

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Surprising Insights Into Complaining"
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September 21, 2008
Proper 20

Complaining is the natural outflow or expression of a basic dissatisfaction in life.

When I was little, I remember one of my brothers hurting me physically. I remember complaining to my mother. She would say to me, "Just ignore him." And I would say to myself, "This isn't fair." Or perhaps I would go further and say, "Life isn't fair."

We often respond strongly to a perceived injustice against us and not only when we are children. Similar to the process we discussed last week in regard to forgiveness, we have a choice as to how we process sins against us.

We can choose to stay in a place of anger and bitterness because of the unfair things that we experience. We can choose to see our lives as unsafe, and people as untrustworthy. Or we can choose to trust God with these injustices and to cry out to Jesus about the hurts and harm we have experienced over the years. Then we look for God's intervention. Because God can intervene, even miraculously intervene, yet we can miss it.

Such was the case of the people of Israel. They had known the hard life of slavery and forced labour in Egypt. They had known the abuse and whips of their former masters. They had also seen the works of their deliverer and their God in the nine plagues. Each plague was a critique against a specific god of Egypt, showing there was only one true God over all.

Not only had they seen the miraculous intervention of God in the plagues. They also seen God's hand over and over as they went across Egyptian territory against Pharaoh's army, and then across the Red Sea to the Arabian Peninsula. Whether that was a small body of water where they crossed, and the army was drowned, or whether it was a large body of water with the same result, the hand of God was shown.

Now in the end of chapter 15 and into 16, the Israelites are in the Shur Desert. Right away, they grumble and complain about a lack of water, or a bitter water source, Marah. So their complaint is contrasted with Moses'

prayer life, which gives a solution to turning the bitter water sweet or potable. In recording this transformation, God encourages us to take our places of bitterness and complaint to him for sweetening, to quench the thirst behind the complaint.

God's people then get to Sin Desert, between the oasis of Elim (the healing place) and Sinai (the place of experiencing or encountering God). Here again the people complain against their leaders. Sure they might have enough water, but they don't have bread and meat. They remember when we were slaves in Egypt, at least they had bread and meat. So they complain against their leaders, Moses and Aaron.

This is often the dynamic when something goes wrong in an organization. The members of the organization blame the leaders. In the case of the church, or the people of Israel, all the leaders can do is pray. They have no way to feed hundreds of thousands of people in a desert environment. Just as I have no way to be in as close relationship with everyone connected to St. David's, all three hundred or so. I wish I could, but all I can do is pray and meet with those who have immediate needs, and try to meet with others as time and opportunity allow.

I love the visiting part of the ministry, but I am only one person. That's why we often say that the ministry belongs to us all, not just the Minister and the elders, but to every Christian who claims to follow Christ and live out Christ's teachings.

So Moses takes these complaints and lays them before the Lord. To use pool language, he is snookered. He knows there is no way to play the shot. But God has continually showed himself to be faithful, so once again Moses will trust God in prayer. This time there are two answers, miraculous and wonderful.

One is that God does something new that no one has ever seen before. The other is that God can re-direct bird migration in anticipation of this need.

The new thing comes to the people like a frost on the sand. It is not sticky or wet so that the sand would cling to it. It is a thin, sweet cracker from heaven. No one knows what to call it, so they call it, "What is it?" or in Hebrew, "manna." This unleavened bread from heaven comes and the people have enough, only enough for each day, and a double portion before

the day of worship, so you can have a day of rest. The people who are unable to gather a lot still have enough. The people who want to hoard it, and keep it an extra day find out it spoils in these circumstances. You only have your daily bread. And such is our spiritual life. We need to worship and choose to be in relationship with Christ everyday. He is the bread of heaven, according to his own teaching in John 6. He gives us enough, not too much, and as we trust him we are satisfied.

The people eat their new found bread, and they eat their new found meat. It is interesting that the Scripture does not record any worship, praise or thanksgiving. All it records is the fact that the people go against the commandments of God, in trying to hoard the gift, in trying to collect it on the Sabbath and their unbelief. To prove that this is not just another story, God instructs them to put some in a pot for future generations to see. This is because only this generation of forty years was able to see what they saw.

Every generation, even today, gets to see the hand of God in a specific way. We can choose not to see. We can choose to not believe. We can choose to receive what God has for us or not. Say in your heart today that you want to receive what God has for you. "Open my heart to you, O God."

Jesus similarly addressed our natural inclination to grumble and complain. He told a story of an agricultural landowner who needed labourers, probably harvesters. This is a very common need today in Canada and across the face of the earth. The harvest comes on quickly, and smart owners know they will need a lot of workers to get the job done well. There are many stories today besides this parable of migrant workers who would be paid a minimum wage, with their agreement.

So this vineyard owner sees men in town standing around, just as migrants often would congregate a certain part of a city that we stayed in, in California for work. He would hire them and they would agree to a full day's wage, based on what was fair at the time. So they agreed because it was fair for a day's work. However, the vineyard owner keeps going into town for more workers, possibly because he hadn't planned perfectly how many workers he needed. Another possibility is that he went into town for other reasons but kept seeing these men who needed work.

So he not only hires in the morning but also in the afternoon, and even into the late afternoon. So some of the workers are only in the field picking

grapes for an hour or two, then it gets dark. All the labourers line up at the end of the day. The last ones line up first...The first labourers who had been in the hot sun all day working see that the owner is paying the last ones the same as what they had been promised. All of a sudden they figure they are going to get way more than they were promised. But as the line goes on and on, they see that those who put in ten hours are paid the same as those who worked an hour or two. They begin to complain because they see this as unfair. Some are bold enough to complain directly to the owner. His only response is "Why are you resentful of the fact that I am generous to others? Isn't it my money to give as I choose?"

In so doing, Jesus is teaching us to beware of believing we deserve more, or not being content with what we currently have. He is also teaching that there is only one reward in salvation: relationship with God, which whether you've been serving God all your life, or perhaps someone makes a death bed confession, and only knows God for a few moments. The reward is the same: life with God in God's place with God's people.

Should we resent that other Christians don't feel as called to actively serve God as we do or I do? We should simply serve and give of us ourselves in spite of what others choose to do, or not to do. Do we have the right to feel resentful that we volunteers loads of hours at the church and in the community, but someone else finds it hard to make a weekly or monthly meeting? Again, as we look at the Lord in the face, look deeply into God's eyes, we see the generosity, and hopefully know again that this isn't about me. It's not about how good I am, how gifted I am. It is about Jesus Christ, who gave himself, who is worthy of following and devoting one's whole life to worship and honour in labouring and loving.

So what should we do when we feel the complaining coming through our lips. Perhaps stop for a moment, and ask God what he thinks about what is happening to us.

Once again the blueberry season is upon us. We continue to hear stories of how people find places to pick, where individuals say they can pick a gallon an hour, yes, sixteen cups an hour. Wow. Why I am picking the same in two or three hours? Why won't that person tell me where their spot is? All of this can lead to resentment, or it can lead each of us back to the blueberry as a kind of manna, rich in antioxidants, given from heaven. Not matter whether we get a lot or a few, big or little, in a long time or a short time. We

simply need to give thanks. Worship, praise and thanksgiving are just some antidotes to complaining.

Let us pray.