

New St. James Presbyterian Church  
Sunday, July 21, 2019  
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## **A VERY POWERFUL TOOL FOR DIFFICULT SITUATIONS**

Text: St. Paul said, "Give thanks whatever happens, for that is what God wills for you."

Betty who always complained about everything had a very positive mother who could always find A GOOD REASON FOR EVERYTHING. Betty came home from her afternoon out with her boyfriend Bill looking very unhappy. "What's the matter, Betty?" asked her mother. "Bill has asked me to marry him," she complained. "But that is wonderful! But why are you complaining?" her mother asked. "Because he also told me that he was an atheist. Oh mum, he doesn't even believe in Hell." Her mother thought and then said, "That's all right Betty. It really isn't a problem. I suggest you marry him and between the two of us, we'll show him how wrong he is!!"

Even the most psychologically healthy and cheerful people can get depressed from time to time! And if we are not careful, we can find ourselves complaining about the people we work for, the stress we are under at home, and the real or perceived slights we receive from others. Nothing seems to be immune from our litany of complaints. So, I have a question. Does complaining help?

I think for most of us complaining does give a temporary form of relief. But the results are short term. If we are genuinely hurting about something, then talking about it does help. We can go to a friend and tell them our troubles and if we share our burdens, they can get lighter. But if we are into complaining on a regular basis our friends will soon tire of our endless complaints. We are no longer much fun to be around.

Is there something much more powerful that we can do than complain? Is there something we can do that will make us fun to be around again? Is there something that will bring about changes in others that are incredibly positive?

The story of David, Abigail and Nabal is a classic in the Hebrew Scriptures. David is at this time in guerilla warfare and has a band of men with him. He has formed a wall of protection around Nabal who a settler on the land is and into farming. Nabal is a chronic complainer. He is rich. He thinks he doesn't need people. He has become surly and mean spirited. So, when David makes a reasonable request for food and supplies for his men, Nabal turns him down. But David's fortunes are on the rise. He will soon be King. When he receives Nabal's insulting reply, David is ready to kill him and destroy his holding. David has the power, and these were anarchic times. Abigail, Nabal's wife, has a lot going for her! She is beautiful, intelligent and wise. She is handed a very difficult situation, because she learns that David is on his way, David is angry and will destroy Nabal's holding and household. She knows that her husband had been an absolute fool.

Interestingly, Nabal's servants are not fans of Nabal. They had seen David's goodness and protection and are grateful. So, they attempt to steer Abigail in the right direction saying "Think carefully what you had better do, for it is certain ruin for our master and his whole family. It is no good talking to Nabal."

So, Abigail reaches for the most potent tool in the toolbox! She chooses gratitude. She sends donkeys in David's direction, laden down, full of culinary delights and food for David's men, in very short order. Is this manipulation? Yes, it is. Is it bad manipulation? No, not at all! Why does she do it? Because David needs to be moved off the course he had set. He was furious, out of control, mad. **But even in this state he cannot resist gratitude.** She places all her comments in terms of gratitude. She makes it clear that she believes that the future lies with David. She seeks his conscience. Is it right she argues that David would kill her entire family for the folly of Nabal? By showing that Nabal is the real problem, not her or her family, she restores David to balance. Then gratitude does its powerful work. David in turn becomes grateful. Nabal, Abigail and David!

What is this story about? It is about the importance of gratitude for solving really tough situations! First, it's about Nabal who is not grateful. Over his lifetime he has gradually become more surly and mean. Gratitude is not on his radar. It is all about him. Abigail, however, exemplifies gratitude. She is generously appreciative in very concrete ways, like food for hungry men. Works every time! 😊 David is an example of what gratitude can do when it is extended to us. **Gratitude changes attitude.**

So, where do we fit with these three? What is our problem today? Are we like Nabal the chronic complainer? Are we like David smarting under a lack of gratitude for all we have done? Are we an Abigail caught between a rock and a hard place - a tough unreasonable husband and an upset commander? What can we learn from these three people for our difficult situations?

First, if we are choosing to deal with our problems by complaining, we are going down the wrong road. Because when we get to the end of that road it is likely that the Nabals in our life will all be there to greet us, and we will have to listen to their curses. When was the last time we were blessed by a complainer?

I once had a Clerk of Session who was a salesperson. He said to me "David whenever I go to Hortons, I never sit down at a table of complainers who are belly aching about their lack of sales. I have learned that complainers are rarely successful. No, if I have had a bad day, I always try to sit with the top salespeople who stay positive no matter what!"

Abigail's use of gratitude is a solution to a complaint. She thanked David and backed up that thanks with concrete actions of generosity. She had learned somewhere along the line that giving thanks heals situations. Over many years she had witnessed what complaining had done to her husband.

