

## **“Are You Yearning for Fleshpot or Freedom?”**

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Based upon Exodus 16:2-15; Galatians 4:8-11; 5:1

What image comes to your mind when I say the word “fleshpots?” My guess is that if you are like most people, the answer is something you wouldn’t necessarily want to shout out in a worship service with young children present, so please don’t this time. Let’s just say that for most people today, the term “fleshpot” refers to a place of entertainment which encourages indulgence in sensual pleasures, perhaps to a hedonistic degree. So if I stood here and said in church that you should avoid the sinful fleshpots of this world, you wouldn’t be surprised. I’m sure thousands of pastors, particularly in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, have preached such a sermon. But what if I told you that right now, almost all of us here probably have a problem with fleshpots? Well it’s true. We may or may not have any interest in the sensual fleshpots we have just been imagining. But the odds are good that like the ancient Israelites and some of the Galatian Christians we just heard about in our Scripture lessons, we still have fleshpot issues of another kind, issues which are not just hurting us, they are also keeping us and others from experiencing the fullness of God’s liberating grace.

In the Bible, the only reference to fleshpots is in today’s text from *Exodus*. In this context, the word fleshpot is not racy at all; it is painfully literal. A fleshpot was a pot or caldron of flesh-meat. When the Hebrew slaves lived in Egypt, they were fed in part by means of pots of meat or stew shared by multiple families (along with bread and vegetables). We don’t know whether the Pharaoh of that time fed the people well; that seems unlikely given how he treated the Hebrew slaves the rest of the time. But however much meat he fed them, it was more than the newly minted “children of Israel” had when they were wandering in the Sinai wilderness with God. So today’s text says that after they were safely on the other side of the Red Sea, free from the threats of Egypt, the Israelites started grumbling and murmuring with hunger when their food started running out. “Why did you bring us out here to die?” they demanded of Moses. “We could be sitting around the fleshpots of Egypt.”

It is completely understandable that the Israelites fantasized about rich stew as they trudged through the arid desert with empty bellies. When people are forced to limit their calorie intake drastically while experiencing extreme conditions, they often cannot help but think of food. The Olympic runner and World War II hero Louis Zamperini did, along with his crewmen, when three of them were shipwrecked at sea after their plane was shot down. As Laura Hillenbrand records in her great book about Zamperini called *Unbroken*: “Every conversation meandered back to food. Louis had often boasted to Phil about his mother’s cooking, and at some point, Phil asked Louis to describe how she made a meal. Louie began describing a dish, and all three men found it satisfying, so Louis kept going, telling them about each dish in the greatest possible detail.... So began a thrice-daily ritual on the raft, with pumpkin pie and spaghetti being the favorite subjects.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hillenbrand, Laura, *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption* (New York: Random House, 2010), 146.

There is a critical difference between Zamperini's dreams of his mother's home cooking, and the Israelites' dream of the fleshpots of Egypt, however. When Zamperini dreamed of spaghetti, he was eating it in a place of safety and love; when the Israelites dreamed of fleshpots, they were eating in a place that was a living nightmare for them because of Pharaoh's oppression. Egypt was the place where they were crushed by inhuman and impossible brick-making quotas at the same time they were denied the supplies to make the bricks. Egypt was the place where Pharaoh's men had been killing their newborn children. Egypt wasn't spaghetti and pumpkin pie; it was slavery and suffering.

