

Behind the Gift to the Giver
Thanksgiving Eve 2011
Exodus 16:2-15
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Complain, murmur, mumble, groan, whine, whimper—no one word covers it all. The picture isn't flattering, this picture that reveals how we sometimes act. When the heat isn't 70, the lunch late, the bread stale, the coworker snippy, the weather gray, and yes, the sermon dry, if it isn't paradise now, we have a tendency to complain. We come from a long line of skilled grumblers.

The moment the people of Israel reach the wilderness, the whole community rises up in complaint. That's what Exodus tells us. They march up to Moses and say: "Why didn't we die in the land of Egypt? At least there we had bread and meat to our hearts' content. As it is now, you've brought us into the wilderness to starve us to death."

The facts, of course, don't quite bear this out. The people have conveniently forgotten that they complained in Egypt too. They complained about Pharaoh's harsh taskmasters. They complained about having to make bricks without straw. They complained about not being free. But now that they *are* free—sad to say—the complaining continues. Isn't that just the way it is? When we're in a complaining mood, it's easy to lose perspective.

Did you notice how God responds to Israel's complaining? You sort of expect God to lash out with a lightning bolt or two, but that's not what happens. They want food, so God gives them food. God rains down food to their hearts' content: manna, food from heaven, the bread of angels. And this is a test, God says, a way for you to remember: Who brought you out of the land of Egypt? Who conquered Pharaoh? Who pushed back the Red Sea? Who fed you yesterday and the day before?

It's so easy to forget, isn't it? We forget to name what we already have. And in the process, we forget that what we have is a gift. The longer the gift is ours, you see, the more it begins to feel like a possession. The longer it's ours, the more it seems to have come from our own hands. The longer it's ours, the more the gift becomes separate from the Giver.

A movie from several years ago, *Shenandoah*, makes this point abundantly clear. The movie is set during the Civil War. Jimmy Stewart plays the widowed father of a

large farm family. He's a self-made man. At the beginning of the film, he prays before each meal, but only because his wife made him promise to do so before she died. It's a fairly testy prayer: "Lord, *we* cleared this land, *we* plowed it, *we* planted it, *we* harvested the crops, and *we* fixed the food. *We* worked till *we* were dog-boned-tired. None of this would be here if it weren't for *us*, but thank you anyway"

Jimmy Stewart has forgotten that life is a gift. Maybe he never knew it. Like Israel in the wilderness, he's about to be put to the test. War breaks out. He loses pretty much everything. His family is ripped apart. Brothers fight against brothers. His daughter dies in childbirth. One of his sons is killed in battle right before his eyes. And the crowning blow: his youngest son, who reminds him so much of his wife, is carried off as a prisoner of war.

Deep into the war, the bruised and battered remnants of the family gather around the table for a meal. Jimmy Stewart starts to pray the old, familiar prayer, "Lord, *we* cleared this land, *we* plowed it, *we* planted it, *we* harvested the crops..." but then he chokes up and he can't go on. Suffering and loss have shattered the illusion of self-sufficiency. Ironically, it is suffering that opens the door a crack to a feeling he has not known before: gratitude.

Toward the end of the story, against all hope, Jimmy Stewart is sitting in a church. Suddenly his youngest son comes home to him. He's on crutches, limping down the aisle. With tears welling up in his eyes, the old farmer stands and joins the congregation in singing, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow..."

Jimmy Stewart was put to the test. As we read earlier from Gerhard Frost, his character went through times of "winnowing and refining, vetoing and delaying, refusing and revising." And little by little, his heart was changed. Little by little, he began to see that all of life is a gift: his body, his children, the seeds, the earth, the rain, the sun. And little by little, he began to acknowledge the Giver behind the gift.

Over the years I've come to believe that thankful people are not born; they are made. Gratitude does not come naturally to us. Spend any amount of time around children and you know what I'm talking about. Parents, can you imagine a 7-year-old coming up to you and saying, "You're just about the best parent a kid could possibly have. I really appreciate all the things you do for me: the clean clothes, the warm house,

the comfy bed, the tasty food, even the broccoli. Why, I'll never ask, beg, plead, cajole, or manipulate you for another thing. I'll be eternally grateful." Parents, what do you think, does this sound plausible? I didn't think so.

