

Enemies of Gratitude: Disappointment

Well y'all, I don't know if you have noticed or not, but it is officially Fall. I could tell because of the falling leaves and there is pumpkin spice everywhere, but I immediately knew it was officially Fall when my South Carolinian daughter walked out to a 60 degree day, yipped in protest, and came back out wearing two scarves, winter gloves, and a knit cap. Believe it or not, next week is Halloween and Thanksgiving is less than a month away, and so it's a time that I am always reminded of the HORRORS of being asked "what are you thankful for this season." I don't know if this is just a "my family" thing, but having to come up with a meaningful answer, especially when I'm not in the right mindset to process it, is incredibly stressful! After all these years, I don't know why I'm still surprised by this question, but being put on the spot leads me to forget about everything good in my life, and I can't think of a single thing I am grateful for.

Well, thankfully (pun intended) for all of us at Triune, we have been in a series called "Enemies of Gratitude" to help us get in the right mindset by dodging some common pitfalls to thankfulness like worry, nostalgia, and entitlement, and to begin noticing the blessings we should be thankful for. Today's topic is "disappointment," and I want to ask you to do me a favor. Grab a pencil in your pew in front of you, open your bulletins, find today's sermon title "Enemies of Gratitude: Disappointment" in the upper right hand corner, and write a big question mark right after that title! Okay?

When I was first asked to preach on today's topic, I was a bit wary. Who here has experienced disappointment? And who here has experienced disappointment and a well-meaning friend say something like, "Don't worry, things will be better tomorrow" or

“It isn’t all that bad! Be thankful for what you do have!” Yuck! And let’s be honest, who here has offered this same advice to someone? Worse yet, I am reminded about all the terrible sermons I’ve heard in my lifetime that might say something like “your disappointment is just a lack of faith!” or maybe “don’t worry, God has a plan for everything!” Double yuck! All of these messages can make us feel ashamed for being disappointed. And if we continually feed these messages to ourselves and aren’t careful, our brain can play tricks on us and say something like, “you can’t be disappointed and a good Christian at the same time.” Rest assured, today we will not be relying on silly platitudes, I will not be suggesting disappointment is something for you to just shrug off or “get over,” nor will I be suggesting that disappointment is not a natural part of our faith life. Instead, I want to offer a new way of looking at disappointment not as an enemy but as an invitation to experience thanksgiving. But before we begin, will you pray with me?

Lord of all, God of feelings and circumstances, we come before you today and lay our everything at your altar. The things that we can control, and the things we cannot. Those of us in lofty highs, those of us in cavernous lows, hear our hearts' pleas and guide us as a community to live more faithfully. Unplug our ears and speak to the deepest depths of our beings. Sanctify us this day and renew our spirits for the road and work ahead. In your precious and holy name, Jesus Christ, amen.

In today’s text, we’ll be looking at a pretty big disappointment with God at its center from the book of Ezra. If you would like to read along with today’s text, you can find Ezra by opening up the middle of your Bible to the book of Psalms and flipping backwards past Job, Esther, and Nehemiah to find Ezra chapter 3. As you flip there, let

me tell you a little background to our story. 600 years before the birth of Jesus, God's people were living in Israel and were attacked. They were taken from their homes and forced into slavery by the tyrannical Kingdom of Babylon. For half a century, the Hebrews lived as foreigners in another land and were forced to give up all of the things that made their society unique, including all the ways that they connected with and worshipped God.

Not only did the Covenant people have to deal with having to give up their ways and be forced to become Babylonians, they also had to struggle through the daily traumas of exile in being belittled, cursed at, and killed. To further add to this, they also battled with spiritual depression and continually asked "where is God in all this? Did the Lord abandon us?" or even worse, "was the Lord defeated by the gods of the Babylonians?" While some Hebrews maintained their faith during this time, many lost it, choosing to turn their back on God and not expect to be saved. Nevertheless, the Babylonians were eventually conquered by the Persians, and their ruler, King Cyrus, ordered the people to return to their homeland. The book of Ezra depicts the first wave of Israelites returning to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple and reestablish the worship of their God back home. Let us now turn to the word of the Lord found in Ezra chapter 3 starting in verse 8:

During the second month of the second year after the people had returned from Babylonia, they started rebuilding the Lord's temple. Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jozadak, the priests, the Levites, and everyone else who had returned started working. Every Levite over 20 years of age was put in charge of some part of the work. The Levites in charge of the whole project

were Joshua and his sons and relatives and Kadmiel and his sons from the family of Hodaviah. The family of Henadad worked along with them.

