

God's Generosity and Our Complaining

3- Strength for the Journey

Exodus 16:1-16

Psalms 105:1-6, 37-45

Philippians 1:21-30

Matthew 20:1-16

September 18, 2011

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T. S. Eliot said, "Except for the point, the still point, there would be no dance, and there is only the dance." That is why we come to church, to see the bigger picture, to participate in the dance, to recognize that we live out of the still point in the midst of God's grace. We come to church to expand our perspective and express our thanks. The still point at the center is God's incredible generosity. He shows us how to be generous as well. We are capable of living up better and higher and stronger, more fully, more generously, more thankfully, in response to all God has done for us. "Bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more."

Our lessons today carry this theme of how generous God is. Exodus records how the Israelites, only two months out of Egypt, suddenly have delusions about how grand and glorious their lives as Egyptian slaves under Pharaoh had been. Oh that we had never left the fleshpots of Egypt! It was just so wonderful back there making all those bricks out of mud.

Paul writes the Philippians from his prison cell about the privilege of not only believing in Christ but suffering for him knowing that "For me, living is Christ and dying is gain." Christ living in us is the foundational reality of our lives, the still point out of which the dance emerges.

And if the message of God's generosity does not sink through in either of these two approaches, Jesus brings the cookies down to the bottom shelf, where absolutely anyone can reach them, with his story about the workers in the vineyard, where those who worked only the last hour of the day got the same pay as the workers who had been in the vineyard sweating all day long. They complain, "Unfair!" The master simply tells these complaining 8 hour workers, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" We serve a gracious generous God. God's math is generous. I don't want to ask God to give me what I deserve, and neither do you. I want to ask God to give me what God wants me to have. Thankfully God grades on the curve, and we can only rightly respond with gratitude, not with complaining, not with comparison, not with measuring what the Jones got compared to what we got. Gratitude!

I

The plight of the wandering Israelites is gripping. They have fled from what had been years of desperate hardship in chains under cruel task masters. Modern Egypt is in the midst of a dicey process these days since their revolution experimenting to see if democracy can take hold in this ancient land with its thousands of year's history of autocratic totalitarian rulers, or if the overthrow of one Pharaoh leads to yet another. Those tombs of the dead Pharaohs are glorious

wonders of the world, but their housing for the living on all rungs of society, together with overall development of their society in terms of well-being for the larger population, has never been much. Least of all for Hebrew slaves, whom the Egyptians despised and feared. So Israel was only too happy to follow after God leading them out from that slavery, into the wilderness, on the way to freedom, under the guidance of Moses and Aaron. Yet only two months into this, as they are getting sores on their feet and a little thirsty, hot and tired of scrounging for the next meal, they begin to grumble. It sure was nice back there.

Grumbling is such a universal human phenomenon. It is too hot, it is too cold, so we grumble. We wish we were on the beach instead of the mountains, or on the mountains instead of the beach, and so we grumble. We suffer from the desire for the greener pastures syndrome, if only, and the inability to gratefully receive and grow the seeds of faith, and nurture the gifts of the spirit, we are given for want of what someone elsewhere has. So we grumble. Failure to keep the tenth commandment can destroy us. “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbor’s.”

Tim Keller says it is self-absorption that makes us so miserable. “How am I feeling, how am I doing, how are people treating me, am I failing, am I being treated justly? Self-absorption leaves us static. There’s nothing more disintegrating. Why do we have wars, class struggles? Family breakdown? Why are our relationships constantly exploding? It’s the darkness of self-centeredness.”ⁱ

So the people take their frustration out on their leaders. “The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron.” Pastors understand this. Sometimes churches even grumble. Did you know that?

I serve on a Presbytery committee that oversees the comings and goings of pastors and churches, and sometimes after those meetings, and hearing what this church and that is mad about, I go away feeling what a miracle it is that the church continues at all. All this complaining, all this negative energy expended, the pot shots taken at the pastor often over people’s frustrations about something in their own lives, is totally non-productive.

I do not mean a pastor may not have a big part to play in a problem. But simply to grouse and complain and stew and fret accomplishes little. And those on the outside looking in say, “Why in the world would I ever consider going into such a toxic setting and become like that?” Paul said a bit later to the Philippians, “Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world.”ⁱⁱ

I will tell you, in all honesty I have never experienced much grumbling at South Highland. Oh there are complaints, there are murmurs that come and need to be dealt with. We have our characters. We have our concerns. But complaining is not our corporate identity. Serving others is. Becoming fully alive with the passion of Christ is. That is what we are about. That is what you so amazingly embody and reflect. New members consistently tell us this warm welcome and genuine sense of caring is what they have experienced here. It is what draws them

to our family of faith and keeps them coming. There is a positive energy and contagious joy that radiates out from you. And for that I thank you.

