

Sermons from Park Hill: September 28, 2008

Sermons from Park Hill Congregational UCC Denver, Colorado

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Exodus 17: 1-7 “Make a Bad Sandwich”

I was reading one of those Cosmo-quiz type articles recently and found an interesting one on how to give good criticism. They suggested using the “sandwich technique.” When you do this, you sandwich one bad point between two good points. Start off with a good thing about the person, or special gift they have. Then, put in the “but.” Then always close with another good point on the other side.

They used the following example: You’re so good at making those grilled cheese sandwiches. They taste so good. But I really wish you would clean up the kitchen after you make them. That would really help me out a lot. You are such a good cook though, so keep it up.

I thought this was kind of an odd example because if I was the one at fault for making a great grilled cheese sandwich but I didn’t clean up, it would occur to me to turn it back to them. “If you want me to keep making more good sandwiches, perhaps you should clean it up. That’s what is fair.”

So Cosmo writers, here’s one back. “You guys are so creative coming up with all this great advice. You really have a gift. I don’t think your example is as helpful as it could be. But, you made me think. You’re doing a great job, so keep it up.”

I thought I’d try applying the sandwich technique to the Israelite’s complaints to Moses because they aren’t doing anything to motivate him to do any better. They are pretty much stuck in a constant flow of criticism – you brought us out into the wilderness to die when there plenty of good graves back in Egypt. And this water tastes terrible. And we liked the food a lot better back when we were slaves. Why do you want to kill us with hunger and thirst?

So how’s this instead? “Moses, you did a great job of turning the bitter water at Marah last week into sweet water. But we feel a little like we’re kind-of dying of thirst here in Rephidim. It feels to me like you don’t really care. But you’re so good at getting the Lord to provide for us, so would you ask for some more help?” And I would say they need to add: “and we’re willing to cooperate in any way we can to help you.”

If they stuck with the advice to concentrate on “I feel like” instead “you did this to me,” maybe they wouldn’t have wandered around in the wilderness for so long. Each incidence of complaining proved that they weren’t mature enough to take possession of a land of their own. God had to trust that they could handle the responsibility – and tested them all along the way.

Just like raising children into teenagers, they had to journey by stages into more responsibility – from crossing the street to staying alone in the house to going to the store to taking drivers ed. God had to teach them how to think and act like free people, not like slaves anymore. God had responded to their every complaint for food and water but they continued to make it personal against Moses – Why did you bring us out here to kill us with thirst?

But Moses has also lost his patience. And he has started blaming God. When the people quarreled with Moses, he told them it wasn’t his fault. They

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should point the finger at God. Perhaps Moses could have been more understanding, too. These people were just scared.

Where were they going? Are we there yet? Can't we just stay here? They're looking for answers. They need some assurance. Moses, we're feeling lost and afraid. And he responds, why do you keep complaining to me, instead of "I feel your pain."

I read another advice column this week about what to do if you're a child who gets lost. This one isn't from Cosmo. First, if you're lost, keep calm. Sing, whistle; even tell yourself jokes or stories. Try using your imagination to pretend you are somewhere else where you'd really like to be. If you are afraid when it gets dark, memorize everything around you while it's still light out. Nothing changes in the dark; you just can't see it. And finally, there is no punishment for getting lost. Whoever is looking for you will be so happy to see you, they won't even think about punishing you. So don't go into hiding. Someone is looking for you.

Some of these seem like a pretty good idea for the children of Israel, too. Sing and dance the same songs as when you crossed through the sea; tell stories about how you escaped the chariots that got stuck in the mud; imagine what God has planned for you; remember the light on your darkest days of doubt. Memorize the names of all the places that God has provided for you on this journey. Just recognize how scared you are – and that's OK. But, give Moses a break.

As I was writing this I started anticipating complaints; criticisms, certainly from at least someone here this morning. Last week I gave a stinging assessment of the consequences of greed on Wall Street and today we are getting a lesson on what to do when we're lost children. Well, sometimes things are complex and require detailed analysis to understand. And other times, we make things too complex when the real answer is to stop – to recognize that sometime's we're simply afraid of what we don't know and what we can't control. We can't control how the world is changing around us. And when we're scared,

sometimes we take it out on people who don't deserve it and we do irreparable damage to them.

Make a paper cutout of a person. Make an insulting complaint to them and then tear off one portion of their body. An arm, or a foot. Pass the cutout around the room and let each person do the same – add another complaint and tear off another piece.

Now do the opposite. Give a compliment to that same cutout and attempt to tape the torn body parts back together. It's much more difficult and the result is a pretty scarred little figure. Complaining is easier – and more damaging.

Some of us are complaint-challenged – not complainers but we have a hard time not having the focus be on what "I want;" we haven't developed a more encompassing outlook on things beyond what we like, our tastes; our focus is on all things "me." Yet, quite often, the people who complain the most are afraid no one likes them because they don't quite like themselves. This might sound like so much middle-school advice, but think again about that guy at work, the neighbor down the street, the brother-in-law in the family – the complaint-challenged.

Sometimes we don't know how to give or take criticism so we deflect responsibility onto someone else. I'm not happy, so it's got to be someone else's fault. And we blow things out of proportion. I'm hungry, so someone must be trying to kill me.

Think about the last time you complained about something. What's really going on? Was the way you spoke to them insulting? Did you care about what they were going through? Could you have handled it another way? Was it necessary?

In a book called *Love Is Letting Go of Fear*, the suggestion is given: Declare a complaint-free day. A day with no complaints. Try it tomorrow and see what it feels like, if it's hard. Give yourself the opportunity to go through one entire day accepting everyone and making no judgments. No little bit of harmless gossip. No fair making mental notes to keep for the next day.

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You know, when we argue we put those little mental notes into a filing cabinet in our head – a list of all the things that person has done to us. And we pull things from this list every time we need a come back to something that was said to us. Sadly, we don't make the same kind of lists of the other person's good traits to use in an argument.

The 40 years of wandering in the wilderness were full of complaining Israelites. They had a very short memory for all the things like bread every morning and meat every night that God provided, but a very long list of faults and blame. They criticized Moses unmercifully, even as God's mercy was showered on them, as God prepared them to take possession of their own land, to be a fully mature nation capable of caring for itself.

Would their misery have been shorter if they had just made a bad sandwich – a bad thing in-between two good things; if they had just used the sandwich technique? God, you did a great job of getting Pharaoh to let us go – kudos on the whole Red Sea thing. But, maybe Moses wasn't your best idea of a leader. Sometimes it doesn't feel like he cares about our fear. Yet, you've done such a really good job of responding to every single one of our complaints – the water, the manna, the quails. So, keep up the good work.

And God smiled, thinking, if only they knew how much I love them they wouldn't be so afraid.