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Proper 20 (A) ~ 20 September 2026
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda
Exodus 16:2-15
Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45
Matthew 20:1-16

Living a Sacramental Life

I imagine this has happened to you...

You come across an article online that looks particularly timely and interesting, so you click the link. And then, once you're about a paragraph or so in, just as you are hooked and want to know the rest of the story, suddenly you hit a roadblock: the dreaded paywall. You cannot go any further without subscribing. Maybe it's a "free one-week trial" (which still demands a credit card to continue), or maybe it's a year-long commitment (which in my case turns into a lifetime relationship, because I forget to unsubscribe), but either way you are blocked from moving ahead until and unless you are willing to pay.

It's like when my family and I were last in London a couple of summers ago: We had taken the redeye, and after checking into our hotel we decided to go for a walk in Regent's Park to try to stay awake and fight off jet lag. I'd been drinking a lot of coffee, and after a while I really needed the loo. You see where I'm going with this: I was so relieved to find a public restroom, dashed in, and ran right into a turn stile blocking the door.

That will be 20p to enter, please.

We hadn't even been to the ATM yet, and we certainly didn't have any coins. I squirmed with desperation. I was just trying to figure out whether I could climb over the turnstile at least somewhat gracefully (and without having an accident...) when I remembered that this is the 21st century. Lo and behold, it took Apple Pay. All was well. Crisis averted.

But still! It was frustrating.

The point is that we occupy a world in which everywhere we turn, it seems, there is a roadblock or paywall or turn stile.

It's difficult to get very far without something being expected or demanded of us – whether it's a monetary payment, a survey, or the time it takes to watch an ad before proceeding on YouTube.

Time after time, we bump into obstacles. Some small and mildly annoying, some monumental and overwhelming. Impossible to surmount.

And it's easy to bumble along not really paying attention, not expecting more, taking it as a given that this is just the way things are.

You know, “Life is hard and then you die.” That sort of thing.

Pay your dues.

Do your time.

Keep your head down and work hard.

And if you're lucky, if you're successful, then one day maybe you will have the means to avoid some of those roadblocks and paywalls and turn stiles.

It's the Express Lane for you here on in, Baby!

That's how the world works, isn't it?

We earn what we have and we pay – sometimes dearly – for what we need, or want.

You and I can do that. It's the benefit of privilege.

But there is a cost, too, isn't there?

And I don't mean the price we pay to read an article or use the restroom.

I mean the expense of living life believing that what we see is really all there is.

I mean the fiction that the way of *our* world – with all of its mild irritations and very real concerns and struggles – is the sum total of reality.

I mean the myth that if we're just clever enough, or hardworking enough, or wealthy enough, then we will have "arrived."

That is such a hollow, impoverished understanding why we are here.

But for many of us, it is the guiding principle that defines every waking hour.

Just trudge along on the treadmill, figuring out a way to tackle each obstacle or hurdle as it comes.

That doesn't so much sound like the Abundant Life, does it?

Yet that's what so many of us have committed ourselves to, whether we realize it or not.

The great writer Annie Dillard, who died this past Tuesday and whom we remember in our prayers today, put it this way:

*How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.
What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing.*¹

Gulp.

Sobering, isn't it?

By that measure, my life consists of answering email and attending meetings.

¹ Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life: The Classic Essay Collection on the Creative Process*

There has to be *more*.

And the great Good News, my friends, is that there is.

But we have to pay attention. We have to learn how to perceive the holy, the divine, the sacred, all around us and within us and within one another.

We have to have eyes to see.

This morning we've heard the story of the People of Israel, wandering in the wilderness after escaping from Egypt.

They are exhausted.

They are hungry.

They are losing hope of ever making their way to "The Promised Land."

And, being people, they begin to complain.

Why did you bring us out here to die? they ask Moses. Surely life was better back there, where we were enslaved.

That's human nature, in a nutshell. You and I do that all the time. We can almost hear God sighing, can't we?

And so, the story goes, God tells the people, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you..."

I am going to feed you. I am going to take care of you. I am going to provide.

But more than that, God shows them that they have been trudging through sacred ground this whole time. They are surrounded by holiness. Every step of the way.

God reminds them that what they see, what they do, what they experience is *not* all there is.

The manna isn't really the point; it is simply an outward and visible sign of God's Amazing Grace, God's abundant love, poured down on them like rain, unbidden and undeserved.

In the language of the Church, the manna is *sacramental*: It is a signpost pointing the people to God.

And notice how they respond: *What is it?* they ask.

They have no frame of reference for this lifesaving holy mystery, for that which they cannot understand.

We might imagine the Israelites just standing there, aghast, confused, perplexed.

How can this be?

How is it that this is possible?

They have been so caught up in their own struggles and concerns that they might have missed this moment altogether.

Fortunately, God is not particularly subtle and manages to get their attention. Hunger and exhaustion help.

But spoiler alert: They will forget again, and soon. You can read all about it for yourself!

That seems to be the human condition, doesn't it? We forget that we walk with God. That we stand on Holy Ground.

This is why, when we come to Christ's Table each week to make Communion together, we pray the prayer of *anamnesis* – the prayer of remembering. As the word implies, it is the opposite of amnesia. We are reminded who we are and Whose we are. We are invited to taste and see God's abundant grace, the holy manna, all around us.

In other words, we are invited to live a sacramental life. Or, to quote the late singer John Denver, we are called to “seek grace in every step we take.”²

I wonder: What are we missing as we stumble through the world, just trying to navigate one roadblock or pay wall or turn stile after another?

What don’t we see when we move so quickly toward our next goal, our next promotion, our next vacation that we don’t stop to perceive God in our very midst at this very moment?

What don’t we hear when we fill our days with noise and fail to sit in silence, listening for God’s voice?

What is it that God is doing for and with us at this very moment?

Will you pray with me?

Days pass and the years vanish and we walk sightless among miracles. God, fill our eyes with seeing and our minds with knowing. Let there be moments when your Presence, like lightning, illumines the darkness in which we walk. Help us to see, wherever we gaze, that the bush burns, unconsumed. And we, clay touched by God, will reach out for holiness and exclaim in wonder, “How filled with awe is this place and we did not know it.”³

Amen.

² John Denver, “Rocky Mountain High”

³ From the *Mishkan T’filah*, “A Prayer for Shabbat.”

