

Muddy Glasses

Exodus 16:1-8; Colossians 3:15-17

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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January 26, 2020/ Third Sunday After Epiphany

Today is the second Sunday of our “Faith Questions” sermon series.

Again, here’s a breakdown of how things will go between today and the beginning of Lent.

[slide]

So, today’s topic is complaining and gratitude. Actually, today’s “faith question” wasn’t a question at all. What the little piece of paper in the submission box *actually* said was this:

Spend your time counting your blessings not airing your complaints.

I must confess that puzzled over this one for a while. This wasn’t a question; it was an exhortation. Was it directed to me, personally? Was it a general comment to the church more broadly? How would I turn this into a question?

You’ll see on the screen how I approached this conundrum.

“Spend your time counting your blessings not airing your complaints” morphed into “How do we move from complaining to gratitude?”

The original statement was thus transformed into a question seeking a technical or a pragmatic solution to fit into the format I have chosen for this series.

After all, who would disagree with the statements, “We should be grateful people” or “We should not be complainers?” These are not controversial ideas.

The sermon, so I thought, would have to be a “How do we *do* it?” sermon.

I'm not sure what you think about this.

Perhaps you think, "Great, I could use some practical advice! Never mind all of this high-minded theological language that so many sermons use. I want to hear some concrete steps that I can take to becoming a person less prone to complaining and more grateful."

I get this. I, too, could probably use some practical tools toward this end. You can ask Naomi and Nicholas for confirmation of this, if you doubt me.

But once I had rephrased the original submission into a question and chosen my texts for the sermon, I began to have an uneasy feeling that wouldn't leave me for the early part of the week.

I wasn't quite sure why, until I listened to a podcast and followed it up with an article on Wednesday.

The podcast was a conversation between an American Methodist pastor named Jason Micheli and Episcopal priest, author and theologian Fleming Rutledge.¹

One of the topics of conversation was the anemic state of preaching these days. According to Rutledge, this is because many pastors and many congregants have largely given up on the idea that the words of Scripture are a living word from a living God.

We treat the bible like a resource manual for spiritual wisdom or practical guidance—a how-to manual of sorts.

We don't come to Scripture expecting or even being open to being confronted by a living word; we come looking for (and expecting) technical solutions to technical problems.

The article that I read after the podcast was written by the host of the podcast, Jason Micheli, and he summarized the problem in this way. The problem with preaching today is that many sermons are anthropological, not theological.² They are mostly about us, not about God.

¹ <https://crackersandgrapejuice.com/episode-244-fleming-rutledge-help-my-unbelief/>

² <http://tamedcynic.org/preachers-diagram-your-sentences/>

Now, perhaps you are thinking along these lines right now. Well, of course sermons are about us, at least *partly*. Especially a sermon series about *our* faith questions!

Haven't I been telling you that this is the sermon series where *your* questions set *my* preaching agenda?

But I think that even in a series where our questions are driving the bus, like this one, the questions raised by Rutledge and Micheli remain: Are we accessing Scripture as a resource manual that addresses our agenda or as the living word of a living God?

Or, to put it more succinctly, in all this talk about *your* questions setting *my* agenda, is there one agenda that the preacher can easily forget, namely, God's?

If I'm honest (and I'm a little embarrassed to admit this after nearly twelve years of preaching), this is roughly how I approached things at the outset of this sermon.

I had my topic (complaining vs. gratitude). So, I thought, I'll just go to the bible and find some verses that talk about why it's bad to complain (the story about the grumbling Israelites in Exodus 16), a few more that talk about the importance of being grateful (Paul's inspiring words to the Colossians), wrap it all up in 10-15 minutes (because we have a full service) and—voila!—there's my sermon.

It probably wouldn't have been an awful sermon. But it would have been pretty predictable.

Don't complain. Be grateful. The bible says so. Look at these verses I found in the manual to address the problem. Now, go do better.

