As I was contemplating this morning’s texts, I was reminded of the words of one of my favorite theologians, Mick Jagger, “You can’t always get what you want; ... but sometimes, if you really try, you get what you need.” This theme, which is more positively stated in the title of a beloved hymn, Great is thy faithfulness, is at the heart of both our readings from Exodus and Matthew.

Just six weeks after the Passover meal that led to their deliverance from slavery in Egypt; just days after God had provided water in the desert, the people of Israel complained again about the leadership of Moses and Aaron. “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.” Biblical scholar, John Holbert points out the “revisionist history” at play here, writing: “This would be hilarious, if it were not so pathetically whiney. This bunch, in fact, never had pots filled with meat and unlimited bread back in Egypt; we are told, to the contrary, that they made brick without straw and scrounged a living in any way they could.”

And yet...pay attention to God’s response. Instead of wiping out this untrusting, ungrateful people, YHWH offers them food. If that doesn’t beat all! God rewards the complainers with bread, instead of the back of his hand. Or how about the story of those day workers who got hired in the last hour of the day and received the same pay as those who worked all day long? Does Jesus really expect us to believe that this is what the kingdom of heaven is like? Where is the reward for hard work; for not complaining. This seems an awful lot like coddling a bunch of losers, doesn’t it? What kind of God is this whom we worship?

It is tempting to see God’s response to the Israelites and to those hired at the end of the day in the parable as teachings that only apply to people who lived long ago. But is our dependence on God any less than theirs? While we benefit from systems of agribusiness that fill our grocery store shelves with endless choices that make us take food for granted, any farmer will tell you that the harvest still depends on miracles of seed, germination, water and good soil that all proceed from God’s good grace. In fact, it is humankind that has created food deserts. God’s intent is to provide a table at which all have enough.

The Rev. Dwight Andrews offers this perspective on our times: “Many of us are bewildered by today’s times. We are terrified by diseases for which there are no cures. We are disappointed and frustrated by the wars and violence in the Middle East, Africa, and even within our own borders. We ask ourselves, ‘When will it end?’ Or even, if it will end. Our own private and collective fears seem to be acted out in increasingly violent and volatile ways. Our public discourse about everything from education to immigration to justice and human rights is diminished and tainted by the vitriol, cynicism, and mean spiritedness that comes from virtually
every direction. In spite of our great abundance in this land of plenty, in this land of promise, our fears and anger—yes, even our lack of faith—causes us to act as if we are in a vast wilderness. And we are in a vast wilderness of despair and desperation.” Andrews concludes, “We are the wilderness people in the Promised Land. I think our wilderness mentality represents the way in which we complain about the lack—not of food—but the lack of acquisitions. We hunger for more things, not the Living Water that enlivens our spirit.”

So let’s go deeper into these texts with an awareness of our need for deliverance. Think with me, if you will, about the lesson from Exodus and what you would do if you were among the Israelites in the wilderness. While you are no longer enslaved in an oppressive system of forced labor in Egypt, one can’t assume that your hearts and minds are free and at peace. Faced with where to find food and water the memory of God’s deliverance at the Red Sea fades quickly, doesn’t it? To survive, you will need to learn to depend on God for everything. Just as an infant learns that the response to her cry will be met by her parents, the people of Israel needed to learn that God can be trusted.

The Lord spoke to Moses and said, “I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.’” Several things stand out here. In the ancient world the average family ate meat only on festive occasions, but God provided quail every night. Yet, the more important lesson of trust is taught by that mysterious bread known as manna.

At first glance it doesn’t look like much. In Hebrew “manna” literally means, “what is it?” Since it is social media Sunday today, I went on line to learn more about manna. Wikipedia associates manna with the deposits of aphids, plant lice, that feed on the tamarisk tree. I’m told that in the desert the crystallized secretion of these insects dries rapidly due to evaporation, becoming a sticky solid that is sweet to the taste and a good source of carbohydrates.

Perhaps this manna had always been there and the people hadn’t noticed it or maybe God caused the aphids to migrate to the trees where the people of Israel were camped. Who knows? The really important detail about manna is that it comes “with strings attached”. This bread from heaven is only good for one day at a time. If you take more than you need, it spoils; teaching daily trust in God and discouraging greed. However, on the day before the Sabbath, one should take enough for two days because God rests on the Sabbath. On that day of the week, the manna will not spoil, but be miraculously preserved so one doesn’t miss the lesson of God’s faithfulness to Israel, but also to all creation.

Lest we deceive ourselves with myths of self-sufficiency, God uses the anxiety of wilderness living to show us that precisely in the circumstances of our lives where we are most vulnerable, God’s companionship never fails. Indeed, in the midst of our most fearful and anxious questioning and complaining, God does not reprimand as we deserve, but provides all that we need.
That phrase “all that we need” is not to be taken lightly. Remember Mick’s lyrics: “You can’t always get what you want, but sometimes if you really try, you can get what you need!” In Jesus’ parable of the vineyard owner who hires workers all day long we see this in spades. In pointed contrast to this world’s rules in which those workers who bear the heat of the day rightfully expect to be rewarded in greater proportion to those who were hired last, the kingdom of heaven is present when everyone has enough. When the first hired grumble that they should be paid more, the landowner replies, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

If I am honest, I often question God’s generosity, believing that those of us who come to church, invest ourselves in caring for others, and playing “by the rules” should be rewarded. However, Jesus’ point is that the kingdom of heaven has nothing to do with what one deserves, but everything to do with God’s generosity.

What kind of God do we worship? Lutheran bishop, Abraham Allende writes: “When Jesus speak of God’s kingdom, he’s not talking about some geographical faraway place beyond the here and now, but rather, about life lived under the reign of God—a God who is generous to a fault, a God whose generosity offends and baffles us; a God who is inclined to show special generosity to the poor and outcast; a God who makes the so-called ‘respectable’ people to become anxious and nervous.” Grading myself by “kingdom priorities”, I realize how often I fall short of them. Indeed, an honest evaluation reveals that I have more in common with the workers who didn’t show up until the last hour of the day than those hired first.

Nevertheless, our generous God feeds you and me. God invites us all to come to this table that he sets for us. The little piece of bread and sip of wine may appear insignificant, but we are fed by Christ himself whose generosity is beyond our deserving. His body and blood nurture in us the vision of God’s reign where grace abounds and everyone has enough. This holy meal aligns us with God’s will and fortifies us to work for that which we pray...that God’s kingdom may come on earth as it is in heaven so all may receive their daily bread and know to whom we should give thanks.