

*Sermon for Proper 21, Year B
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The people of Israel have a strong craving. You see, in Egypt they had good food. They ate well, for slaves. They had fish and meat and vegetables and fruit. They had herbs to season their food. It was really good. Of course, they also had to do forced labor under whip-wielding Egyptian overseers. They also had their infant sons thrown into the river and murdered. But the food...the food was really good.

And now they are free! God has delivered them from the Egyptians. He has brought them out of Egypt and saved them at the Red Sea. They grumbled a little at the hardships along the way, but God provided water and food aplenty. He made a covenant with them at Sinai, promising to be their God. He has forgiven them for the Golden Calf incident and given them guidance in purity and righteousness. And here they are in the wilderness, guided and protected by the presence of God himself, fed and watered by God himself.

But that food in Egypt... It was really good. And here we've just got this boring old manna. You can boil it or bake it or eat it raw, but it's always the same ho-hum, miraculous manna. There's just nothing like a good Egyptian onion.

The truth is that we can look down our noses at the Israelites in the wilderness all we want, but we aren't really any better. God has blessed us greatly. Jesus died for us to set us free from the chains of sin and the devil. He has brought us out of the world and rescued us through the waters of baptism, making a covenant with us and promising to be our God. He has given us guidance through his word and the great tradition of his church. He has given us his presence within us by the Holy Spirit, as well as his holy life in our very bodies by receiving the miraculous manna of the Eucharist. Some of us have financial struggles, but not one of us is ever really hungry.

And yet, just like the Israelites, we long for Egyptian onions. Unlike the Israelites, we can get them. They just complained, because they were stuck in the desert. But we are actually living in Egypt. We can get food and entertainment suited to our tastes and desires. And we do. And we still have the temerity to complain to God that we don't have everything we want.

We want to have God and have everything our way. We want to have God and still satisfy our appetites. We want to have God and still be friendly with the world, the flesh, and the devil. And yet we're unhappy with God when the world, the flesh, and the devil make our lives miserable. We are what St. James calls "men of double mind". We have not truly made up our minds to follow Jesus, because that would require us to lay down our whole lives in submission to God. So we waffle and bear very little fruit. The devil may not be able to completely destroy us, but he's got us all wrapped up so we don't really do much good.

I know this, because we continue to complain about each other. We continue to try to manipulate each other to get what we want. We speak evil of each other without ever mending our relationships, sometimes without ever forming them in the first place. We are jealous of our rights and our positions and our possessions. Or else we are jealous of other people's rights and positions and possessions. We say we are followers of Christ, but we continue to presume that we are righteous and therefore we can judge others, forgetting that there is only one righteous man in the history of creation who has been given judgment over the rest of us. And so we are also complaining about him, whether we admit it or not. "O that we had people we like to be in church with us! Here there is nothing at all but these redeemed members of Christ's body to look at."

It's not a new problem. St. Cyril of Alexandria wrote in the fifth century, "Every wicked act dulls the sense of our thoughts and gives birth to arrogance. For although it is necessary for each one to examine himself and behave according to God's will, many people do not do this but prefer to mind the business of others. If they happen to see others suffering, it seems that they forget their own weaknesses and set about criticizing them and slandering them. They condemn them, not knowing that they suffer from the same things as the people they have criticized, and in so doing they condemn themselves."

We are double-minded.

St. James has a simple, wildly effective method for counteracting all this. "Submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you." Notice the order. Submission comes first, then resistance. "Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you." Again, notice the order. Humbling comes first, then exaltation. Humbling and submission entail giving up your rights. They entail an admission of guilt and repentance. They involve total dedication. In other words, we have to say to God, "I'm not in charge here anymore. I'm not even in charge of *me* anymore. You are." And then we have to act as though that were true.

Jesus also gives instruction in this matter. If your hand or foot or eye causes you to sin, get rid of it. You are more whole without part of your body than you are with the sin. Obviously, this is hyperbole. No one is advocating masochistic maimings, because no part of your body actually causes you to sin. But your TV might. The things in your refrigerator might. Your computer might. Your bank account might. Your job might. Your relationships with pagans might. Your pride definitely will. Anything that hinders you from seeking the righteousness of Christ must go. That is submission.

Do you really want to go back to Egypt? Are the onions *that* good? Is the satisfaction of your appetites worth your life? Because that is what it costs. You may get tasty food, but the torture and death of slavery to sin is what you get with it. There is only one thing worth giving your life. Freedom. The freedom to resist the devil. The freedom to know what is right, and the freedom to do it. The freedom to treat each other kindly and work together, in spite of the faults we all still have. The freedom to be exalted by God. The freedom to ask for what you need and to trust that it will be provided. The freedom to take joy in God and his provision, rather than the slavery of always wanting what you don't have.

In order to gain this freedom, you will have to hand over your entire life to God. You will have to mourn for your failure to honor him. And you will have to remove all obstacles to that honor in the future. Humble yourselves and he will exalt you. Continue to serve your own lusts and appetites, and you will lose everything.