

March 19, 2017
Third Sunday in Lent

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Daily”

The Reverend Amy Starr Redwine



*After the Dalai Lama delivered a lecture, a member of the audience
asked him what the answer to world hunger is.
He responded, "Sharing."*

The Church of the Covenant
Presbyterian Church (USA)
11205 Euclid Avenue
Cleveland, Ohio 44106
CovenantWeb.org

Exodus 16:3–5, 13–21

³The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” ⁴Then the LORD said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. ⁵On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.” ¹³In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat.” ¹⁶This is what the LORD has commanded: ‘Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.’” ¹⁷The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. ¹⁸But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. ¹⁹And Moses said to them, “Let no one leave any of it over until morning.” ²⁰But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them. ²¹Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.

Matthew 6:25–34, 18:1–5

²⁵“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ ³²For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

¹⁸ At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” ²He called a child, whom he put among them, ³and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

“Daily”

Exodus 16:3–5, 13–21; Matthew 6:25–34, 18:1–5

The great preacher Fred Craddock once said in a sermon that when the *disciples* who had **followed** Jesus became *apostles* who **spread the news** of the crucified and resurrected Christ, they performed a majestic flip-flop. All along, faithful Jews who had been waiting for the Messiah had been saying, “When the Messiah comes, *no suffering*.” “See that man over there, in constant pain from arthritis? When the Messiah comes, you won’t see that anymore. When the Messiah comes, *no suffering*. See that crippled woman? See that broken family? When the Messiah comes, no more of that. When the Messiah comes, *no suffering*.” But when the disciples met the **real** Messiah in Jesus of Nazareth, and became apostles, they did a majestic flip-flop, a complete reversal, proclaiming that for now and until Jesus comes again to this earth, **wherever** there is suffering, *that is exactly* where you will find the Messiah.¹

This week in the *New York Times*, columnist David Brooks wrote about a book called *The Benedict Option*. The author, Rod Dreher, a conservative Christian, argues that the culture wars have been lost. The only option left for true believers is to follow the example of St. Benedict, who, in the sixth century, set up monastic communities where the orthodox religious could go as the Roman empire crumbled. Christians, Dreher argues, should withdraw from mainstream culture to deepen, purify and preserve their faith.

David Brooks has deep respect for Rod Dreher and for the monastic model, but he argues that Dreher gets it wrong. The problem, Brooks writes, is that “most people are dragged willy-nilly into life — with all its contradictions and complexities. Many who experience faith experience it most vividly **within** the web of their rival loves — different communities, jobs, dilemmas. They have *faith in their faith*. It gives them a way of being **within** the realities of a messy and impure world.”²

For the last two weeks, we have seen that the Lord’s Prayer does not make it easier for us to understand God’s ways in the world. Instead this prayer puts us right into the ambiguity, the complexity, and the mystery of faith: *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

¹ Scott Hoezee, sermon starter on Matthew 20:1-16 at Center for Excellence in Preaching, September 15, 2014.

² David Brooks, “The Benedict Option.” *The New York Times*, March 14, 2017.

The opening lines of this prayer affirm that the God of creation who is *wholly other* is also *accessible* to us here and now, that we live in a time when God's reality is mixed with ours, and that we have a part to play in bringing God's kingdom to earth. And then, into the chasm between heaven and earth, into the mystery of God who is with us, Jesus offers us a simple, down-to-earth petition that grounds us in the present: *Give us this day our daily bread*.

We live as we pray. This seemingly simple petition in the middle of this prayer teaches us something about how we are to live: *day by day*. Give us *this day* our *daily* bread. Just as we discover in Jesus' sermon about the birds and the lilies; just as the Israelites learned in the wilderness to gather only enough manna for one day, part of living as we pray is trusting God enough to focus on what is before us **right here and now**. After all, at the end of that sermon about the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, Jesus doesn't say, you'll have blessings for today and blessings again tomorrow. He says, *Today's troubles are enough for today*. **Stay present to the needs of today**.

We have lots of tried and true methods of avoiding the here and now. *We obsess about the past* – people who've hurt us, mistakes we have made – and *we worry about the future* – what we are afraid might happen, what we fear might not happen. And as anyone who has ever had a big project to do knows, there are always tasks to which we can attend, even if they are just a way of avoiding the thing we really need to do. We are masters of distracting ourselves from the here and now.

Leadership coach Marty Linsky tells the story of a friend who rose through the ranks to become the head of a state human services agency. Having worked at the agency for a long time, Elizabeth had many ideas and reforms she was eager to implement. Six months into her new position, Marty took her out to lunch and asked her how the job was going. "It's the most amazing thing," Elizabeth replied. "I've never been so busy. My appointment calendar is full, and each meeting is important...I'm working more hours than I ever did before...I take work home on the weekends. But I have barely begun to work on my agenda...It's as if [all the people at the agency] got together, whatever their differences, and agreed to keep me so busy that I would never get anything done!"³

³ Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*. Harvard Business Review Press, 2002.

Sometimes the hardest thing to do is to determine exactly what are the worries in a given day that deserve our attention. Jesus tells us we not to worry about the basics of life – what we will eat and what we will wear – and yet, many of our worries (and sufferings) fall into such categories. So we spend our time and energy on these, which often means that the biggest, thorniest issues in our lives – like our relationships, our finances, our health – never get the attention they deserve, precisely because they are so overwhelming and it's so much easier to focus on the little things! *What shall we eat today, and what shall we wear?*

We know that, compared to much of the rest of the world, we live in relative wealth and ease. Few of us truly need to worry about whether we will have food or clothes *today*. So what does it mean for us to pray, *Give us this day our daily bread*? If we trust God to provide the basic needs of our lives, then, having been nourished and cared for, what is God calling us to concern ourselves with as we pray *Give us this day our daily bread*?

