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Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

[August 5, 2018](#)

Exodus 16:2-4, 12-15

Psalms 78

Ephesians 4:17, 20-24

John 6:24-35

Manna sounds like a pretty nice treat, doesn't it? Some parts of Scripture make it appear like a near relative to milk and honey. Surprisingly, it got its name because when the Israelites first discovered it on the desert floor they said something like, "Manna?", which we would translate into English as "What is this?"

Although nobody recorded their tone of voice, we can safely assume that it didn't echo a woman who just discovered a diamond bracelet in her birthday card. They had been complaining that Moses had freed them only to lead them to a slow death in the desert. From that vantage point, aging out as slaves in Egypt looked like a better but lost opportunity.

In response to their complaints, God instructed them to collect what they called "manna?". Moses explained that it was the bread the Lord had given them to eat.

Something like an ancient version of instant breakfast, it was a 100 percent natural substance left by insects who had extracted juice from a particular fruit. People could gather and eat the pellets or flakes and even bake them into a kind of bread. This "bread from heaven" seems to belong to the category of foods that the less you know about their provenance the more you can enjoy them.

The manna kept the Israelites going. It gave them nourishment, but, more importantly, it served as a sign of God's constant care for them. With the manna, they were able to continue the journey toward becoming the chosen people in the land God wanted to give them.

Strange as the manna first appeared, its story evolved into a classic and cherished legend about God's providence, including the warning that it would decay if anyone tried to hoard it.

The people ate that bread day after day until they arrived in the promised land. In the process, they grew in gratitude for what it meant as much as they appreciated how it arrived and how it tasted. They came to realize that the manna and the quail were not just food, but signs, what we call sacraments of God's care for them. The more they acknowledged that, the more their eating became a communion, a way of receiving and taking in God's love. Eating that bread would transform them.

Because it's always easier to appreciate miracles and grace in hindsight, the people of Jesus' day loved their 1,000-year-old memory of the manna and shared the hope that it would happen again in the time of the Messiah. (See *Jesus and the Last Supper* by Brian Pitre.)

That's where Jesus tried to help them delve deeper into their religious imagination; he wanted to help them understand the truly human meaning of what he called the bread of life. If they desired to participate in the experience of their ancestors, they would have to learn not only to look at the past or hope for the future, but also to see what was right in front of them.



(Mark Bartholomew)

Jesus said, "It was not Moses who *gave* the bread from heaven, my Father *gives* you the true bread from heaven" (italics added).

While it was easy for them to remember the bread of heaven, the manna they thought had appeared miraculously for their ancestors, they had forgotten that the great sharing of bread that motivated their search for Jesus began with a child who gave everything he had for Jesus to share with the crowd.

One of the key challenges John's Gospel gives us is the call to recognize the gifts of God in our midst. The people who meet Jesus in this Gospel are always looking for great things and seem unable to realize that the marvels they seek are right in front of them. They need only believe in order to perceive them.

Perhaps we might take today's readings as an invitation to look at the stuff of our daily lives, the ordinary, the surprising and even that which originally appears less than attractive, and to ask "What is this?" Following the lead of our ancestors in the

faith, we may slowly learn to see beyond what the Letter to the Ephesians calls the "futility" of our minds and begin to perceive what God is doing here and now.

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The Gospel tells us that God is constantly in the process of giving life to the world. Like the Israelites, we are invited to keep moving on our journey of faith. We are called to go along together, seeking and praying, looking at the reality of our world and asking "What is this?"

Sincerely asking that question in community will lead us to discover the manna God keeps sending. When we share it, we discover that it is the only bread that satisfies the hungers of our world.

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Editor's note: This Sunday scripture commentary appears in full in NCR's sister publication Celebration, a worship and homiletic resource. Request a sample issue at CelebrationPublications.org. Sign up to receive [email newsletters](#) every time Spiritual Reflections is posted.

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