meant a lot to me to see that. And the Wilmette Theatre is still there. And next to it is an ice cream store... the place where I had my first job.

It isn't a 31 Flavors any more. I forget the new name. But the layout is exactly the same. I recognized the curve of the counter, and could see the spot where Pete Deahl made a hole in the back wall by sliding a three gallon tub of ice cream right through it. When I started working there a single dip cone cost 29 cents and a sundae was 59 cents. I was paid 95 cents an hour, and I was almost worth it. I ordered a small hot fudge sundae and paid the twenty-something shift manager my \$4.38. And I hesitated about whether or not to say something.

"Didn't this used to be a 31 Flavors?"

"Yeah, I think so. But it changed way back in 2003."

"Oh. I used to work here." I paused and swallowed hard. "I started in 1965."

"Really. That's nice." I told him about Pete Deahl and the hole in the back wall. He wasn't very interested; just some old geezer yapping about the old days.

I walked around the center of town as I ate my ice cream. A kid on a bike rode past me wearing a Boy Scout uniform, and I had to take a long, hard look to make sure the kid on the bike wasn't me. I knew where he was going... or at least where he was coming from. He was on his way home from a Scout meeting at the First Presbyterian Church. It was Troop 5, my troop. And First Presbyterian was the church where I was confirmed. It was only three blocks away. I wondered if the building was still open.

Sure enough. I went in through the big oak doors, and the place smelled exactly the same. How does that work? From the lower level I could hear the ageless sounds of kids running wild and frazzled adults trying to rein them in. I just stood in the hallway and listened, wondering what year it was. The sanctuary was locked, but I looked in through a window. It hasn't changed, except that now it looks *really* small. The Alexander B. Allison Chapel was open. He was the Sr. Minister when we moved there, and I thought he was the most boring person on the face of the earth. The chapel looks the same. I think the carpet *is* the same.

Once outside, I took the same route that I used to ride my bike home from church: down Greenleaf to Sixth Street, then left to Central, then right to 510. Again I got out of the car and walked. It sounds the same. It feels the same. And suddenly names came rushing back at me: the Lloyds lived over here, the Allisons were next door to us, the Detmers on the other side, the Hazens lived across the alley. In the next block was Chuck Hammond's house, where I played basketball. Next door, on the corner, was John Muir's yard. They froze it every winter, and that's where I learned to skate, and to love to play hockey. I walked all the way around the block, and up and down the alley, hoping

nobody would notice and wonder what this strange man was doing out there in the dark. There was my bedroom window. I heard the sound of the “L” train approaching the station a few blocks away at Fourth and Linden. It was a sound I heard every summer night as I lay in bed. And I could almost hear my mother whistling. When she couldn’t sleep she would get up in the middle of the night, and sometimes she would scrub the kitchen floor on her hands and knees and whistle hymns as she worked. I can still hear that: beautiful, haunting and strange; although when you grow up with that sort of thing it takes you a while to know it’s strange.

So here’s the thing, the point of this odd, rambling, self-indulgent monologue: as I revisited all these places from my past and they came alive for me and in me, I was wonderfully and poignantly aware that in and through all of this I had been nurtured in ways I never recognized at the time. On this beautiful September evening in 2008 time telescoped together for me, and I had the feeling almost of being on holy ground: not because these were places I had been before, but because God had been there and I hardly knew it at the time... but I know it now.

I don’t really trust my words this morning to convey how deeply I felt these things—in the crunch of the acorns beneath my feet, the rustle of leaves in the trees, the sounds of the evening that could have been any evening. It was holy ground. It is holy ground.

And, of course, so is this... but we so seldom realize it. We’re like the Children of Israel who plummet from euphoria to despair. The crossing of the Red Sea is a triumphant moment when they know God is on their side and when they sing and they dance and they rejoice. But that’s not the only way God is with them, and they know it’s true, but they forget.

Somewhere ahead is the Promised Land. Somewhere ahead is their awaited deliverance. Somewhere ahead are ease and comfort and certainty. But here? Where are we now? We don’t know where we are, and so we want to go back.

Many years ago I wrote a musical about these stories, and in one of the songs the people sing these words to God: “So I’ll trade your tomorrow for my yesterday, Cause at least that was something I knew. All my friends tell me traveling takes you home some day, and I used to believe it was true.” After the dramatic experience comes the day to day; and where is God in that?

God is in the manna from heaven. God is in the quails in the camp. God is in every step we take and in every breath. But usually we don’t realize it.

Sometimes we do: when we’re in a time of crisis and we’re living one day at a time, we know that each and every day we are dependent upon God to make it through that day, and we know that God is as near as the breath within us. Jesus taught us to pray for our daily bread: not just for the sustenance that we need every day, but for the realization every day of our dependence. Why not just pray, “Give us *every* day our daily bread” and be done with it? Because each new day is a journey in itself. On each new phase of the journey, God gives us our daily bread. Like the manna, you can’t store it up and hoard it. Each day is enough for the day. Each day, every day, one day at a time. Give us this day our daily bread.

And God does, wherever we are.

This is a hard lesson to learn, and a harder one to live by. We are so focused on what we want, that we don't realize that we have what we need. We are too focused on what we don't have to recognize what we do have. We are so intent on where we're going that we pay no attention to where we are. We are too busy searching for God to be aware that God is here and now.

Even on the journey we have a home in God: in Wilmette, in Des Moines, and all along the way. Give us this day our daily bread.

Amen

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