



Easter 7
May 23, 2004

Numbers 11:4-6;13-20
Leading the Rabble
Installation of Officers
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Any prayer that begins with the words "If only" is very dangerous. The greatest danger is that you may receive what you are craving. Then how would you explain your unhappiness?

When the Hebrews left Egypt to begin their difficult journey through the desert to the Promised Land, they brought with them a group of people that the Bible calls "the rabble." The rabble were not true believers in this journey, or in the God who called them to it. In Cecil B. DeMille's movie "The Ten Commandments" the rabble were personified in Edward G. Robinson's character. Remember him? Every time the journey became difficult, he just kept saying, "Yeah, Moses, where's your God now?" And soon a riot would break out. The rabble's toleration for discomfort was low, and their capacity for complaint was high. Complaining is so contagious to a spiritual community. It doesn't take much to get everybody in a lather of anxiety

The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again and said, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at." (11:4)

A couple of months ago I spoke to you about the manna. It was a small bread-like substance that appeared every morning in the desert. It wasn't much: just enough to keep the people alive. The people had to collect it every day, and everyone had to collect it for themselves. Thus, the manna was a symbol of how God would care for the people, one day at a time. Also, remember that the literal translation of the word manna is "What is it?" So everyday the people nurtured their faith by taking in the great question: "What is it, Lord? What is it, that you are doing? What is it, that you are making of my life?"

Since the whole purpose of being on life's journey is to learn faith, you don't get a lot of answers. Mostly, you get questions and a choice still to believe in spite of those questions. That is how faith is formed. But the rabble undermine our faith by getting our focus off of "What is it?" and onto their favorite phrase, "If only." As they lamented, "If only we had meat. If only we were still back in Egypt. If only we didn't have to keep settling for questions. Why don't we have some answers?"

As a pastor, I cannot tell you how many times I hear a sentence that begins with "If only." Teenagers say, "If only I could get out of the house, then I would be okay." Then we say, "If only I could get out of college and get the dream job, then I would be happy." But after the dream job turns into a nightmare we say, "If only I could find a real job." Eventually we start to say things like, "If only I could get married... If only we could have kids... If only the kids would leave home... If only they would visit and bring the grand kids." You can "if only" your way all the way into the nursing home until you are saying, "If only I had lived differently."

Sometimes we say "If only" because we are focused on the future: "If only I could find someone special in my life, then I would be okay." But at other times we use the phrase because we are focused on

the past: "If only I had my health back." Either way, speaking these words defines your life by what is missing. It preoccupies you with the past or future. Thus, the words "if only" are always a judgment upon the present day, which is the only day you have, and the only place manna is found.

These days, we have such a hard time finding the manna precisely because we have such a hard time finding the present tense. In my grandfather's day the present used to stretch out for a long way where it lay between a distant past and dim future. But our society moves so quickly that the present is over before we ever notice it. Within a few generations we have progressed from traveling by horseback to jet planes. What used to take months to cross we now cover in a few hours. Our computers move so quickly that we have had to invent a new word, nano-second, because a second is no longer a short enough unit of time. And our kids are hustled through their childhood so quickly that in a nano-second someone is talking to them about college. If only they can get into a good college. Before you know it, they are gone and you missed your moment because the present just didn't last long enough to enjoy the manna of grace they provided.

One of the hardest places to find present tense contentment is when you are in leadership. It doesn't matter if you are leading a family, the church, or a corporation. You will soon grow exhausted listening to the "If only" complaints of those you are trying to serve. Up to this point in the journey out of slavery, Moses has been the model of patient leadership. When the people complained that Pharaoh was going to kill them, Moses stretched out his staff to open the waters of the Red Sea. When they complained about the lack of water, he found water in the desert. When they complained about the lack of food, he pointed to the manna. When they complained that he was gone too long on Sinai and turned to the idol of a golden calf, Moses interceded on their behalf and talked God out of consuming them. In the first three verses of our text today the people complained again. This time God couldn't resist sending down a little consuming fire, and would have burned up all of them if Moses hadn't interceded again. But when the rabble got everyone going on the meat thing, this time Moses snapped.

Now it Moses himself who is complaining about the people's complaints. In verse 11 he asks God, "Why have you treated your servant so badly, that you lay the burden of this people on me?" In verse 12 he laments, "Am I their mother?" In verse 13 he asks, "Where am I supposed to find meat for all these people?" In verse 14 he says, "I am not able to carry this people." And in verse 15 he tells God that if he cares about his servant at all he will just go ahead and kill him to take him out of his misery. This is a leader who has gone over the edge, and has finally flamed out trying to save the people.

The most dangerous rabble to the leader are not the complaining voices around us, but the rabble that lives within each of our own hearts and tempts us to reduce leadership to servicing complaints. No one lasts long trying to make people happy - but that was never the leader's job.

God responds to Moses by saying, "I'll take care of the meat thing. But I'm more worried about you." Then he places some of his spirit on the elders to help Moses bear the burden of the people. These elders had been appointed months earlier. Moses' father-in-law, a good organization man, came up with a scheme for appointing officers over groups of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. But being an appointed officer does not create a leader. It was shortly after these appointments that the people made a gold calf. If you limit your leadership to job descriptions and administrative functions you may just be organizing better disasters for the people. At best, you will think its your job is to get the people to the Promised Land. But that's just another "if only" phrase that places your calling in the future. It's God's job to carry your people, your family, to the Promised Land. Your job is to help people see the manna that keeps them spiritually alive another day.

This is why God put his Spirit on these administrative officers, and it is why we ordain the officers of the church. The purpose is to provide a spiritual purpose to their leadership, which isn't to take over for God, but to help the people see what God is doing. That's what leaders do: they help the people see what is hard to see.

At the end of his book, *Leading Without Power*, Max Dupree illustrates this vision in the leadership of Leningrad in WW II. In 1941 as the Nazi armies were marching on the city, the staff of the Hermitage Museum boxed up all the paintings and sculptures and shipped them east before the advancing army arrived. However, they left the frames on the wall and the pedestals on the floors as a symbol of their belief in a time when the war would be over. The siege of the city went on for two years, but during that time the staff of the museum didn't just long for better days and they didn't just complain. Instead they continued to give tours for the people even though there was no art in the building. We have photographs from this period that depict people standing in front of empty picture frames while the curators describe in detail the Renoirs and Rembrandts that should be there. They filled in the blanks, and helped others see what was not now visible. In doing that, they helped the city to have hope. That's leadership.

We also live in a city and in a world that is greatly in need of vision, for we have been in the wilderness a long time. Our people are tempted to think they have to demand what they want and our leaders are tempted to think all they can do is negotiate between competing complaints. What we need are leaders who can fill in the blanks with beautiful visions of how we should live. Because it is only with these grand visions that people can make good choices about how they will use the day they have.

Here's the really scary part: God will honor your choices.

God honors the choices of the people. When the people insisted that they were sick and tired of living by daily regimens of manna and were looking for something a little meatier than that, God said, "Fine. You want meat? I'll give you meat. Until it comes out your nostrils." So he sent hoards of quail, and the people devoured the meat until they choked on it. Hasn't it always been true that when you finally got the thing that you thought would make you happy that you were not happy after all? Of course, because contentment is found not in the future but in the present.

God also honors the choices of the leaders. As Moses eventually discovered, if you keep asking God to get these people to the Promised Land without you, he will. Moses wasn't with them when that day finally came.

And it didn't make him as happy as he thought it would. Amen.