

FOOD THAT PERISHES IN MAHFOUZ'S *MIRAMAR*

**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
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Stanford Memorial Church
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Today is a communion Sunday at Stanford Memorial Church, which we have twice a month in deference to Jane Stanford's 1902 request that the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper be made available at stated intervals in this church.ⁱ Today's gospel lesson from Johnⁱⁱ has Jesus describing himself as "the bread of life: Whoever comes to me will never be hungry."ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus is telling the crowds that have been pursuing him in the Galilee region of Israel, after he has physically fed five thousand of them at the time of the Passover, as reported earlier in John,^{iv} that they need to distinguish between food that perishes and food that endures.^v There is of course the food that we need for daily sustenance: "Give us this day our daily bread," as we pray in the Lord's prayer.^{vi} But this food perishes, just like the scraps of the barley loaves that fed the five thousand. "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" – that's the food that endures. Or as we put it in the translation of the Lord's prayer we use here in Memorial Church, "Abba in heaven...your reign come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven."

Elsewhere, Jesus describes this Kingdom of God as like a mustard seed that's growing in the world and will at some point come to full fruition.^{vii} Jesus is the harbinger, the seed of divine presence sown here on earth that we can align with and never to be hungry, in the sense of helping to promote a world of peace and justice and freedom – one in which people will do unto others as they would have those others do unto them, one in which neighbors will be loved as oneself, and one in which we'll even be able to love our enemies.^{viii} Jesus gives instructions in his Sermon on the Mount^{ix} on how to live as if the Kingdom of God had already come in all its

glory: turn the other cheek, pray for those who persecute you, judge not lest you be judged, and don't worry about tomorrow. In our communion service today we will speak of bread metaphorically not as that which turns hard and molds and perishes, but instead as a sign of hope -- holding a story of dying and rising, of breaking and sharing, of ongoing nourishment and strengthening. Through us, and in us, the story of hope that consecrated bread represents can be carried forward in the rising of new life and in the growing of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Now this all may be sounding a bit abstract and doctrinal. So I often find it useful to turn to literature to make meaning of scripture that feels hard to penetrate. In relation to the contrast between food that perishes and the bread of life that endures, I'd like to discuss today a novel called *Miramar*^x by the Nobel prize winning Egyptian writer, Naguib Mahfouz, who died in 2006. It takes place in a small hotel or pension in Alexandria that is owned and managed by a Christian woman named Mariana, who takes in, as a maid, a peasant woman named Zohra whose deceased father Mariana used to know.

The book's really all about Zohra and everything that swirls around her. For she's smart, ambitious, independent-minded, strong, and full of character. By contrast, many of the people who come into contact with her are small-minded, lazy, conventional, weak, and suffering from vices of various kinds. Or maybe that's too black and white. Other characters have certain virtues and strengths, but instead of being nourished by the bread of hope that endures, they seem to eat too much of the materialistic bread that perishes, trying to pull Zohra down with them or at least ignoring her best interests. In Christian terms, Zohra could help them grow in the Kingdom of God, but instead they languish in the doldrums of worldly hopelessness and despair.

Mariana at the beginning seems to be Zohra's champion. She gives a decent city job to a farming village woman who's escaping the economic straightjacket of the Egyptian countryside

and the personal demand from her relatives that she marry an old man there who probably needed her as a nurse. Mariana explains that in turn Zohra will help her and perhaps save her from economic ruin, because she's hard-working, talented, and attractive to clients. Sure enough, the small hotel fills up on a long-term basis with working men who have noticed Zohra and appreciate her service. However, an octogenarian former journalist in the hotel, who becomes her defender, begins to see that Mariana is really taking advantage of Zohra's sexuality: She dresses her "in a cotton frock cut to a size that did justice to her charming figure"^{xi} after she'd always been concealed under a ankle-length robe. She insists that Zohra provide massages to near-naked male clientele. And Mariana doesn't defend her by evicting clients who have made inappropriate sexual advances to her.

