

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Pentecost 19 (Proper 21B), Series B
Saturday, September 29, 2018
Sunday, September 30, 2018

Sermon: Cravings
Text: Numbers 11

Focus: God punishes his people for complaining.

Function: That they would be content and grateful for God's gracious provision.

Structure: Story-Framed

Locus: "He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life" (SC, 1st Article of Apostles' Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Do you ever have a craving for a certain food that just won't go away? Maybe it's fried chicken, a nice, big juicy steak, or frozen custard. The craving just won't go away, and until you get it, nothing else you eat seems to satisfy. For me, my cravings always seem to be for really good pizza. And I'm *very* picky about pizza. After all, I grew up working in my family's pizza place for 7-1/2 years. Frozen pizza doesn't cut it. Chain stores are terrible. Take 'n' bake is a *little* better, but still not quite there. In my not-so-humble opinion, there is no spot better for pizza in all of Castle Rock than Stumpy's over by the library. Just fantastic! Nothing but hot, spicy, greasy goodness. I never had a bad bite there. Yes, I've had Granelli's and Sienna's and Perry's and Boulevard and Uncle Maddio's and Little "Squeezers." Some are okay. But none of them come close to *Stumpy's*.

So when I get the craving for some pepperoni pizza, nothing else will do. I don't care what else Lisa wants to serve; until I get me some Stumpy's, I can't get rid of the craving. I may even have to sneak off during my lunch hour to grab a slice to go (so that Lisa won't notice!). Unfortunately, stolen water is not sweet, and bread eaten in secret is anything but pleasant (cf. Prov. 9:17). Going to Stumpy's by yourself is not as fun and rewarding as enjoying a good

family dinner there together. (It is cheaper.) When I let my cravings get the better of me, I end up feel guilty and bloated. Not exactly what I was looking for!

Our Old Testament lesson from Numbers 11 is all about the cravings of God's people. In Numbers, chapters 11, 12, and 13, the Israelites (or their leaders) complain about one thing after another. They are only a three days' journey from Mt. Sinai, where they spent most of the past year receiving the Ten Commandments and building the Tabernacle and Ark of the Covenant for worshiping the Lord God, Yahweh. They have ordained Aaron and his sons to be his priests. And now, nearly a year after leaving Egypt on the night of the first Passover, they are ready to set out for their journey to the Promised Land of Canaan.

But Moses tells us that "the rabble... among them had a strong craving" (Num. 11:4). The children of Israel were tired of eating the miraculous manna. Even though the Bible describes this sweet, frost-like flaky bread as "the grain of heaven" and "bread of angels" (Ps. 78:24, 25), they cried and wept and called out for *meat*! They remembered the fish and cucumbers and melons and vegetables that they used to eat in Egypt. They got a craving—not for pizza—but for the food they ate when they were slaves. They complained about God's gift and craved slave food. Like a man who sets his hand to the plow and turns back, they yearned for the life they'd left behind. For them, slavery in Egypt was better than freedom in the desert as long as it came with a full salad bar.

The people's complaint made Moses mad. Our ESV translation reads, "...And Moses was displeased" (Num. 11:10). That's a bit understated. The literal Hebrew reads, "And in the eyes of Moses [it was] evil" (Num. 11:10, CSM). So Moses, in turn, complained to God about having to be their leader. The prophet blamed God for putting him in charge of their nation. Why did Yahweh burden him with the Israelites, when he didn't give birth to them?! He went so

far as to beg God to kill him, since he wouldn't let him quit his job and resign his call. Being the shepherd of Israel was too much for Moses, and he'd had enough of being God's man. You can tell he was more than a little frustrated and worked up about the people's craving. And rightly so!

The burden of his congregation was too much for Moses to bear alone, so Yahweh raised up 70 elders from the men of Israel to prophesy and give him support. But he also promised the people that he would give them meat, just as they asked. Earlier in the Exodus, God graciously gave his people water from the rock and manna from heaven to satisfy their hunger and thirst. When they complained, he provided. But not this time! This time, he decided to punish them for complaining. They would come to loathe the very food they craved, for God was about to give them so much meat that it would come out their nose (cf. Num. 11:20).

