

Margreta Silverstone: Gratitude to a Demanding God?

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[Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18](#)

[Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31](#)

[1 Thessalonians 5:1-11](#)

Let me start by saying that my focus will not be on the Proverbs piece, although that was initially why I felt comfortable choosing this week to preach. One of the verses that wasn't included in the lectionary, but is part of Proverbs 31:22 "She makes coverings for her bed; she is clothed in fine linen and purple." While I don't wear linen, I figured that the passage had me pegged – a quilter and a lover of purple.

These passages make me uncomfortable. Like Brenda Seat said in children's worship last week, when I feel uncomfortable, I know I need to pay attention.

How should I live?

Zephaniah was a prophet to the rich and powerful. The beginning of Zephaniah reads like a modern day resume where the writer lays out Zephaniah's pedigree (the son of a King Hezekiah) and credibility to speak to this audience. And the message Zephaniah brings to these people isn't comfortable; it is about the "Day of the Lord", a time of great destruction and trouble. A day when God will punish the complacent, wealthy, and those who don't expect God to act. In the 1980's, when I was in my twenties and relatively poor, this message

was more comfortable to me. I felt that God was going to "get" the folks who deserved being gotten. But, when I look at my life today and what I have, the message isn't so comfortable anymore. I'm all for a God of justice, when I'm the underdog. I'm not so keen on the idea when I can be considered the one who is the overlord or privileged.

I know I am complacent at times. I see it the newspaper and hear it on the radio news. I'm not contributing to ending the conflicts in the world, like Chechnya. I'm not the one protesting the School of the Americas. I'm not the one staffing the food kitchen on the weekends. I'm not the one writing another check to another cause that needs more money to do their work.

And I know, I sometimes think God won't act. For the past few years, I've not been able to believe in a God who directly intervenes in my life. About the farthest I can go is to think God is somehow moving someone else to act in my life. Or that God, in my sleep or dreams or subconscious, gently sets me down and plants a seed in my head of something to do or think or say.

And I know I am among the wealthy. As a federal employee nearing the top of the service scales, I make more money in a year than my parents did in two years. As a person who owns my dwelling and not sharing ownership with the bank, I know I have wealth. Recently I was reflecting on how I couldn't afford in the 1980's to go out for breakfast more than once a week and going out for dinner once a week at a fast food joint was a treat. I can still remember days when I had to figure out if I could afford the luxury of yogurt.

So Zephaniah's message to the people rings like a warning bell for me as well. Some day God may act and my assets and attitude won't save me.

In my church experience in college, a pastor I knew said the

pieces of lectionary aren't just randomly put together. From his perspective, the Hebrew scripture lesson often posed a question and the New Testament and gospel readings shed light or answered the question. For me, since the Zephaniah passage is clear about how I shouldn't live, it leaves me with the question: "How should I live?" I could add, "to avoid disaster", but the bottom line remains.

A matter of perspective, or gratitude to a demanding God

If Zephaniah is about this question, Matthew provides some response in the telling of the parable about talents. Familiarity breeds complacency. This is one story I have heard since I was young. And, when I heard it, it was about how I should use my talents and abilities at work as a way to bring glory to God. Certainly, I've ingrained a lot of that. But I'm not sure this is what the story is about. It leaves me with more questions when viewed from that perspective. It especially makes me feel sorry for the one talent – no talent servant.

I've also heard the story as a story about how we use money. The story could be a lesson in wise investment. The two servants who doubled their talents were rewarded. And a talent in those days was a lot of money. According to the NIV study bible, one talent is worth 60 minas. One mina is worth 100 drachnas. And one drachna is worth one day's wages. If I translate that into today's dollars, one talent is worth over one and a half million dollars. The master gave these servants a lot of money. But even from this perspective I am left with questions. Why is doubling one's talents the appropriate response? Is it comforting to know that the Sovereign treated the 2 and 5 talent folks exactly the same way? When Zephaniah seemed to warn the people about placing too much importance in money, how does this story make sense?

So, for the past month I've sat with these two stories, trying to find the connection. And the answer to the question about how am I to live is an answer about perspective. What is my perspective of God?

I've been taking the Genesis class in this fall's School of Christian Living. One of the gifts from the class has been the recognition that so much of the scripture is left with gapping holes. Rabbis and others have had the opportunity to invent "midrash" or other stories to address those gapping holes. Jesus' parables are the same way. What was the perspective of the servants who got all that money? Were they overjoyed? Were they worried? How did they double the talents? Did they talk to each other about the master's action? How long was the master gone?

And when God came back and held them accountable, how did the others feel? There is no indication of joy or any emotion in the two and five talent servants during the time of accountability. Certainly, I know I would feel somewhat proud of having invested wisely and done well and be a bit like a child showing off. The story doesn't say.