When the builders had finished laying the foundation of the temple, the priests put on their robes and blew trumpets in honor of the Lord, while the Levites from the family of Asaph praised God with cymbals. All of them followed the instructions given years before by King David. They praised the Lord and gave thanks as they took turns singing:

“The Lord is good!

His faithful love for Israel will last forever.”

Everyone started shouting and praising the Lord because work on the foundation of the temple had begun. Many of the older priests and Levites and the heads of families wept bitterly because they remembered seeing the first temple years before. But others were so happy that they celebrated with joyful shouts. Their shouting and crying were so noisy that it all sounded alike and could be heard a long way off. The word of the Lord... Thanks be to God!

I felt that the story in today's text was so dramatic and interesting! You can almost hear these loud voices of weeping and these loud voices of joy mixing together and coming from the text. I read it over and over again this week, but to help capture it, I asked my friend Owen to illustrate it for our art this week, and I would encourage you to take a moment to look at it after we conclude today. Thank you so much Owen for sharing your gift with us and helping us to experience God's word. Within, we have two

groups finally returning to Jerusalem, rebuilding the Temple, and worshipping for the first time together after 50 years. The young people who were born in exile have heard stories of their homeland, have heard about how their God rescued the people from Egyptian slavery and have now experienced it themselves! They come to the altar in worship ecstatically uttering exuberant praise to their savior! But the older generation, those who experienced being violently removed from their home, weep uncontrollably as their once glorious city and Temple has been reduced to what they consider to be a lackluster reconstruction.

Before Babylon had destroyed it, Solomon's Temple was a grand, ornate structure made from the most luxurious timber and stones. It was decorated with gold, silver, and precious gems. Its splendor was a representation of how God had lavishly blessed his people, how Israel's best was then offered back to God, and, most importantly, the Temple itself was the central space in which the Lord was tangibly present and resided with the people. The grief of the exile, the pain of God allowing the people to be defeated, and the spiritual depression of God's seeming absence became overwhelming for the older generation as the image of Solomon's glorious Temple, something that they had dreamt of and that provided hope to them through the exile, was now reduced to mundane rocks and planks. What was originally a representation of God's blessing and presence is now a picture of the people's squalor after God let them be defeated.

Can you begin to imagine their disappointment? What I love about this passage is that neither group of people are demonized. This isn't a moral issue. Both the young generations' excitement and the older generations' sorrows just are. Both are absolutely

valid experiences considering their circumstances. We can imagine that each group spoke to each other, “You don’t know how it was! How can you be celebrating?” and “Get over the past! We’re finally free! God has been so good to us!” It would be unrealistic for either group to stay in these extremes forever. Hearing any form of “get over your feelings and be realistic” is inevitably unhelpful and won’t exactly be changing anyone’s mind or feelings.

Disappointment is what happens when our hopes intersect with less than ideal circumstances. It’s not that the people didn’t realize that God hadn’t saved them and were unthankful. The older generation had hoped for a return to how things were, but the painful reality of their circumstances drove them to experience extreme disappointment in having to reconcile that this was their new normal. The only way for disappointment to become the enemy of gratitude in this story is if it were allowed to fester and for the people to stay in it. If their grief was just shoved down instead of being processed, disappointment could become a weapon to cut away at their joy to make them callous and hard hearted. Instead of living in disappointment and allowing it to direct our life, we must learn to navigate through life and all its inevitable difficult circumstances. And here’s the key, we must learn how to do it faithfully.