## **Sow complaining and we will reap a harvest of bitterness. Sow gratitude and we reap happiness and peace. Why?**

Because gratitude changes our moods.

When I find myself complaining and catch myself at it, I frequently give myself ten things I am grateful for. Works every time! Gratitude is like oil and water; one displaces the other.

I once knew a remarkable woman. She had had a tough life when everything seemed to turn against her. But slowly she placed her faith in God. She began to rely on God in her failed marriage in her life and in her job search.

When I met her, I knew none of these things because I met someone with a radiance that was palpable. She was so radiant that I asked her what her secret was. She smiled and said simply: "Gratitude!"

She had made the ultimate transformation. Gratitude became her attitude. What followed afterwards was that her life was transformed. She got a great new job, and she found someone wonderful to love!

One of the reasons we complain, is to try to get people to change for us. It is probably the worst strategy on the planet of all available. For people rarely do change. Instead they get defensive or resentful. There is a wise saying that the only person we can change is our self and there is a lot of truth in that BUT there are many examples around us like that of Abigail who transforms David. Instead of killing her, he marries her! That is huge! Gratitude can restore a good man to perspective. That was what Abigail knew.

We need a little honesty here. Have we upset someone by not expressing gratitude for what they have done? Have we just assumed them and taken their goodness as obligation? "Heh! I employ her. That is her job. Why should I be thankful? I am paying her. That is thanks enough!" Know anyone like that?

I once knew a man who used to get absolutely furious about the fact that his wife had lost a matching sock in the laundry process. The third time it happened he exploded and chewed her out for half an hour. As far as he was concerned, she had to be doing this deliberately. Instead of being grateful that she had done the laundry he chose to abuse her.

If he had instead always expressed gratitude for what she did she would have moved heaven and earth to find the sock for him. But instead she ended up in a shelter for battered wives.

Lesson? Gratitude can save your marriage. Gratitude can save many a relationship that is troubled. Gratitude that is sincere and genuine must be fearlessly presented when a situation is handed you that is hard.

How do we practice for these difficult situations?

When we are at the grocery store checkout, the office, the plant, on the telephone, at school at University, at the service club - in all these situations we can learn to thank people all the time. We begin to look for things to be grateful for and it will transform us and them!!

Over the years I have had to visit jails as part of a pastor's duties. They are forbidding places. My heart goes out to the inmates that are in these places particularly if they are there unjustly.

Police officer Miller was put in jail for a crime he did not commit. One day, while he was on trial, a man called Johnson who hated cops and was a look alike to Miller, called on Miller and said with a knowing look in his eye "I know you didn't do it Miller." They locked gazes and then Johnston drove away in his beat-up station wagon. Miller was subsequently identified by a woman he had never seen and sent to jail. Miller went to jail consumed with resentment for the institution he had served so faithfully, and his bitterness was killing him just as effectively as a jail house shiv. But then one day a dear old Catholic nun came to visit him and said, "When you are down, Count your blessings!" So, officer Miller started to do that: Blessing 1) He gave thanks for Richard Emmanuel who refused to give up and worked for him for free as his lawyer; Blessing 2) He gave thanks for his kids Kim and Larry who continued to believe in him; Blessing 3) He gave thanks for Liz his wife who he described as the most incredible human being he knew.

He was in jail for 12 years for a crime he did not commit.

He was getting old in prison. His legal appeals all failed. His children grew up and got married, while he was in jail. No father to walk Kim down the aisle! He saw his grandson across a table but could not touch him or hold him. He said that his time in prison could have deadened him because he saw that in so many other prisoners. He decided that he would use his time to grow his faith in God and for him that was a life or death choice. Miller's lawyer was tireless. Time and time again he went to see Johnston who was now serving a life sentence for murder. Every time he got close to a confession Johnston balked. But one day Miller's lawyer got a confession from Johnston. Six months later a judge acquitted Miller. Miller felt weightless - like he could float away. His little grandson as soon as he saw him shouted "Grandpa!" And ran into his long-denied arms!

Miller was asked by the press whether he was bitter about all those lost years in prison. Miller said that although it hurt him to think of all that time away from his family, he saw it as a time to get to know God better. **And when he did that, he saw that bitterness was just another prison, and so he had decided to be free.** Miller in one of the toughest situations I can think of, chose gratitude. Is your situation as bad as that?

If you don't know what to do about your situation, choose gratitude anyway, for if something works in a very tough situation it is likely to work well in the everyday problems that you came to the church with today. Perhaps that is why St. Paul said, "Give thanks whatever happens for that is what God wills for you." Perhaps after all God really knows what makes us tick, and what heals us?

It's Gratitude!