

**Behind the Gift to the Giver
Exodus 16:2-15
Thanksgiving 2024
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Complain, murmur, mumble, grumble, whine, whimper—no one word covers it all. The picture isn't flattering, this picture that reveals how we sometimes act. When the temperature isn't 70, the lunch late, the bread stale, a comment 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. Am I right?

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: "Oh, why didn't we just 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—their 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, bread from heaven. "And this is a test," God says, "a way for you to remember: Who brought you out from 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 gets separated from the Giver.

A movie from several years ago, *Shenandoah*, made this point abundantly clear. The movie was set during the Civil War. Jimmy Stewart played the widowed father of a large farm family. His name was Charlie Anderson. He was a self-made man, at least he thought he was.

At the beginning of the film, Charlie prayed before each meal, but only because his wife made him promise to do so before she died. Let's just say, it was a prayer offered up with a bit of an attitude: "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."

Maybe Charlie had forgotten that life is a gift. Or, maybe he never knew it. Like Israel in the wilderness, he was about to be put to the test. War broke out. Charlie lost pretty much everything. His family was ripped apart. Brothers fought against brothers. His daughter died in childbirth. One of his sons was killed in battle right before his eyes. And the crowning blow? His youngest son, who reminded him so much of his wife, was carried off as a prisoner of war.

Deep into the war, the bruised and battered remnants of the family gathered around the table for a meal. Charlie started to pray his old, familiar prayer, "Lord, we cleared this land, we plowed it, we planted it, we harvested the crops..." but then he choked up and couldn't go on. Suffering and loss had shattered the illusion of self-sufficiency. Ironically, it was suffering that opened the door a crack to a feeling he had never really known before: gratitude.

Toward the end of the story, against all hope, this tired and weary farmer was sitting in church one Sunday. Out of the blue, his youngest son came home to him. He was on crutches, limping down the aisle. With tears welling up in Charlie's eyes, and gratitude coming from deep inside, the old farmer stood and joined the congregation in singing, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow; praise him, all creatures here below; praise him above, ye heavenly host; praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."

Charlie Anderson had been put to the test. As we prayed earlier from Gerhard Frost, his character had gone through times of "winnowing and refining, vetoing and delaying, refusing and revising." Many of those times were incredibly hard. But little by little, his heart got 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, the food on the table. And little by little, he began to acknowledge the Giver behind the gift.

As I mentioned in my sermon last Sunday, I have come to believe that thankful people are not born; they are made. Gratitude does not come naturally to us. Spend any time around children and you know what I'm talking about. Can you imagine a 5-year-old coming up to her parents and saying, "You're just about the best parents a kid could possibly have. I really appreciate all the things you do for me: the countless car rides, the clean clothes, the warm house, the comfy bed, the tasty food, even the broccoli you tried to get us to eat. I'll never ask or beg or plead for another thing—ever! I'll be eternally grateful." Parents, does this sound like the kids in your household? Maybe once in a while? I hope so.

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

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

You know what these gifts are, don't you? They are manna from heaven. Completing a hard task you've been working on? Manna from heaven! Holding the tender hand of someone very special to you? Manna from heaven! Filling up a bag of groceries for the food shelf? Manna from heaven! Turkey, dressing, mashed potatoes, gravy and all the fixings? Manna from heaven! Gathering with family around the Thanksgiving table – with positive, encouraging, and loving words shared, despite the things that divide you? Manna from heaven!

Why is it important to acknowledge these gifts? So that little by little we can come to see that we are not self-made people; so that little by little we can

come to see that what we have is enough—sometimes even plenty; so that little by little we can come to see the Giver behind the gift...and when we do, to stop and say thank you.

Gerhard Frost, a former professor at Luther Seminary, once wrote a poem entitled, *Takk for Alt*. It went like this:

She was not quite 97
When she died.
One who waited at her side
Heard her say it:
“*Takk for Alt*”—“Thank you for everything.”
It was her home-going word to God.

Like a good guest
She addressed her Host.
She spoke as one well-taught,
Well-taught by life,
By memory and expectation.

To be gift-conscious is to be wise;
To know whom to thank is grace indeed.
To know the gift and to love the Giver,
To have learned life’s dearest lesson,
Is to be rich toward God.

Takk for Alt. Thank you, God, for everything.