

Our father, who art in trailer, was thrilled to have all three of us boys together for Thanksgiving a number of years ago at his place, which some of you may remember is a two and a half acre parcel of California paradise decorated with the metallic and sentimental residue of many decades and known to us affectionately as The Ranch.

For all of its abundance and style, The Ranch does lack certain luxuries, such as electricity and automatic running water, so preparing Thanksgiving dinner is done a bit differently there than it is at, say, Mom's house.

Instead of oven roasted turkey, we savored seasoned, skillet-seared chicken fried steaks, which I daresay are tastier than almost any holiday bird I've ever tasted; the old man can cook, and this is his specialty.

Dad performed his marinated magic on a small, makeshift outdoor stove while also juggling potatoes, green beans, sauce, and I don't remember what else AND navigating several playful, hungry dogs while enjoying the help of the only of his three sons who can't cook.

He found and cleared and set a table with clean silverware, which was no small accomplishment, and summoned his beloved children to supper to pray and celebrate and give thanks.

He presented our feast, hours in the making, with introductions of each item, waving his still scalded hands enthusiastically, his face bright with nervous anticipation.

And that's when my brother said it.

My brother, who had been shooting off guns and his mouth and Lord knows what else as Dad was toiling for hours, racing against the setting sun by whose light we needed to eat. My brother looked at Dad and said, "Where's the gravy?"

The look on Dad's face is what I see whenever I hear today's first reading from Numbers.

Our father, provider of manna in the wilderness, went to such untold pains to gather and feed his beloved children, only to hear complaining.

"We had gravy at Mom's house."

We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic.

Sure, maybe we were oppressed and stifled and miserable and broken, but the food was so much better.

Sure, maybe we did have to wear stiff clothes and plastic smiles and make painful small talk with relatives we don't like for hours on end last year, but there was gravy.

I think Dad wanted to kill him, and I think I wanted to watch, because he did have it coming.

As we prepare this morning for a special congregational meeting about what we don't have after worship today--most likely a worship that was lovingly prepared about which you will remember how bland the sermon was or how there was a typo in the bulletin or a sound system malfunction or how it lacked creativity or imagination or liturgical precision or fresh Communion bread with no gravy--we are supported by a chorus of the faithful.

Their sacred voices cascade across cultures and centuries, a great cloud of witnesses, and if you tune your ears and silence your soul maybe, just maybe, you can catch the ancient strain and hear them as they complain:

If only we had meat to eat!

We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing...

There is nothing at all but this manna to look at.

Why have you treated your servant so badly?

If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once...and do not let me see my misery.

Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp...my lord, stop them!

Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he wasn't following us.

That last comment from the disciples might be my favorite.

They have just watched Jesus exorcise a demon that they could not cast out themselves. Now someone else, probably a Catholic from the suburbs, is doing in Jesus' name what they were unable to do themselves, and they tried to stop him not because he wasn't following Jesus, but because he wasn't following *them*, which apparently was true, because they apparently weren't able to stop him either.

We have so many reasons as we gather around the table at the feast of our Father, the meal we name Eucharist which is basically Greek for Thanksgiving, to complain...but the reasons seem to fall naturally into at least two categories.

One category is The Missing Gravy, the thing we want but don't have...we feast upon the presence of God and the assurance of our salvation and the body and blood of Christ and the sacred community we share...and we think we should get better wine, or a nice dipping oil for the bread, or a singable hymn or silence or better people next to us who dressed better or any number of side dishes that don't matter at all except to us.

Another category is to complain about what God does provide, but to the wrong people.

Eldad and Medad aren't members; they shouldn't get the Spirit.

The nameless exorcist isn't following our constitution.

Many churches don't allow perceived unbelievers or non-members to take Communion: God only works through authorized channels; Thanksgiving dinner should only be for family.

Yes, God's family also includes siblings who say stupid things...which, let's be honest, is one more reason for us to complain, because they also get lavishly loved and fed.

Why do they get gifts and attention and new members and publishing deals that we don't?

Why does the Spirit get shared with them; why doesn't anybody stop them?

The answer, the disappointment, the good news is, because we can't.

We can't get the demon to go, and we can't get the Holy Spirit to stop.

God will do what God will do, and much to our frustration, God isn't following us.

Our efforts to stop our unmanageable God don't work, and our efforts to stop others with our stumbling blocks to the family feast kindle righteous fire in our Father's face.

Whoever in the church is at work to stop the grace of God, with stumbling blocks to the altar or regulations for exorcists or discouragement of service or dismissal of small acts of grace can all go to hell...because they'll fit in better there.

As C.S. Lewis' demonic protagonist Screwtape has eloquently rhapsodized, hell has standards.

People in hell get what they deserve.
Hell also has fish and cucumbers and melons and leeks and onions and garlic and gravy.
Things are so much better there.

And really, why not exchange trying to follow a God who won't follow us for the security and predictability of attentive self-centeredness which are the signature perks of hell?
Apparently we can't avoid the flames either way; *everyone will be salted with fire*, says Jesus, who also said *take up your cross and follow me*, and really, who wants any part of that?
Who wants to suffer and strive for an uncertain reward; who wants to work for a God who shares Spirit and power and grace so indiscriminately?
Who wants to be a part of an operation where we are called to be salt instead of entree, side seasoning instead of main dish?
Nobody goes to a restaurant and orders the salt; it just sits there, free of charge, waiting to be poured out, a servant at the ready to enhance, to preserve, to season, to improve, but not to be appreciated or even noticed...at least until it is missing.

We are all of us smaller and less appreciated and more overlooked than we had hoped for; we are all of us missing something someone else has and looking to stop others and promote ourselves.
In a world that celebrates fish and cucumbers and melons, Jesus instructs us to be at peace with each other and with ourselves as nothing more than a dash of salt.
This also is good news, because while we are not the entree, we are critically important.
The world thirsts for and needs that unusual, flavorful pinch of peace that we provide.
And any meal missing just the right seasoning is not nearly as special.
Just ask my brother.