We next find that Zohra's new-found freedom in Alexandria is threatened by the long arm of patriarchal domination, when her brother-in-law comes from her village to try to take her back and marry her off to the old man who needs a nurse. After Zohra refuses, he exclaims, "You deserve to be killed," and no doubt she would be if she didn't have some protection by being employed in Alexandria. Then an older man who sells newspapers near the Pension Miramar proposes marriage, and when Zohra refuses him, he becomes enraged. We learn, though, that he's said, "All women have one thing in common. They're cuddly little animals without brains or religion, and the only way to keep them from going wild is to leather them every day!"^{xii} Then, a corporate accountant hotel guest whom she genuinely falls in love with, and who says that he loves her and wants to live with her, ends up saying that he can't marry her. He explains that an alliance with her as someone not his equal would cause problems for him at work, eventually ruin his career, and make it very difficult with his family.^{xiii} He says to himself in the text, "Marriage is an institution, a corporation not unlike the company I work for, with its

own accepted laws and regulations. What's the good of going into it if it doesn't give me a push up the social ladder?"^{xiv}

Next, Zohra experiences barriers as she tries to educate herself. She finds a female teacher with whom she takes lessons for an hour each afternoon, because she's illiterate. She hopes to learn some profession, she says, once she's learned to read and write. The hotel residents make fun of her behind her back and talk about her ambition cynically,^{xv} but she perseveres. That is until she realizes that her teacher is having an affair with the man Zohra loves. Zohra is tough and confronts her male lover, who gets angry with her and hits her savagely, but she hits back more strongly than he could ever have imagined.^{xvi} This is not the only time in the book that Zohra defends herself in a fight and gets the best of her male assailant.

In the end, Mariana fires Zohra, claiming that all the problems occurring in her hotel are due to this beautiful young woman. Of course she's at the center of the violence and intrigue, but only because others are her predators and her detractors as she tries to do her hotel work morally and well and to better herself intellectually and socially. But she's unbowed at the end, confident that she can find other good work in Alexandria, continue her education, and eventually pursue a profession.

Literary critics^{xvii} have claimed that symbolically Mahfouz has made Zohra stand for the redeemed Egypt of the future, beyond all of its current economic corruption, class warfare, ethnic and religious conflict, and lack of unified vision. Zohra is eagerly pursued by the other characters in the novel, who represent different national factions and classes, in order to advance their own interests. But she stays pure above the fray, or by fighting her way out of the fray.

The redeemed Egypt of the future that Zohra represents may not be fully the Kingdom of God to which Jesus refers, but we can see dramatically the interplay in this novel between the

food that perishes and the food that endures. Examples of what will perish are single-minded pursuit of profit to the exclusion of fundamental human values, lust as a substitute for love, and patriarchal domination that denies personal freedom. Examples of what will endure are deep wisdom, true love (which is based on equality and mutuality), basic freedom, justice in both the personal and social realms, and courage as a virtue.

In the Old Testament reading for today^{xviii} we find the greatest of the Israelite kings, David, eating food that perishes as he allows lust to triumph in his pursuit of another man's wife, Bathsheeba, and fundamental injustice to prevail as he sends her husband, Uriah, to the front lines to be killed so that he, David, can then marry Bathsheeba. Courage is demonstrated by the prophet Nathan, who tells him a story of a rich man oppressing a poor man that enrages King David until Nathan tells him, "You are the man!" Luckily for both, David then confesses, "I have sinned against the Lord." But David never fully recovers, as Nathan quotes God as foretelling that trouble will now arise within David's house and that the sword will never depart from him.

So even the greatest among us sometimes work for the food that perishes rather than for the food that endures. But Jesus is the way to the other side – to the kingdom of God in which we learn always to do unto others as we'd have them do unto us, to promote genuine justice, and to have the courage of our convictions and act on them, regardless of the consequences. With joy may we then claim the growing light, which from the old unfolds the new.^{xix}

BENEDICTION

We receive fragments of holiness, glimpses of eternity, brief moments of insight.
Let us gather them up for the precious gifts that they are,
And, renewed by their grace, move boldly into the unknown. (Sara Moores Campbell)

NOTES

ⁱ Jane Stanford, "Address of October 3, 1902," *The Founding Grant of Stanford University*, published by the University in 1987, pp. 21-22.

ⁱⁱ John 6:24-35.

ⁱⁱⁱ John 6:35.

^{iv} John 6:1-14.

^v John 6:24-35.

^{vi} Matthew 6:9-13.

^{vii} Luke 13:18-19.

^{viii} See Scotty McLennan, *Jesus Was a Liberal: Reclaiming Christianity for All* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 193-195.

^{ix} Matthew 5:1 – 7:29.

^x Naguib Mahfouz, *Miramar* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993).

^{xi} *Ibid.*, p.24.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, p. 44.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, p. 152.

^{xiv} *Ibid.*, p. 154.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, pp. 165-166.

^{xvii} See, for example, John Fowles and Trevor Le Gassick in their introduction and postface to the Three Continents Press version of the book (Colorado Springs, 1994).

^{xviii} 2 Samuel 11:26 – 12:13a.

^{xix} Samuel Longfellow, "With Joy We Claim the Growing Light"