The whole congregation of the Israelites, however, complained against Moses and Aaron. But their real gripe, is not with Moses and Aaron. It is with God. They really are blaming God for how their lives are working out, but cannot quite bring themselves to face that. So Moses and Aaron become easy targets. The congregation really is questioning whether God is in this or not. Moses helps them name what they are doing, “Your complaining is not against us but against the Lord.”ⁱⁱⁱ

II

At this point God steps into the picture in an amazing and surprising way. God is generous. God is gracious. God provides. The people deserve wrath. God sends grace - water and bread and quail, food and drink, miraculous provision.

“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.’”^{iv}

Have you ever experienced that? Have you ever come to the end of your rope, felt there was no way ahead for you and suddenly, out of nowhere, God provided? God showed you a way where there was no way. I have seen this time and time again. It has been my personal experience and as a Pastor I am privileged to walk alongside many of you in such moments. I have seen attitudes transformed, sometimes as the check unexpectedly arrived in the mail, sometime through hardship or sickness, as persons respond with confident faith rather than complaining fear. “Surely the Lord is in the place, and I did not know it!” And that awareness itself is a gift of grace.

Philip Yancey says this about grace.

“Grace is not about finishing last or first; it is about not counting. We receive grace as a gift from God, not as something we toil to earn, a point Jesus made clear through the employer’s response.”^v

III

The point is God is incredibly generous and shows us how to be as well. We can learn to respond to life with gratitude once we have opened ourselves to receiving this amazing grace and living in its rhythm day-by-day. The dance, that is key here. That is the test here. Will Israel learn to trust God for each day? Grace for the day, not storing away hoarding in a portable storage until for the whole length of the journey? Israel has so much to learn that it will take them forty years of schooling, daily dependence, bread in the morning, quail in the evening. Enough for the day, but only for the day. When they try to stuff a little extra in their pockets it breeds worms and rots. When they live by daily dependence, God gives them what they need when they need it. No more, no less.

Learning this is why we worship. We worship because we need, every seventh day, to gather together and remember who and whose we are. We need to remember the point. “Except for the point, the still point, There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.” The very next verses in Exodus go into the procedures of God instructing the people to prepare twice as much food on the sixth day so they will have food enough for the Sabbath and be able to observe a holy rest. On the sixth day that extra food does not rot, because they are responding as God commanded them. They are in the dance. There – that is where we want to live our lives. “Only live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.”

We are living in exciting and fearful times. Our city, state, national and global problems are immense and demand creative ideas and disciplined leadership, and a willingness of people to live differently. But what we need most is not change in City Hall or Montgomery or Washington so much as it is change in ourselves. As Walter Brueggeman put it,

“The turn of health in the city awaits a different kind of resolve that will never be packaged as a technical fix in a party platform or a governmental policy, urgent as those are. What is required is a new gift of God’s grace that is promised, and a fresh embrace of covenantal fidelity that is large and powerful, and sweeps through policy, budget, and institutions.”^{vi}

We must change from grumbling to gratitude. I remember dear Georgene Gainey’s amazing spirit of gratitude. Blunt, to the point, authentic, genuine. Faced with many physical limitations she kept going, she lived each day to the full. The play, she knew, must go on. She lived the moment. She stayed engaged. And God’s serenity flowed through her, day by day.

In the Lowcountry of South Carolina they have a term among the native Gullah people for early morning. They call it “dayclean.” As in, Child, you’ve got to go to bed because dayclean’s a coming.” Every new day is a clean blank slate, a new beginning, a fresh start. What will you do with it? How will you fill it?

If we are not focused on the past, or worried about the future, we will see the day for the miraculous generous gift that it is – in the face of a child becoming aware of the bird sitting outside her window at the breakfast table, in the gift of work to do, even if it is not the joy of our dreams, or in friends who share our joys and burdens with us.

Each day we can receive with gratitude our daily food and drink from a generous God our heavenly Father and say thank you with a grateful heart. “Praise God from whom all blessings flow.” I will never forget the exuberance with which the Presbyterians of Mozambique do that. As they present their offerings in worship in their thatched roof church each Sunday the elders come down their dirt swept aisle, singing and dancing. Raising and waving their offerings of bananas and mangos and chickens and coins to God. Gratitude!

Jesus said, “I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?... So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”^{vii}

Day-by-day trust in God, that is what Israel of old and the Church of today are called to do and by what God's free grace, we are enabled to.

Will you open your heart and soul that God may feed you, and fed, nourished, sustained, ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, will you feed another?

“Come Thou Fount of every blessing.
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace;
Streams of mercy, never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet,
Sung by flaming tongues above;
Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it,
Mount of God's unchanging love!”^{viii}

ⁱ Timothy Keller, King's Cross, p.17.

ⁱⁱ Phil. 2:14-15.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ex. 16:8

^{iv} Ex. 16:11-12.

^v Philip Yancey, What's So Amazing About Grace, p.61.

^{vi} Walter Brueggeman, The Threat of Life, “Afterward... After George.. After Bill... Newness” p. 52

^{vii} Matt. 6:25, 34.

^{viii} The Presbyterian Hymnal, “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing”, p.356,