Then after the brief side note about Eldad and Medad prophesying in the camp, and Moses' wish, "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets..." (v. 29), our story would seem to end. Unfortunately, our pericope doesn't give us the full ending of the story. Let's read on to the end of the chapter:

"Then a wind from the LORD sprang up, and it brought quail from the sea and let them fall beside the camp, about a day's journey on this side and a day's journey on the other side, around the camp, and about two cubits above the ground. And the people rose all that day and all night and all the next day, and gathered the quail. Those who gathered least gathered ten homers. And they spread them out for themselves all around the camp. While the meat was yet between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the LORD was kindled against the people, and the LORD struck down the people with a very great plague. Therefore the name of that place was called Kibroth-hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had the craving" (Num. 11:31-34).

So God gave them what they asked for. He gave them meat. But he also killed them as they took their first bite, while the quail was still between their teeth, before they even swallowed. The lesson learned is this: sometimes you'd better be careful what you wish for because you

might just get it! As the psalmist describes this scene, “They ate and were well filled, for he gave them what they craved. But before they satisfied their craving, while the food was still in their mouths, the anger of God rose against them, and he killed the strongest of them and laid low the young men of Israel” (Ps. 78:29-31). Why did he do this? “Because they did not believe in God and did not trust his saving power” (Ps. 78:22).

When we insist on having *my* will instead of “*Thy* will be done,” we might just get it. Sometimes the most dangerous thing that can happen is for God to let you have what you demand, to give into your cravings and give you what you wanted until it’s coming out your nose (cp. Num. 11:20). When we stop trusting our heavenly Father to do what’s best for us, we can wind up in a world of hurt.

So does God not want us to ask him for things we want? Is that the real issue? No, that’s not it. The Bible says, “Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Ps. 37:4). The trouble is not asking God for stuff, but *what* we are asking for! Because of our fallen, sinful human nature, our desires are disordered and displaced. As James wrote in last week’s epistle lesson, “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions” (Jas. 4:3b).

God’s concern with craving is that it leads either to complaining or coveting, both of which are a form of idolatry (cf. Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5). Think about it! When we covet what we don’t have and get that insatiable craving, it belies our heart and bears out that our real trust is *not* in God and his ability to take care of us and provide for us. It’s as if we’re saying, “God, I know that you say, ‘I’ve got this,’ but I don’t *believe* you! You’re not giving me what I want or need. You’re not delivering fast enough. I doubt that you provide me daily bread. And I question your goodness.” And if you think about it a little further, isn’t that what the original sin

was all about: doubting God's Word and not trusting his character? Before Eve ate the forbidden fruit, Satan told her that God was holding out on the good stuff and keeping it all to himself: "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:4b-5). In other words, the serpent suggested that God didn't want Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil because he wanted to savor the secret knowledge for himself. In reality, of course, God was protecting them. But when we get the craving, it's hard for us to see or think clearly.

But God's promises remain true. Jesus doesn't tell us to pray for daily bread because God wants us to go hungry. He teaches us to pray for the very things God wishes to give us. God doesn't hold out on us! He is a loving, heavenly Father who delights in giving his children gifts. "What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?" (Luke 11:11-12). I would never do such a thing to my children—not even in jest! How much more, then, our heavenly Father give to those who ask *Him* (Luke 11:13). As the Bible says, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" (Jas. 1:17, NIV). "Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good!" (Ps. 34:8a). "He would feed you with the finest of wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you" (Ps. 81:16).

God loves you and wants what is best for you. That is why he sent his Son Jesus to be your Savior. "God so loved the world, that he his only Son..." (John 3:16). If Jesus loves you enough to *die* on the cross for your sins, don't you think he cares about the rest of your needs, physical and spiritual? And if God had the power to raise Jesus from the dead, don't you think he has the power to provide for your needs too?

As the baptized, redeemed children of God, it's time for us to stop our craving. Rather than complaining to God about what we have or don't have, let us give thanks for his wonderful gifts—above all, his gift of salvation in Christ our Lord! St. Paul writes, “Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world” (1 Tim. 6:6-7). And everything we have is already God's. “For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills.... If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine” (Ps. 50:10, 12). If God wanted a cheeseburger, he wouldn't ask us to give him one. The cattle on a thousand hills are his. So he will take care of you. “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32).

Craving and coveting are idolatry. Contentment demonstrates faith and trust in God. Contentment brings peace. And it helps us to end our anxious efforts to keep up with the Joneses and be jealous of what our neighbors have. Instead of lusting after somebody else's spouse, I can delight in the wife of my youth. Instead of wishing that my kids behaved more like your kids, I can rejoice in the gift of my children. Instead of complaining about our jobs, we can glorify God and give thanks for the opportunity to love and serve others in our vocations. Craving gets us nowhere. Gratitude gets us everything. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.