Now to God's credit, when the people said they were ready to run back to the misery of slavery just for a burger, God did not rage at the ungrateful, just-liberated Israelites for their unbelievably selective memories and warped priorities. God heard their murmuring and responded by providing them with manna and quail in the desert. It was food that would not just feed their bodies, it would also feed their souls by teaching them that God would provide for all their needs. But the fact that the Israelites had been willing to throw away their new found freedom the minute they began to feel uncomfortable and peckish transformed the term "fleshpots," at least in scholarly circles, into a metaphor for all the things, ideas, and practices from our old lives which give us so much comfort that we would rather cling to them and remain endangered and enslaved, than embrace the new beginnings and alternatives God offers us without them. As Anna Carter Florence put it, "fleshpots" are "the things we are attached to which we must leave behind if we are ever to get to the Promised Land."<sup>2</sup>

People who struggle with addiction know all too well how powerful the yearning for fleshpots can be. It can make a person who had already lost everything crave just one more drink or hit. It can make a person who has recently gained a life-changing second chance, blow it. I read a medical report this week about a study which was done on people who were given liver transplants after alcoholic liver disease ruined the livers they had. Transplant opportunities being as limited as they are, the fact that the people in the study were given new livers after destroying their old ones was nothing short of miraculous. So to protect them, the doctors told all the transplant recipients that they should never drink again. Yet within six months of the procedure, almost 50% of the participants who survived were drinking again to varying degrees.<sup>3</sup> I'm sure there are similar studies of people gaining weight after gastric bypass surgery or smoking after surviving cancer scares. Addiction turns substances into fleshpots which make bodies yearn and memories fail.

But even people who do not have physiological addictions can cling to the fleshpots of the past in destructive ways. I knew a woman once who stayed in an abusive relationship for years because she was so attached to her house. I know multiple people who have stayed in jobs which

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<sup>2</sup> As quoted in Scanion, Leslie, "*Witness/Testimony theme introduced at opening Covenant Network Session*," pres-outlook.org, Nov. 26, 2007, retrieved 9-18-17 from <http://pres-outlook.org/2007/11/witnesstestimony-theme-introduced-at-opening-Covenant-Network>

<sup>3</sup> Tang, H., Boulton, R., Gunson, B., Hubscher, S., Neuberger, J., "*Patterns of alcohol consumption after liver transplantation*" BMJ JOURNALS, Vol. 43, Issue 1, retrieved 9-20-17 from <http://gut.bmj.com/content/43/1/140>

are nothing short of toxic because, notwithstanding the fact that the abuse is causing life-threatening stress, the security of having a job, any job, is so comforting they won't risk temporary insecurity to find something better. Fleshpots are all about the comfort and security of the familiar. Whenever we are given the choice between a new way of looking at the world or living, which requires change or stepping into the unknown, and the old way, the power of the familiar seems to grow exponentially, and can stop us in our tracks or even send us back in the wrong direction.

This is what was happening in the churches in Galatia, as we heard in our New Testament text today. On his second missionary journey, the apostle Paul had set up some house churches made up of mostly Gentile Christians in the region of what is now central and northern Turkey. But after he moved onto other territories, other Christian ministries, most likely Jewish Christians, came by and convinced the new Gentile converts that if they really wanted to be faithful Christians, they first had to be faithful Jews. They had to be circumcised and observe all the Jewish holidays and basically keep all of the Law before they could hope to follow Christ faithfully. Although Paul was a faithful Jew, he believed passionately that this was wrong. The Gospel of Jesus Christ was a Gospel for all people, he believed, and a Gospel which embraced people as they were. He was so outraged that anyone would tell the new Gentile Christians he had converted that they had to be circumcised, that he did something shocking in his letter addressing the crisis: he equated observing the Law with idolatry. "Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods," he wrote. "Now, however, that you have come to know God... how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits? How can you want to be enslaved to them again? You are observing special days, months, and seasons. I'm afraid my work for you has been wasted."

Paul, who had followed the Law his whole life, believed that God in Christ was doing a new thing. So even though the Law was good, clinging to it when Christ had set them free was not. It was tantamount to idolatry because it was seeking salvation from something other than God, demanding fleshpots instead of feasting on manna and quail. We are all at risk of doing this in our own lives, making something about our relationships, our jobs, our understanding of ourselves or the world so important to us that we effectively turn it into an idol. But never more are we at risk of doing this than in the Church. In every Church you will find people yearning for or actively clinging to the fleshpots of the way things used to be, whether the pots are filled with practices, doctrines, or biblical interpretations. We get so attached to hymnals, worship styles, programs, policies, and more, that we forget that it is the job of the Holy Spirit to teach us constantly, and lead us into newness. We forget that we are called to be reformed and ever reforming our understandings of God, the Gospel, and ourselves. So when someone—a church leader, a pastor, the denomination, a visitor who arrives with different expectations—suggests that meat is the past and manna is the future, there are always people who refuse to recognize either that the manna is food, or a gift from God. There are always people who feel threatened, believing that they need their fleshpots, or their faith and the whole Church will die.