Thankful people are not born; they are made. It will take our children lots and lots of promptings to learn to be grateful. And, if we're honest, it will take adults lots and lots of promptings too. It may take 40 years in the wilderness. It may take a civil war. Whatever it takes, we will face plenty of tests along the way.

Please hear me: I'm not suggesting that God deliberately sends trouble our way in order to teach us lessons about gratitude. No, most of the time, trouble just happens. But God does seem to specialize in using the troubles of life to help us remember what's truly important. And perhaps, in those moments of remembering, our self-sufficiency becomes a little less pronounced, and our gratitude becomes a little more evident, and hopefully we become more deeply connected with the Giver behind the gift.

I witnessed a profound expression of gratitude last Sunday afternoon. It was my turn among the pastors at Zumbro to preside at communion for the Dinkas. We do this on the third Sunday of the month. I happened to be joined by one of the 40-day small groups, the one led by Pat Campbell. The group had decided to worship with the Dinkas as their service project. The Dinkas were very gracious. One by one they came up and shook our hands, smiling and welcoming us like we were old friends. They seemed genuinely pleased to have us there.

The leader of the Dinkas, Kamen Makeur, got up to preach. He spoke on the story of the sheep and the goats from Matthew 25. He mentioned how those who feed the hungry, and visit the sick, and welcome the poor are really welcoming Jesus himself. Kamen connected the biblical story with the story of the Dinkas. He told us how the Dinkas faced persecution and war in South Sudan. They became refugees. They fled to Khartoum where they were treated badly. They went to Egypt where they were treated even worse. Expectant mothers would wake up from a c-section and they'd be missing a kidney. The kidney would later be sold on the black market.

Finally, the Dinkas had a chance to come to America, and to Rochester. Kamen shared that Zumbro was the place that truly welcomed them. Zumbro was the place where they felt safe and at peace. Zumbro was the place where they could begin to make

a new life for themselves. Said Kamen: The people at Zumbro were the sheep in this story. God used us to welcome the hungry and the sick and the poor among the Dinkas. And as we welcomed them, we were welcoming Jesus. Kamen concluded: Thank you so much for all you have done. We are grateful.

I don't know what I was expecting last Sunday, but I wasn't expecting that. The outpouring of gratitude was unbelievably touching and humbling. As a way of saying thank you, the Dinkas invited us to stay for a celebration. They began to bring out all sorts of delectable Sudanese dishes. And we feasted together.

As I see it, gratitude is the ability to experience life as a gift. It's a learned behavior. Like it or not, it often comes out of the tests of life. Without gratitude, our lives can easily degenerate into complaining. But with gratitude, hopefully we can come to see the hands of a God who loves us and wants to take care of us.

I have an assignment for you. Sometime before our processional offering, I want you to get out the gratitude card in your bulletin. I would ask you to write down some things for which you are grateful. We'll be bringing these cards to the altar. And then, for the next week or so, I want you to keep a gratitude journal. Put it beside your bed. Before you go to sleep at night, take a minute or two to reflect on the day, and jot down five events for which you are thankful. They could be as simple as seeing the face of someone you love, eating a great taco, completing a challenging assignment at work. As you write down these things, remember that each of them comes to you from the hands of a God who loves you and wants to take care of you.

After all, you know what these gifts are, don't you? They are manna from heaven. A Sudanese meal? Manna from heaven. Seeing the face of someone you love? Manna from heaven. A really great taco? Manna from heaven. Completing a challenging assignment at work? Manna from heaven. Turkey, mashed potatoes, and gravy? Manna from heaven.

Why is it important to acknowledge these gifts? So that little by little we may come to see that we are not self-made people; so that little by little we may come to see that what we have is plenty and there is enough to share; so that little by little we may come to see the Giver behind the gift...and to say thank you. Amen.