Come to think of it, that would actually be a pretty terrible sermon!

So, I did a kind of mid-week course correction.

I tried not to approach these passages as technical solutions to a technical problem or as "what the manual says" to address the topic of complaining and gratitude, but as the living word of a living God addressed to a specific human community at a specific time and place.

And I saw something different.

I didn't see a lesson about the evils of complaining (don't be like those ungrateful Israelites!).

I didn't see a bit of inspiration from the early church about the virtue of gratitude.

I saw a simple invitation to trust.

The story of Israel's grumbling in the desert isn't primarily about complaining or about looking at the past through rose-coloured glasses, or about a failure to count their blessings or call to mind the miraculous deliverance from Egypt that they had only recently experienced.

All of these things are in the story and we can learn from them.

But underneath all of these things is a lack of trust. The Israelites don't believe that the God who rescued them from slavery can be trusted to lead them through the desert to the land that God promised them.

They don't trust that there is hope and goodness or plenty or security in their future. They don't believe that the God who led them with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night will continue to lead and guide them into the unknown.

They have allowed the difficulties of their present moment to overwhelm and embitter them.

And so, God acts in such a way that invites them to trust him once more. He meets their need, and in a miraculous way. But he does so in such a way that they must trust him, day by day, for their provisions.

They are only to gather enough for each day and enough for the Sabbath on the sixth day. They are not to hoard God's gifts (indeed, those who do this, later on, will discover the manna infested with maggots and with a rather unsavoury odour!).

They are not given the option of imagining that they are self-sufficient. Every day, they are reminded of these basic truths.

God has brought you this far.

God is with you now.

God can be trusted for the future.

This, I think, is the living word of the living God to us today, as well.

God has brought you this far.

God is with you now.

God can be trusted for the future.

You may be wondering about the title of this morning's sermon. I got it from a very forgettable article in the *New York Times* this week called, "Go Ahead and Complain. It Might be Good for You."³ How could I *not* click on that link in a week where complaining was on the preaching menu?!

The article predictably addressed a few of the potential mental health benefits of blowing off some steam, about the solidarity with others that complaining in moderation can produce, about how complaining that gets out of hand can lead to "catastrophizing" which isn't good for stress and mental health.

It was, as I say, forgettable.

But it had this great phrase, "muddy glasses" which was used to describe the complainer who, "no matter what's going on... always find something to complain about." Everything they see is coloured by mud, negativity.

I read it and I thought, well there's my sermon title.

This was when I was still planning on telling you that you mustn't complain and that you must be grateful because the bible says so.

³ https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/06/smarter-living/how-to-complain-.html?algo=identity&fallback=false&imp_id=913308949&imp_id=139350822&action=click&module=Smarter%20Living&pgtype=Homepage

But I think the phrase still works, even after my course correction. It points to the reality that as human beings, we have the ability to choose how we will see, at the lenses through which we look at the world.

We can choose to look exclusively through the lens of the difficulties of our present circumstances with all of its “mud.”

Or we can look through the lens of trust in the character and purposes of God.

So, I’m not going to tell you to stop complaining or count your blessings today. I’m not going to give you three practical strategies for becoming a more grateful Christian.

I am going to point you toward the living God of liberation and providential guidance that Exodus shows us.

I am going to point you toward the living Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, that the Apostle Paul never tired of proclaiming. I am going to invite you to let his word dwell richly in your hearts and minds.

I am going to invite you to trust God with your future. To believe that, just like the Israelites in the desert, God is sufficient for the need of each day.

I am going to invite you to trust God again tomorrow, and then the day after that, and then the day after that.

I am going to encourage all of us to daily choose how we will look at the world and, most importantly, who we will see it through.

That’s my sermon today. Trust God.

Whether you’re in the desert or enjoying the milk and honey of Canaan.

God has brought you this far.

God is with you now.

God can be trusted for the future.

Amen.

