

Homily for September 20, 2020, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Des Moines © Steve Godfrey
Exodus 16:2-15, Psalm 105, Matthew 20:1-16

In February, our vestry (parish leadership team) met for a 1.5 day retreat, as is our custom each year. We did an exercise to learn and reflect on our personality types, to help us work together more effectively as a team. We discerned our current understanding of St. Andrew's particular purpose, core values, and current priorities to support our success this year and into the future, and we began to flesh out how to focus on those priorities. We discerned that we are a community committed to creating safe, vibrant, holy space for all kinds of diversity that encourages inspiring and trailblazing action, and that we need to focus on communication, commitment, and worship. We started to think about which teams and leaders could take on which particular tasks toward addressing these focuses. We were all ready to complete this discernment process and launch our commitment when the world shut down because of Covid-19. We have struggled ever since to stay together as a team and focus on communication and worship that is remotely possible during this time of social distancing, Zoom meetings, masks, and restrictions. I've been complaining about it all the way because it is so frustrating to see the potential lost, even as so many have suffered so much more.

I've been complaining a lot lately. It hasn't been helping. In fact, I think all my complaining is just exacerbating my frustration & despair with 2020. You know what's helping? Giving thanks for all the good little things, like the great Zoom conversation the vestry had this past week about leadership at St. Andrew's. Worshiping and celebrating Eucharist (which means thanksgiving), just celebrating period – like Sunday drinks & dinner with my beloved.

Life can feel pretty hopeless, scary, and just miserable sometimes and this year is the worst:

- The pandemic with all the illness, death, restrictions, cancelations, closures, lost livelihoods, extra burdens
- The fires on the West Coast & hurricanes on the Gulf Coast
- The derecho storm in Iowa
- The prospect of climate change and sense that I can't really do anything about it and don't really know what the impact will be
- Where is the good news this year?
- It feels like there is nothing but anxiety and lamenting what we've lost

God's people complained in their fear and hunger in the desert. People often complain when they feel treated unfairly, as in Jesus's parable. We focus on what we don't have and compare ourselves to some human ideal. We lament what we lack, instead of celebrating what we have. While lamenting and grieving is normal and helpful, there are limits to its effectiveness. Sometimes you have to look a little harder for the good news that exists and celebrate that.

The Good News is that God has saved us and opened the way for us to eternal life, abundant life of justice and hope for all of Creation. God gave the people in the desert daily bread; God gives us what we need too. Abundance of life is ours if we follow Jesus and his faith and hope in the power of the Resurrection over death. God has led God's people out of bondage and cynical suffering into freedom and possibility and self-determination. God has broken down the barriers of status and privilege and power. God has opened the way for all of us to enjoy abundance in God's kingdom.

We just have to recognize what God has created and given us, the preciousness of life:

- Celebrate God's marvelous works and give thanks.
- Call on God and trust God to provide what we need each day.
- Focus on God and Jesus's call to love and justice and hope.
- Continually seek God's face.
- Share our delight and hope and faith in God with those around us.
- Spread the Good News we experience in our belief in God and the power of the Resurrection.

Look for the Good in every situation and notice:

- The beauty and abundance of Creation
- Respect & Kindness
- Desire & work for justice
- Humility
- Intelligence and the potential of our God-given resourcefulness
- Prayer, Worship, Thanksgiving
- Service
- Love!

Celebrate the life and love that we have so profoundly that it overwhelms the despair, complaints, frustrations, sadness, and fear. Let that love of God make right all that is wrong, through the faith of the church and our engaging God's ultimate message of hope.

Late this past spring I was complaining to the bishop about how hard and disappointing this year has been. Some of my colleagues have perhaps been a bit more eager than I have been to experiment with the opportunities in online worship and community development during the pandemic. I have been feeling a bit stuck in the frustration of the situation. He pointed out that I have been working pretty hard here in the Diocese of Iowa for seven years, and at St. Andrew's for five, while also working much of that time on the diocesan staff, without a break. He recommended that I take a bit of a sabbatical this fall, to rediscover the Spirit that drives my excitement for ministry. It seems like a good time to do this, given the limitations on the ministry that we can do right now. With the vestry's support, I am going to take that sabbatical for the months of October and November. I'm already feeling newly energized and encouraged by the potential of this time with God for reflection and recommitment.

The vestry is also committing to some sabbatical work this fall, while I am away, stepping back from most of the "regular" business to pick up on Zoom where we left off in the Library in February, to reaffirm our sense of purpose and values, and do that work of commitment to communication, worship, and discerning St. Andrew's leadership needs going forward. The teams and a retired priest will help keep our essential worship and other ministries going.

God is with us all the time, giving us our daily bread, in many different ways, often ways that are most unexpected. Our job is to be grateful, celebrate, and let that gratitude overflow into hopeful, constructive living. What good things do you especially give thanks for?