

Dear friends in Christ



St. Francis Episcopal Mission Outreach

Rev. Dr. John C. Forney
Pentecost 10, August 1, 2021
Proper 13

“What’s This Stuff?”

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; Psalm 78:23-29;
Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35

I remember as a child that every now and then Mom would try out a new concoction on the family for dinner – yeah, you can see where this is going right now. Mystery dinner, you might call it.

The only good thing was that it WASN'T liver and onions, tomato aspic, parsnips or rutabaga or any of that other yucky stuff she sometimes served up. With enough water you could usually choke down most anything. Or slip it to Skippy, our faithful dog patiently waiting for any handout we boys might offer. Skippy would eat anything.

But ask, with turned up nose in disgust and a sneer, “Mom, what’s this stuff?” and that could get you sent off to your room with no dinner.

That's exactly the plaint of God's people out in the desert wilderness with Moses. "What's this?" as they gathered up this white frothy stuff on that first morning after it rained down on upon their encampment. Manna, what's this? -- literally -- that's the translation from the Hebrew -- "what is it?" God, what's this stuff? At least the Hebrews didn't get sent off to bed on empty stomachs. They got an additional helping each morning with the dawning sunrise.

And we? We look at our daily fare, what's served up on the morning news: societal breakdown with rising crime rates, homelessness, streets full of potholes and trash. Dead-end jobs going nowhere, resurgent Covid, and a society addicted to drugs, booze, lies and infotainment TV, folks who make gazillions of dollars and pay virtually no taxes -- and we cry out, "God, what's this [stuff]? That is a question often requiring much thought and prayerful discernment.

That's what the workers at a Burger King asked in disgust as they came to work and the place was hotter than hell.

A little while later, motorists passing the Burger King sign read: "We all quit. Sorry for the inconvenience."

The kitchen was over 90 degrees. The operation was severely understaffed. They were being forced to work sixty-hour work weeks. Week after week with no relief.

Yes indeed, what is this [STUFF]? This "stuff" is something one probably wouldn't say in a G-rated sermon. They knew exactly what that [stuff] was.

Workers can only be disrespected and abused for so long.

When it comes to the stuff that rains down, one needs discernment -- a spiritual gift. And the gift for those hamburger flippers that day was the gift of worker solidarity. Heavenly stuff!

Often the [stuff] is not what first appearances would indicate. There's more than what the eye sees. And sometimes it's exactly what it smells like -- [STUFF]. But this stuff began to also smell of "possibility."

All true gifts of God are opportunities and those actions which enhance and build up. Yeah, manna might have tasted like wallpaper paste or something

worse, but it sustained. It got the people through the desert. Just like the actions at a Burger King got those workers through the abuse of an uncaring and toxic workplace. They made lemonade out of the lemons they were handed. Their labor action was also a gift to others on their way to work that morning: **If you're being treated with neglect or contempt, you have choices.**

With the labor market being as tight as it is now, even the lowest paid workers have choices. Stand up for yourselves. Solidarity was the heavenly nourishment raining down that morning, not sausage and egg sandwiches or hash browns. The Spirit put it into the heads of these employees that they are somebody, and they took it from there. That's called agency.

The Gospel of the Jesus Movement is an unerring proclamation of life. In John's gospel, Jesus, all he is and all he does, is for the purpose of the thriving of creation. It's a vision and choice for Life Abundant.

Like many of you, Jai and I would end up evenings this week watching clips of the Olympics that we had recorded. I mean, who's going to get up at three o'clock in the morning to watch this stuff? Unless you're family of a contestant.

Like many, I had had my hopes pinned on an accomplished young African-American gymnast, Simone Biles. This young woman seems to have repealed the law of gravity. She soared like a lark: twisting, turning in space. And then, she'd stick the landing perfectly. This is what I and millions of others waited with bated breath to see.

That's not what we got.

The disappointment was that in event after event Simone Biles was off her game. From the look on her face after one and another poor performance, it was obvious that more than met the eye was going on in her mind. She was struggling with some inner demon.

And then she withdrew from competition. She knew that mental health is the foundation of all accomplishment.

Some of the press and commentariat were brutal. “She choaked.” “She’s a quitter.” “Un-American.” The same fickle crowd that turned from Palm Sunday adulation to shouts of, “Crucify, crucify.”

