

From Grumbling to Gratitude
(Sermon Series: The Stories of Moses)
Exodus 16: 2-15
October 4, 2009
World Communion Sunday
by Dr. Frank Trotter

A visitor who was attending First Church for the first time was very unhappy about the temperature in the Sanctuary when she arrived about fifteen minutes before the service. So she summoned Danny, one of our ushers, and asked that the air conditioning be turned up because it was too hot. A few minutes later, she asked the same usher to turn the thermostat down because it was now too cold. This went on for half an hour. Surprisingly, the usher was very patient and never once got angry. Finally, one of the members who had watched the whole thing asked him why he didn't ask the lady to leave. "Oh, I really don't care or mind," said Danny with a smile. "As you well know, Howard, we don't even have an air conditioner!"

Now I have to confess that to the best of my knowledge this conversation never took place. I'm just having some fun with Howard and Danny. But it might have, it could have – because grumbling is a common trait in contemporary society, and it often shows up in church.

We all know what the word "grumble" means. But I was surprised at the number of synonyms I found for "grumble" in a popular thesaurus: to mutter, to rumble, to croak, to trounce, to berate, to lecture, to bawl out, to reproof, to dress down, to scold, to have words, to take to task, to growl, to call on the carpet, to murmur, to rebuke, to reprimand, to lambast, to chew out, or to chide...

Marlene Dietrich, the famous German-born actress and singer, had an interesting take on grumbling means that probably won't be found in any thesaurus. She said simply that "grumbling is the death of love."¹

It might be said that those of us who are prone to grumbling are convinced that the "glory days" (whoever we define them) are behind us rather than

¹ Marlene Dietrich (1901 – 1992), German-born actress and singer, quoted at <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/marlenedie111812.html>.

ahead of us; that the current leadership is either insufficient or inadequate; that the obstacles facing us are just too many or too great to overcome.

All of these factors are present in today's story from the Book of Exodus as Moses leads the Israelite children into the desert wilderness only a few days after Yahweh had delivered them from the Pharaoh at the Red Sea.

Dr. Walter Brueggemann, perhaps the foremost Old Testament scholar writing today, says that "the crisis of the wilderness is a material crisis with great anxiety over what to eat and what to drink. It predictably becomes a crisis over leadership. The beginning point of the narrative is an assault upon the leadership of Moses and Aaron, who have chosen for Israel trouble (liberation) instead of bondage. The complaint of Israel (which does not mention Yahweh at all) makes a sharp and unfavorable contrast between the wilderness and Egypt. The wilderness is a place of hunger and will inevitably lead to death. By contrast, Egypt is remembered as a place of 'pots of flesh' (i.e., meat) and bread, so that even in bondage there may be material salvation."²

"The contrast, as far as it goes, is no doubt correct; there is no hint that the bonded Hebrews in Egypt lacked bread. What is striking in this assaulting contrast is how present anxiety distorts the memory of the recent past. Egypt is known to be a place of deep abuse and heavy-handed oppression. Here, however, none of the oppression or abuse is mentioned, only meat and bread. The seductive distortion of Israel is that, given anxiety about survival, the immediacy of food overrides any long-term hope for freedom and well-being..."³

When the people of Israel experienced manna for the first time (Exodus 16:31), they discovered that it was "white like coriander seed and tasted like wafers made with honey." The bottom line is that Yahweh, speaking through Moses and Aaron, hopes that through this blessing of manna Israel will know "wilderness is not empty but is inhabited by the powerful presence of God."⁴

² Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. I* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 812. Dr. Brueggemann is Professor of Old Testament at the Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia (United Church of Christ)..

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 813.

“Moses (through Aaron) invites Israel, the congregation to ‘draw near,’ or to gather in worship. When they do, they see ‘the glory’ (v. 10)... Although cast in the language of worship, the coming of God’s glory is at the same time a remarkable and dramatic turn in the larger narrative. ‘Glory’ bespeaks magisterial and wondrous presence, embodying God’s sovereignty. The complaint of v. 3 indicates that Israel still associates ‘glory’ (and the power to give life) with the splendor, wealth, prestige, and extravagance of Egypt. Compared to the glory of Egypt, the wilderness holds little attraction. In drawing near, however, Israel dramatically turns its face away from Egypt and looks again toward the wilderness. It sees there what it always thought to see in Egypt, and what it never expected to see in the wilderness. It is not an empty, deathly place, but the locus of God’s sovereign splendor. The wilderness is more brilliant than Egypt, because Yahweh ‘has gotten glory over Pharaoh’. By God’s rule, the wilderness is completely redefined.”⁵

