

The Extra Mile – Exodus 17:1-7

Rev. Matt Nieman

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My son, Joey, is now gone—off to college at UT. He's worshipping at another church now closer to campus.

And while I miss him being here on Sunday mornings, I now can talk more freely about him in worship, tell stories of his childhood.

And when he was really young, he had one of those moments at the dinner table where a kid voices his opposition to what was being served.

He was a picky eater as a kid, not unlike many kids. And the rule was that if he didn't eat what was on the table, he wouldn't eat, or he'd only have the plate that was waiting for him from the dinner hour.

And one night when he was about three or four, he wanted nothing to do with the main dish at dinnertime. Aside from a few carrot sticks, he didn't touch what was on his plate. So, hence, he didn't eat anything else the rest of the night.

Later that night, he was preparing for bed. I went into his room after I had been gone for a meeting and knelt by his bed. We said his prayers and then had a little conversation like we usually did before he went to sleep. The discussion turned to what he had done that night while I had been gone.

And then I asked him, "So did you end up eating your dinner?"

He shook his head and said, “Nah.” Then he looked at me and said, “Don’t make that again.”

And I remember the look on his face clearly said, “Don’t think this approach is going to work with me. If I don’t like it, I’m not going to eat it then or at anytime. You better change your tactics because I’m not negotiating. I’ll go to bed hungry if I have to.”

So what do you do? There are times when all parents cave. “Alright, get the peanut butter and jelly out.” As much as we try to be firm and hold the line, it seems no parent is one hundred percent immune to caving in to our children’s complaining.

When you read the story from Exodus 16 (in the chapter of Exodus that precedes the chapter where today’s story resides), it seems as though there was some caving in going on there too. First, you have the people of Israel. They were complaining, much like they were complaining here in chapter 17. They’re out wandering the wilderness after having been liberated by God from Egypt. For all we know, they are safe and now free from the oppressive hand of the Egyptian pharaoh. This reality alone should make them thankful and grateful for years to come.

Yet, we find them complaining. “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt,” they complain to God, “when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

Then, we have God. God knows and remembers distinctly what God has already done. He’s delivered the people dramatically out of the land of an oppressive Egypt.

Surely, he's counting on receiving the praise and thanks rightfully due him.

Instead, he finds through Moses and Aaron a complaining people. All he hears is how hungry the people are and how they'd just as soon be back in Egypt where they at least had daily bread to eat.

What an ungrateful people, God must have thought. God could very well have left them to starve because of their lack of gratitude and commitment. Perhaps after all God had done, the Israelites deserved this fate.

But instead, God caves. He gives in. He doesn't get angry and rebuke them in response to their complaining. God does the opposite. He says, "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'"

And sure enough, that evening, quail and manna covered the camp in which they were settled. There was food for them to eat.

And then, here in chapter 17, a very similar story. This time, instead of food, it's the lack of water in the wilderness. And the people once again give Moses a hard time: "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us with thirst?"

And Moses goes to God with their complaints and his fear that they were going to stone him.

And God, who surely was frustrated by Israel's lack of gratitude, caves in again. He has Moses strike the rock of Horeb with his staff and water gushes out for them.

Two things stand out to me about these stories: First, God listens to his people. Whether it's justified or

unjustified, when we shout out, “Is the Lord among us or not?”, our voices resonate with God. We belong to this Creator who has created us in His image. And God is interested in what we have to say, scream, cry, or sing. Our voices will always be heard.

In the silence of our sorrows, it becomes easy for us to assume we are by ourselves and that nobody is around to hear what’s on our minds. For example, you’ve just gotten from the doctor the news of a bad diagnosis. And treatment begins. And while people take time to express their concern, at some point you go through the painful or sickening treatment by yourself. You’re the only one who can experience your own unique suffering. That reality can be very isolating. In fact, it might even make you feel all alone. You want to express what you’re feeling, but nobody else, you think, knows what you’re feeling. Is there anybody to listen? Is the Lord with me or not?

As God heard the cries of the Israelites, so does God hear our cries of unique pain and bewilderment. God always hears us. Our voices are never inaudible to the Lord.

The second reality we discover in this story is God’s wonderful, over-the-top generosity. At a moment when God could have decided to teach the Israelites hard lessons about appreciating your blessings and the danger that comes when we don’t, God goes the other way and indulges them. God provides for them again...again.

I always become a bit exasperated at the claims made by skeptics that the God we worship is strictly one of aloofness, distance, and judgment. They see all the bad stuff

in the world and therefore assume that God doesn't care or orchestrates the suffering we find.

One only has to examine this account of God's caving in to the short-memored Israelites to see how this thinking utterly goes against God's character. Throughout the Old Testament and certainly in the ministry and sacrifice of Jesus in the New Testament, we find God again and again going the extra mile to grant healing and compassion and mercy and forgiveness to his people. Time after time, God extends benevolence and goodwill to this human race with which he's utterly in love.

In response to God's wonderful over-indulgence on our behalf, perhaps we can respond differently than the Israelites did. Maybe instead of complaining to God that we don't have enough, we can respond to God's great generosity by acting like the blessed people we really are.

Instead of complaining of what we don't have, maybe we look inside to see what we do have. And when that happens, we usually can muster up the strength to respond in service and compassion.

The renowned Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman wrote in a commentary on this text, "Everyone knows, in that pre-scientific world [that the Israelites were part of], that you cannot get *water from rock*. But we are witnesses to it! We have witnessed creation at the behest of the creator. We have witnessed the capacity of God to up-end all of our assumptions and all of our power arrangements."

God goes the extra mile. In the wake of our neglect for each other at times, in the wake of our inability to be good

stewards of God's creation, in the wake of our isolation, God keeps giving.

Despite our inability to see all that we have, God keeps giving.

God hasn't learned his lesson of saying no to us. And we are all the more fortunate and better off for it. Thanks be to God.