The response of the servants on the day of accountability is the clue, for me, about how I am to live. The two and five talent servants do not seem to share the one talent servant's perspective of God. They both state, "You gave me this and this is what I have done." They acknowledge the gift given to them and identify how they lived out their lives in response, by increasing the gift. They lived in gratitude. The one talent servant responded, on the day of accountability, by saying how demanding God was and how fearful he was of God's actions that he was immobilized by it and buried the gift. Knowing about the amount of the gift he was given, I wonder how anyone who was given so much could just waste it? How could anyone's first response be to think that God was demanding?

Yet, when I think hard, I begin to identify myself in the one talent servant. How often don't I live in exuberant gratitude? I don't far too often. How often do the gifts I have been given lift me out of complacency and into action? Not nearly often enough.

About a month ago, Kevin Ogle's mother commented, in the time after the sermon, that we Seekers talked a lot about the toughness of the journey. From her perspective, we mention following God's path is so hard. It's so much work. We're so busy. And she faulted us for not talking about the joy of that journey too. I'll admit her statement got me. I thought, "Sure we have joy. Can't you hear it in our singing? Can't you see it in the exchange that is part of the children's word?" Especially that Sunday when Peter let all the milkweed seed scatter around the room and rain upon the children.

I felt miffed at the statement. But I kept thinking about it and was motivated by it to sign up to preach during this season. I was to preach a sermon entitled "I'm joyful, darn it." I thought, "Well, maybe I don't jump up and down, maybe I don't always sing praise songs, maybe I don't always say thanks. But that doesn't mean that in other ways I'm not living thanks." But, with a month of thinking, I've been changed to think maybe it does. Maybe it is a sign that I don't live in exuberant abundance. Maybe I am too often the single talent servant. I see the problem of the exuberant gift and the problem of needing to do something with it. I let the problem cloud my vision for the future and my perspective of God.

Encouraging Gratefulness

So, what can help remind me of the abundance of God? What can help me keep a perspective filled with gratitude to God? Here I find a clue in Thessalonians. Mindful of the gift of God through Jesus, the Thessalonians were to "encourage one

another and build one another up, just as you are doing". Share the joy. Speak the thanks and praise.

If you are like me, these ping-pong balls have been interesting and curious things on the altar. These stories of gratitude and thanks have slowly filled the bowl and been overflowing. This one says "Warm weather, Sun" and this one is "Sally, my mother". And these stories of thanks can encourage me. I have been encouraged by the stories of fellow Seekers on the journey who have been surprised by God and found, joy and triumph over problem. I'm going to take a little time here to share these.

This past Tuesday night, in the sharing of our small break out groups from the Genesis class, I commented how being part of a community of faith where I hear others stories of God's involvement in their lives helps me in the periods that seem filled with problems. While I may not be able to believe that God intervenes directly in my life, I have no reason to doubt your stories of God's intervention and I can find joy in your story.

I also need to be mindful and to speak about the joy in my life. While you all have experienced the pains of my journey of faith in the past few years, maybe I haven't shared enough of the joy. Joy is like the beauty of quilts, the works of my hand and the interpretation of things around me. Quilting is a big part of my life. I don't tell you about the joy of an evening walk where I may see a rabbit, a deer, or a heron in my neighborhood and know that I share this world with God's creation. Or, while I don't see as many of the stars here as I did in Nova Scotia, how I always look up to see the stars at night on my nearly daily walks and find a quiet type of joy knowing they are still up there. Or how I find joy in connecting with other people at work, encouraging each other, helping each other, forgiving each other.

And I know I am not alone in the need to share stories of joy

to encourage us. Paul's request to the Thessalonians is still valid today. I recently read an article in The Sun magazine that was an interview with Frances Moore Lappe, the author of "Diet for a Small Planet". She has co-founded an organization called "Center for Living Democracy" and established a news wire service. In the interview she said:

"I believe one of the best ways to empower people is to give them examples of people just like themselves who are actually making a difference. That's one reason I helped to form the American News Service. We cover stories of people taking responsibility and finding solutions in all areas of public life... Humans are imitative animals. We learn from watching each other, and we take on the characteristics of people we observe. If the media primarily show us people who are corrupt and self-serving, who can't see how their own interests are linked to the interests of others, then that's all we'll believe is possible for us... Really, all the news service does is cover what we as human beings do best, which is try to solve problems. That's our nature: we see a problem, and we try to solve it... For the most part, the media present only problems, not problem solving. ... The message this sends disempowers us in subtle and not-so-subtle ways..."

I'm not sure that raving about how bad things are, the way I used to, works anyway...What transforms people throughout a lifetime is real engagement. I believe that, as people become engaged, they begin to incorporate the negative realities without becoming discouraged by them."

I think Kevin's mother may be right, we need to be encouraging of each other more on this tough journey of faith, by sharing our stories of joy and problem solving. In this time of potential movement and the gift of imaging new space, we may need to be bringing in other stories by people of faith beyond Seekers who are living and feeling God's love and abundance in their lives. Keep passing around those ping-pong balls. Please

don't bury God's abundant gift to you in the ground.