

“Grumbling in the Face of Grace”
September 20, 2020 – 16th Sunday after Pentecost
Hamilton Presbyterian Church

The Prayer for Understanding:

The Witness of the Scripture:

Old Testament: Exodus 16:1-8, 13-15

The Epistle: Philippians 1:27-30

The Sermon:

We have a strange relationship with the blessings in our lives. Some persons are never satisfied with what they have. For them, it is never enough.

There is this problem we have of being satisfied. Continually, we want more. If there is too much rain, we complain. If there isn't enough rain, we complain. And if we don't get what we want or an inconvenient situation strikes or difficult or even devastation arises, we believe God doesn't care about us: “Why me,” or “Life isn't fair,” or “Where is God when I need God?” or “Why have I been abandoned?”

I think the virus has exposed this gene of dissatisfaction and low tolerance in us. There are people who will not wear masks or follow social guidance, or look out for their neighbor, because they are tired of it or it's not convenient or their personal decisions has rank preference over others. Their default belief? It is all about me. College kids who say we need to party.

II.

Our Old Testament passage lays this out. It is about the Israelites as they flee Egypt and escape their life of slavery.

The author of Exodus dates it: “On the fifteenth day of the second month.” That's only 45 days into their wilderness wandering and already the whole thing is wearing thin.

They who had been saved from Egypt, made it through the Red Sea, and look to a land promised by the grace of God... But now, after 45 days, the thrill is gone; it has become a major pain. They are whiners now, complainers, a people focused on “What am I getting out of this?”

Let's check this out in:

Exodus 16:1-8, 13-15

III.

Grumbling in the face of grace.¹ How often is this our human response to God's generosity? The Israelites are grumbling how the old days were better:

“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.”

(The fleshpots, by the way, in Hebrew means “cauldrons of savory stew.”)

It's as though they are saying, “Moses, you bamboozled us away from the easy life.”

IV.

There is some humor in this Exodus story.

The quail come in the evening. All over the camp there are quail underfoot, everywhere you step there are birds in your path. You have to kick them aside to get anywhere. To make it real, I guess we can say quails and their poop.

But the real amazement comes in the morning with a fine flakiness on the ground. Can you picture groups of 3 or 6 standing around asking each other, “man-hu.” Manna! This literally means in Hebrew, “What is it?” They have no idea what is before them.

This is the dilemma God experiences in Exodus with his wayward children, and not just once, but again and again their complaints and desires become a dominant story.

“You are not looking out for Number One, which, by the way, is ME.”

“Aaron, enough of this! We need a golden calf to worship. This Yahweh is not convenient, too mysterious, and definitely *not* a god we can control.”

V.

So what can we glean from this passage?

First, God does hear us. God hears us whether we think we have a relationship or not. The people complain to Moses and his brother Aaron; amazingly, God hears and responds.

Some people have suggested the point of this passage is that we should not be like them, that as a Christian people there should be no place in our lives for fear and dissatisfaction, somehow this shows a lack of faith; stiff upper lip and all that. Christians soldier on.

But I think the reality of life suggests something quite different: that questions, doubts, fears and confusions are a part of who we are. They are inevitable, expect them to arise.

For sure, smooth and steady has a fantasy appeal for us, but we

- learn the most in dissatisfaction,
- difficulties can bring us into life's most important lessons,
- challenge can lead change (if we let it).

Times like this can be the point of our most intense growth.

What is God's action in the story?

- Is it not mercy and tenderness?
- Is it not love and care?

In our anxieties, if we listen, God is prepared to answer. God has provided in the past and will continue to provide in the future.

VI.

But look out! It also says the way of God's provision may take us by surprise. Remember the Manna? "What is it?" the Israelites asked.

God promised enough food for each day as long as they went out and did the work to gather it for themselves. On the sixth day there would be enough for two days, which meant they didn't have to work on the Sabbath. But they had to do the work.

In the most recent issue of Presbyterian Outlook, editor Jill Duffield wrote

"In a world in which we get bombarded with the message that we should receive more, that we always need more, that we deserve more, that strives to make us perpetually on the hunt for more, we struggle to rejoice in God's grace that is beyond counting and to live out of possibility rather than perpetually see only shortcomings."²

VII.

So here's the story behind the story:

So much of what we value and count and measure does not matter to God. God seeks us out to participate in the work of the kingdom. God enlists whoever says "yes" when asked to go to the field.

When we stop thinking we should deserve more and instead recognize the value of what God provides, then grumbling can give way to gratitude. Then we begin to live in possibility instead of a perverse focus on shortcomings.

Let's finish with a bit from the Philippians passage. Paul writes:

“So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. Learn to love appropriately so that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best”

1. I'm indebted to Jill Duffield, editor of Presbyterian Outlook for this phrase.
2. Presbyterian Outlook, September 18, 2020.