We live as we pray. *Day by day*. We do not need to rehash the past – we are forgiven and we are called to forgive. We do not need to worry about the future – God will be there. Instead we are called to focus on *today* – on our *daily* need. And with this phrase Jesus also reminds us that there is not a day that goes by when we live or pray in **isolation**. We live as we pray, and we do not live alone but in community: Give *us* this day *our* daily bread.

If we are privileged enough to know that we will eat today, then what does it mean to ask God to give *us* this day *our* daily bread? Could it be that God wants us to make sure that **all** of God's children have what they need **today**. What are the needs around us that have not yet been met? Who are our brothers and sisters who are suffering – from hunger, yes, but also from poverty and oppression and injustice of every kind? Because when the Messiah came, it's not that there was no more suffering, When Jesus came he showed us in a whole new way that *we are all in this together* and that **God is right in the middle of it with us**.

The Methodist pastor Grace Imathiu tells a story from her native Kenya about a rat living in the walls of a farmer's house. One day the rat peered through a hole in the wall and saw the farmer and his wife opening a package.

The rat watched and was dismayed to see them pull from this package – a rat-trap! In a panic, the rat called a council of farm animals, and in a hushed and trembling voice told them what he'd seen. Over and over, he repeated: "There's a rat-trap in the house!"

The cow listened, the goat and chicken listened. Chicken scratched at the floor and finally said, "Well, brother Rat, I just keep thinking, 'Rat-trap in the house? – so what!' I've never heard of a chicken caught in a rat-trap. I don't see what this has to do with me; it's none of my business." The goat nodded at the chicken's words, and then spoke with understanding and pity. "Brother Rat, you take care now. I'll be praying for you and remember – God loves you! You take care now, you hear!" The cow chewed her cud for a while, thinking hard, and finally said, "It's like, I'm confused – why are we here? It's like, I'm thinking, you know, I am like too big to fit in that trap and I figure, duh, that trap's not for me!" And with that, the cow walked away.

That same night – late, late that night – "pop!" went the rat-trap, followed by a piercing scream and then pandemonium! A snake had crawled into the rat-trap. The farmer's wife reached over and the snake bit her. The Farmer rushed his wife to the hospital but it was too late – she died. The farmer came home in shock. And as you know: people in shock need fresh chicken soup. The next day, neighbors and relatives came from all around to comfort the farmer, who gave permission for the goat to be slaughtered for dinner. On the day of funeral so many people came that the only way to feed them was to kill the cow and make beef stew. All because of a rat-trap in the house!⁴

Jesus tells us that to enter the kingdom of heaven we must be like children – humble and trusting. And what is it that we teach children, over and over and over again: to *share*. We teach them to share their toys, to share their food, to share whatever they have. And then they grow up – we grow up – and somewhere along the way we learn that whatever we have – including our happiness and our relative lack of suffering – we earned and it's up to us what to do with it. "Truly I tell you," Jesus says, "unless you change and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." God teaches us to *share* everything: *Give us this day our daily bread*.

⁴ Rev. Mark Ramsey, "What's in a Name," sermon delivered at Westlake Hills Presbyterian Church on March 12, 2017.

As my friend Mark Ramsey preached last week, when there is a rat-trap in the house, we cannot fool ourselves that it has nothing to do with us! We cannot turn away because we are too consumed with or distracted by our own worries or because we've already received our daily bread. We do not have the luxury of deciding that the problems in our world are just too overwhelming and there is nothing we can do to make a difference. We are the ones who believe that the God of heaven and earth, the creator of all that is, lived and walked and taught and healed and suffered right alongside us. So we can never be the ones to say, *rat-trap? What does that have to do with me?*

- Barrel bombs in Syria dropped on apartment buildings where families live and makeshift emergency rooms where volunteer doctors have come from other countries to work. *Rat-trap in the house.*
- Famine and war in the South Sudan. *Rat-trap in the house.*
- A young mother of four deported to Mexico, from which she fled violence fifteen years ago. *Rat-trap in the house.*
- The opioid epidemic, the epicenter of which is right here in Ohio. *Rat-trap in the house.*
- Seventy neighborhoods in Cuyahoga County in which one in three children under the age of six have toxic levels of lead in their blood. *Rat-trap in the house.*
- People of color being profiled at airports, on highways, walking down the street or playing in the park. *Rat-trap in the house.*
- Depression, abuse, injustice happening anywhere within our reach. *Rat-traps in the house.*⁵

If the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus teaches us anything about God, it is that God does not shy away from the realities and the complexities of this messy and impure world God created. The idea that when the Messiah comes, *no more suffering* – well, Jesus turned that on its head by showing that when the Messiah comes, that is **God getting right into the messiness with us** – with all the suffering that entails.

⁵ *Ibid.*

To pray this simple phrase, “Give us this day our daily bread,” is to remember what we who follow that suffering Messiah are called to do: to pray daily *and then get busy* making sure our brothers and sisters have what they need. Because it is not and **never** will be that when the Messiah comes, no more suffering. It is and *always* will be, that the Messiah *has* come and now we know: suffering is overcome when we participate in it, when we **give up** some of our abundance and privilege to **draw alongside** our brothers and sisters who are hurting. It is what Christians are called to do...because it is what God in Jesus has done for us.

Our Messiah has come, and shown us how to respond to the suffering all around us: with love and compassion and humility, we must share in it, *day by day by day by day by day...*

Amen.