



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 11 – Proper 13 Year B

Contentment

[RCL]: Exodus 16:2-4,9-15; Psalm 78:23-29; Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35

How do we know what is enough?

To any normal member of his kingdom, King David would have looked like a man with enough. And yet, King David was not content. He wanted things that were not his to have. He wanted Bathsheba, although she was married to someone else. He wanted the appearance of innocence, although he was guilty. He wanted the moral righteousness to condemn the evildoer in Nathan's story, but found out he was the man. The Lord God lists the abundance given to David, but then levels this sentence: You weren't content with my bounty. You added the sword. You needed to use the sword to be content? Okay, here comes the sword.

In our Gospel, Jesus says that the people follow him because he can feed them more bread, although he has more to offer. He wants them to find contentment in him. What is enough?

Before we come back to that question, let's go on a journey. Maybe you remember journeys like this one, that sound like this: *Are we there yet? I'm hungry! I'm thirsty! He's bothering me! Why did I even have to come on this stupid trip? Why couldn't you just leave me at home with my friends? When are we going to get there?*

Sound familiar?

Perhaps there are families who do long distance drives in tranquility. Perhaps there are families that actually speak peaceably with one another on road trips without the aid of huge data plans and just sticking their faces down in their phones or tablets. Perhaps there are those among us who have not experienced or delivered this parental admonition: *Don't make me pull this car over.*

If you are amongst those who have no experience of car trip discord, congratulations! If not, perhaps this next journey will sound familiar as well.

This one took place much longer ago than the childhood of anyone here today. And it's much more serious than any family vacation. It's the journey of the Israelites, recently delivered from slavery in Egypt. But the soundtrack is similar: *When are we going to get there? I'm hot. I'm tired. I'm thirsty! I'm hungry! Why did I even have to come on this stupid trip? Why didn't you just leave us back in Egypt?*

In other words, the Israelites are whining. The Hebrew word is sometimes translated “murmur,” but it’s the same thing. And we all know how it sounds.

The Israelites have been out of Egypt for all of two months. They have been, fairly recently, delivered from a truly bad situation, an unjust situation, a miserable situation. They were slaves in Egypt. Without dignity, without self-determination, treated as property, they cried out to God. God heard them, delivered them from the Egyptians, brought them in safety to freedom. And now they are in that middle place, the wilderness: no longer in bondage to Pharaoh and the Egyptians, not yet in the promised land. They are fairly new at freedom and they are finding it a challenge.

The people are hungry, and they turn on Moses and Aaron, who are probably hot and tired and hungry too, and wishing the GPS weren’t sending them on such a roundabout route. (Really? Are you sure this is the road?)

The people whine, but more than the annoying sound of the whining, it’s the irrational content that is stunning. “Moses, did you bring us out here to starve us to death? If only we were back in Egypt! Sure, we were slaves there, abused, no better than pieces of property to the Egyptians, but at least they fed us! You don’t love us. Why did we even have to go on this stupid trip?”

Freedom is a challenge. For one thing, instead of just being told what to do all the time, they have to learn a new skill. Complaining they’ve got down cold. Now they have to learn to trust. They have to learn to trust God. They have to learn to open their eyes and hearts and learn a new way of being in the world. They have to learn how to live with contentment.

Now, they were right to be discontent with their old situation. We are never supposed to be content with injustice, with inhumane treatment of anyone. We are never supposed to be content with abuse, cooperation with evil. But here they were, free! But so far away from contentment. It’s like they carried their discontentment with them, dwelling within it like it’s a shelter, like it’s a tent.

That’s the thing about tents—they’re portable. So you can change your setting, your campsite, your whole surroundings and situation, and you can still be hauling around your same old tent. You can still be setting up your same old tent and crawling into your same old tent at night and waking up in your same old discontent, and wondering why things still look bleak and miserable.

Remember those old canvas tents some of us grew up with? The ones that got that musty smell and if you leaned up against them in the middle of the night, that’s where the moisture would come in? Or if it rained, the rain would find the low point on the canvas to come through, and you would wake up in the middle of the night, with water dripping on you from the ceiling? You are free to still be hauling around one of those old canvas tents if you want, but here’s good news: they make new ones now that don’t leak, that don’t smell musty, that are easier to set up and take down, and are lighter weight. But it’s up to you which kind of tent you want to use as your dwelling. Contentment or discontentment?

We aren’t so different from the Israelites, right? Ever stay in a bad situation because it’s easier to stay with the devil you know? Ever settle for less than you could be doing because, well, it’s not great, but it’s tough to make a change, and, truth be told, complaining about it is easier than changing?

The Israelites had just been brought through a huge change. And it was time to learn a new skill. Trust in God.

To feed them, God gave the Israelites the gift of manna, a fine flaky substance that appeared on the ground every morning. It was so peculiar, new, wondrous, that the people ask, “What is it?”—in Hebrew, it sounds like “*Manna?*” and the name sticks.

The food is wondrous not only because it appears overnight while they are asleep, in this barren place, out of nowhere – or solely out of the abundance of God – but it’s theirs with no work, no slave labor, just grace, here it is.

It is also wondrous because it has special built-in properties to make sure everyone gets enough. Just enough. They have to collect it each day. There’s exactly enough to go around. No more, no less. If they try to hoard it for the next day, it rots. The exception is on the Sabbath when the people aren’t supposed to do any work. On the day before the Sabbath, they can collect enough for the Sabbath too, and it will last.

Like all new things, it takes some practice. Some people hoard, and all they have to show for it is a bunch of moldy manna. Some people don’t collect enough for the Sabbath, and when the Sabbath comes, there’s no manna for them. Trust—says God, trust me—and follow my instructions—they’re trustworthy, too. Trust, listen to me and obey, and you can dwell in contentment.

In Jesus, God took the life of contentment one step further. Jesus was not just someone who gave physical bread, although feeding hungry people is one of the commands Jesus gives and one of the things his ministry on earth was about. He wasn’t content to just make sure people had full bellies and their physical needs met; Jesus came to be bread of life – the source for spiritual contentment as well, the source of joy and contentment in any situation, in plenty and in want, in easy times and in times of struggle and challenge. Don’t be content with physical stuff. Don’t try to find contentment with the things of this world that are here today and gone tomorrow. Seek God’s kingdom. Seek the food that endures for eternal life. Jesus offers himself, and walking with Jesus, feasting with Jesus, eating the bread he gives us, which is himself, we can know contentment wherever we find ourselves. Even in the midst of a desert. Even when provisions seem scarce or we don’t know exactly where the journey leads, Jesus will be our sustenance and guide if we let him. We can dwell in content. We can know what is enough, who is enough.

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