As great a blessing as the manna is in the middle of the wilderness, there are some conditions. “The people shall harvest just enough bread for the day and gather no surplus, so that everyone has enough and nobody has too little. The provision for the bread becomes a model for the right distribution of food and a paradigm for a covenant community that is trustfully organized around God’s unfailing generosity. The wondrous reality about the distribution of this bread is that their uncompetitive, non-hoarding practice really does work, and it works for all! ... The bread has a way of being where it is needed, with everyone having a sufficiency. Thus the bread becomes a means whereby (a) God’s reliability is to be trusted, and (b) neighbors are to live together in trustful equity.”⁶

That’s a powerful word to hear in a time when the much of the country seems to be arguing about national health care. More of us seem to be concerned about whether there will be enough for us, than concerned about how to share the blessings with those who can’t afford what we can. We’re outraged about the possibility that our Medicare benefits might be trimmed even if those benefits are spread more widely.

What we know if we read a little further in the sixteenth chapter of Exodus is that the Israelite children refuse to obey God’s rules. Even though they are

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 813-814.

told that the manna will not last over night, some of them hoard as much of it as they can and are chagrined with it rots and is filled with maggots by the following morning. Simply put, they have trouble trusting that the LORD God will take care of them. Dr. Brueggemann says that what they learn is that “stored-up, surplus bread is useless. Bread that reflects self-sufficient anxiety and greed will have no food value for Israel, so that the bread of disobedience breeds worms, turns sour, and melts.”⁷

It’s all about attitude, isn’t it? Charles Swindoll wrote a wonderful paragraph about attitude in his book, *Strengthening Your Grip*. He said: “The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude, to me, is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than successes, than what other people think or say or do. It is more important than appearance, giftedness or skill. It will make or break a company... a church ... a home. The remarkable thing is we have a choice every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change our past..., we cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have and that is our attitude... I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I react to it. And so it is with you... We are in charge of our attitudes.”⁸

What’s the status of our attitude here at First Church? Are we more convinced that the glory days are behind of us, or that it’s just possible that God isn’t done with us yet? Are we more likely to be found in the parking lot “Ain’t It Awful?”, or in the sanctuary praying for help to solve the challenges that lie before us? Do we question our leadership, past or present, or do we consider what we might do to fill the gap? Are we closer to an attitude of grumbling, or to an attitude of gratitude?

I found a poem entitled “Manna”⁹ – part of which I would like to share with you:

When least expected,
The manna

⁷ Ibid., 814.

⁸ Charles Swindoll, quoted at http://thinkexist.com/quotation/the_longer_i_live-the_more_i_realize_the_impact/296740.html.

⁹ “Manna,” quoted in *Cross Currents*, Spring 2004, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2096/is_1_54/ai_n6095125/

Comes.
Like a burst of lightning in a moonless desert night
Suddenly
Allowing you to see all at once in white
The deep ravines and gaping canyons,
The chiseled walls of protruding boulders,
The strangely sculptured statues of mesas,
The huge cliffs
Surrounding you...

...When the manna comes,
You smell
The fragrance of incense
Enwrapping and enveloping you,
Drifting down from the mountains of myrrh
And the hills of frankincense.

When the manna comes,
You see
A black raven perched on a leafless bush
Transform

Into a phoenix
Whose peacock-colored feathers dazzle,
Unscathed
By the halo of flames
Blazing around her.

When the manna comes,
You hear
The noise of traffic (honking horns, drivers' curses, coughing buses)
fade away;
Distant symphonies gradually grow louder and clearer
As chariots of ivory and translucent crystal draw near you,
Their wheels turning
Like gears inside a mother-of-pearl music-box,
Creating crescendos you never heard before:
The music of chariots driven by hosts of angels.
Or are these angels just notes of music:
Semibreves, crotchets, quavers
Somehow come alive?

And when the manna falls,
God's fingertips
Descend and gently
Touch you.

May it be said that on our journey, we trust that God is still with us, that God is here even in what seems to be the emptiest and most frightening of times, that God's blessings are manifold and always surprising. May it be said that we belong to "the community [that] continues to ... tell the story, and imagine another bread that is taken and given, blessed and broken"¹⁰ – even the bread of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹⁰ Brueggemann, 816.