In the same moment something beautiful was dropped down on the ethic of “win at all costs” – a moment of humility and humanity. Stuff that truly nourishes. A moment of mental health goodness!

Robert O’Connell in his piece in the Atlantic writes: “In walking away from an Olympic event, the world’s best gymnast rejected the false dichotomy between personal well-being and professional excellence.”¹

Simone’s word to her teammates -- “I love you guys, but you’re gonna be just fine.”

And they were. A young Hmong woman, Sunisa Lee – goes by Suni -- on the American team stepped up. She became the first ever of her people to reach such rarified competition. Her floor routine would propel her on to win gold for all around excellence as a gymnast. The best of the best.

She is the “stuff” that rained down on the world stage – excellence, perseverance, beauty. An inspiration.

I told Jai, “Clear the furniture aside. I’m going to start practicing. It’s never too late. Though you might want to dial 911 first.”

Suni’s feat is ever more impressive if one knows something of the journey of these refugees to America’s shores at the close of the so-called “secret war” in Southeast Asia. This Laotian minority, a northern hill tribe, had assisted the Americans during that savage conflict. As that conflict closed out in Laos, they were all extracted with their families. Otherwise, they would have been left to slaughter as our army withdrew from Laos.

Virtually all settled in St. Paul, Minnesota, and are now productive third and fourth generation citizens of that state. In the thousands. An industrious, tight-knit extended family – they have made their way in the fashion of all immigrants. Doctors, lawyers, scholars, construction tradesmen and women, teachers,

¹ Robert O’Connell, “What Simone Biles Understands About Greatness,” Atlantic, July 28, 2021.

business professionals, restaurateurs – and one stellar gymnast, Suni Lee, who claimed top honors and brought home the gold.

And Simone Biles brought home the Gold in character.

To the nay-sayers and armchair critics who've never struggled with mental illness, I say, "Go suck an egg."

The "stuff" that rained down of the American parade was "defeat." But was it? Or was it something else? It was the glorious performance of a young athlete who had overcome family tragedy to excel.

This week, as our environment continues to show the signs of our assault or our profligate excess, we received news on the amount of plastic we have put into the environment. We are at a plastic tipping point.

We read of huge gyres, hundreds of miles wide circulating in the Pacific Ocean. I understand how you might have missed that. It was most likely buried on page 12 in the first section of the paper.

You may be thinking plastic bags and chunks of Styrofoam packing materials, straws and coffee cups. And, sure -- that's part of it.

But all that breaks down into particles much smaller, microscopic in fact. And as such, it enters our food chain. Fish, if they were sentient beings with the gift of language, would surely be asking as they swim through this soup, "What is this [stuff]? Though, since this is their "home," they might not have used the family rated word, STUFF.

This update on the effects of plastic in our environment from the University of Sweden:

"[The] weathering of large plastic items will inevitably result in the generation of large numbers of micro- and nanoplastic particles as well as leaching of chemicals that were intentionally added to the plastic and other chemicals that break off the plastic polymer backbone. So, plastic in the environment is a constantly moving target of increasing complexity and mobility. Where it

accumulates and what effects it may cause are challenging or maybe even impossible to predict."²

The denizens of our seas didn't cause this. They don't have agency. BUT WE DO.

We are the ones who MUST be raising the issue for them. What is this [stuff]? It's now part of the molecular fabric of their flesh and bones. Consider that when you order your next fish fillet, your next bowl of clam chowder. These creatures can't speak. We must. This stuff must now be turned into ACTION.

As we're moved to begin cleaning it all up, we become Bread of Life. As we push large corporations to make materials that harmlessly degrade; as we push for substitutes, we become Bread of Life.

As we move to elect leaders sensitive to our environment, we are the political Bread of Life – of the very same substance of that Bread of Life, broken and shared in an upper room in Palestine.

We have agency. These sea critters don't – at least in the same way.

Agency, the choice to choose for the better -- that is a gift God rains down upon all of us each morning, fresh as the dew and the rising sun. Mana from heaven, sometimes disguised, but always given as opportunity to thrive, to hold on to one another, to boost each other up.

Mana from heaven, fresh each morning – God's true Wonder Bread. Amen.

² Matthew MacLeod, Hans Peter H. Arp, Mine B. Tekman, Annika Jahnke. "The global threat from plastic pollution". *Science*, 2021; 373