Ever since I was a child, I experienced very big emotions, and I was blessed with having a therapist as a father. He taught me that my emotions could either be my greatest strength or my greatest weakness. One of the ways he helped me understand my emotions as a tool and not as a master that controlled me was instilling in me that my emotions are a pointer and not a truth teller. Let me say that again, our emotions are pointers not truth

tellers. When we feel big feelings, it doesn't mean that anything and everything we think because of them are necessarily true. But it does point us to a very real need inside of us that shouldn't be ignored. For instance, if I am wronged by someone, my hurt feelings could try to convince me that that individual is a bad person, but this isn't necessarily true. They could have just made a mistake. Maybe they didn't even realize they hurt my feelings, or maybe I blew it out of proportion. What is true is that their actions in that moment caused very real harm.

Disappointment is an emotion and works in the exact same way. For our older generation, their experience of disappointment might be trying to convince them that God is a failure and has forgotten them again. Objectively, is that true? We know that they were just saved by God in the story! But our emotions aren't truth tellers. Instead, they point to the important truths. The people are grieving the very real experience of exile, their homeland is in shambles, and this grief points them to a very real need. They need to know God is still with them, they need comfort, they need to know that God is their protector despite their circumstances, and that they are safe! What can be a source of discomfort can become an invitation to understand and advocate for ourselves better.

Instead of running from their grief, our central characters are encouraged to process their disappointment and learn what they and the rest of the community are desperately in need of as they rebuild their lives. While the younger generation's blissful worship should be applauded, it would be naive to consider it without also allowing space for the grief of the past and what was lost. The wisdom and experience of the older generation can help guide the future generations by leading them to the high-level of

pre-exilic worship they experienced. They can also harness their disappointment and advocate for a community that will not turn to other gods or lapse out of right relationship with the Lord.

What we learn from all of this is this: our disappointments are very real and shouldn't be pushed aside nor should they be allowed to take control of our lives. Instead, the feelings of disappointment we experience point us to our unfulfilled hopes and desires. Slowing down and recognizing these feelings allows us to better identify our wants and name where our disappointment comes from. Our main characters want comfort, they want success, and they want God to be with them! As we learn the needs that our disappointments point to, we are then enabled to better and more fully engage with our present life, our current circumstances, and make the changes necessary to live the life we want to live.

For instance, let's say you apply for a dream job that you desperately need, but, after a long process, you are not chosen for the position. Is your disappointment valid? Yes! You wanted that job! You needed that job! But what happens when that disappointment festers and becomes who you are? You think less of yourself. You believe lies about yourself like "I don't deserve that job" or "I'm not worthy of any job. Who would hire me?" You might isolate and stop applying yourself. What was "I'm not worthy of that job" can easily become "I'm not worthy of love, of that relationship, of that friend." But what do you need? You need the job for provision, but that disappointment is manifesting as self-doubt, shame, and low self-esteem. What is the

need it is pointing towards? Reassurance? Encouragement? Can you get those things when you isolate and don't believe you're worthy of them? Of course not!

Here's the thing, the life of faith is not one devoid of disappointment. Instead, it is a life that acknowledges an abundance of disappointments but does not allow it to have the final say. We believe in a loving and reliable God, but our God does not orchestrate every detail of our world to ensure our individual happiness and desires come to be. We are never once promised perfect circumstances, but we are promised that we are not alone and that our disappointments are not the final say. Nevertheless, WE have the responsibility to not stay in our disappointments forever. We cannot allow them to rule us or they will drain every ounce of joy and thankfulness we have.

So I leave you with this. Feel your disappointments. Grieve what you had hoped for. Reflect on what was lost. Feel, grieve, reflect. And allow this to inform how you engage with the present. Because you are worthy, and you are not defined by your disappointments. Do not let them rob you, but allow them to point you where you need to go. And here's the thing. You're not alone. That's what the Church is. You're surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, and while we're all dealing with our own disappointments and shortcomings, you are not alone. And that is one thing I am truly thankful for. Amen.