That's why it is critical that we remember what Paul reminded the Galatians, that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a Gospel of liberation. Jesus came to set us free, not just from the consequences of the Sin to which we are enslaved, but also from our mistaken understandings about God and the world. Therefore, embracing the Gospel is always a process of letting go of the old in order to move closer to the Promised Land. It's about embracing the new identity as children of God which Christ has given us, instead of clinging to our old world-given identities because they came with fleshpots that made us comfortable.

How do you know when something that has fed you in the church has become a fleshpot that is holding you or others back? According to liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, the liberating grace of God in Jesus Christ will always move us into greater freedom to love others because the "freedom to which we are called presupposes the going out of oneself, the breaking down of our selfishness and of all the structures that support our selfishness; the foundation of this freedom is openness to others. The fullness of liberation—a free gift from Christ—is communion with God and with other human beings."<sup>4</sup> Paul knew the Jewish Galatians had turned the Law into a fleshpot because they were using it to keep others out rather than bring them into communion with God and others. The true Gospel will never condone selfishness or oppression. It is always communal, always liberating, and always grounded in love.

What are the fleshpots in your life? What gives you so much comfort that even though it keeps you in a state of enslavement or brokenness you can't stop craving it? A relationship? A job? A prized possession? An understanding of yourself? An old dream? God wants to set you free. God wants to lead you into a place of liberty, joy, and love. But as the advertisements for the "Let it Go" app are always saying on T.V., if you want to be free to move you have to "let it go;" you have to recognize your fleshpot for what it truly is, something that is keeping you from reaching the Promised Land. In order to do this, try focusing on something new for 30 days, because that's about how long it takes to make a new habit. Start a new pattern in your relationship. Spend some time each day looking for a different job, trying a new food, or new exercise, or new dream. The Israelites were distracted from their fleshpot dreams by having to spend each day collecting manna in the desert. Try looking for the manna even now God is giving you to fill you and strengthen your journey into something better. You can't stockpile God's manna for tomorrow. You have to look for it each day.

What are the fleshpots in your faith, or the ones you see in the Church? When it comes to religion, it is easy for fleshpots to keep us enslaved because they often start out as beliefs or practices which once fed the community. But if you'll forgive me mixing my meat metaphors, the danger from spiritual fleshpots is even greater than personal ones because fleshpots can easily become "sacred cows," idols which replace the Gospel rather than serve it. That's why we must always practice openness to the Spirit, and keep in mind, as Bill Easum said, in his book Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers,<sup>5</sup> that God is in charge, not us. God does not want us to worship

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<sup>4</sup> Gutierrez, Gustavo, A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation, Rev. Ed., (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), 24.

<sup>5</sup> Easum, William M., Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers: Ministry Anytime Anywhere by Anyone (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

anyone or thing other than Christ. God does not want us to put control or regulation before love. The Gospel of Christ is one which liberates and frees us for greater love of God and the other. Therefore if our beliefs enslave us or others, they are not consistent with the Gospel of Christ, and God will call us to leave them behind.

“For freedom Christ has set us free,” Paul told the Galatian Christians. “Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” (Gal. 5:1). We all yearn for fleshpots at some point in our lives, but they cannot compare to the freedom we are given in Christ. Don’t let the love of comfort keep you enslaved or enslaving others. God has something far better in store for all of us. Yearn for the Promised Land, let go, and Christ will show us the way. Amen.