

“THAT OLD SIN OF GRUMBLING,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, September 24, 2017

This morning for our scripture lessons from the Christian lectionary we have two wonderful stories. The first is from the Old Testament. (*Exodus 16:2-15*) It's an account of the Israelite people in the wilderness after their Exodus from Pharaoh's Egypt. They're desperate for food, as well as anxious and frustrated. The second story is from the New Testament Gospel of Matthew. (*Matthew 20: 1-16*) It's a parable told by Jesus about a generous vineyard owner and employer in tough times when everyone's looking for work.

The Old Testament story more-or-less ends happily. At least the hungry Israelites are blessed by food from heaven which saves them from starvation. However, the end of gospel story has a more ambiguous finish. As Jesus tells it, some vineyard workers are upset that those hired later and working fewer hours are getting exactly the same pay as those who were hired first and earlier and worked hours longer. It just isn't fair, they say. Yet the vineyard promptly turns this complaint on its head by insisting on his own prerogative to be as generous as he wants to be with anyone, whether hired early or late. Jesus is essentially utilizing the parable of the generous vineyard owner to underscore God's right to be inclusive when it comes to our human salvation.

As we all know from our personal familiarity with scripture, the narrative sweep of the Bible is deep, wide, and long. Our two biblical stories, as shared this morning, were probably first told a thousand years apart. Besides differences in age and origin, the Old Testament story is history, while the gospel story is a kind of fable. But, importantly, a couple of the same threads run through both. Each envisions a generous God. Each also describes an unhappy, disgruntled people, given to the sin of grumbling.

Back in the Middle Ages or earlier, the Church Fathers and Mothers put together a list of “Seven Deadly Sins” that they regarded as soul-imperiling. They cited lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride. Grumbling didn't make the list. But it's commonly an outgrowth of any one of these deadly sins.

Who doesn't know what grumbling means? Yet it's still instructive to look up the dictionary definition. The Oxford English Dictionary elegantly defines grumbling as a “subdued utterance of discontent,” then goes on to describe it as a mumbling or

rumbling—a murmur of dissatisfaction and complaint that is sometimes too faint to be completely articulate and understandable. Sometimes, the same dictionary notes, it can be heard as a low growl. Moods most associated with grumbling are moroseness and sullenness. G-words like grim, gloom, and gruff also bespeak the spirit behind our human grumbling. In fact, as I suspect all of us know from life experience, grumbling, like nothing else, spreads grimness and gloom across a room, across a church, across a nation, across the world. If not checked quickly, grumbling can become a terrible contagion, dampening hope and optimism and bringing everybody down, creating the kind of environment where nobody wants to hang out.

Poor Moses! He had done so much for his people. Showing enormous courage, fortitude, and faith, he had for his own people's sake engaged in a war of wits with Egypt's pharaoh who could have ordered him dead at any moment. Then Moses led the Israelites across the Reed Sea to freedom in the Sinai and the wilderness beyond. He freed the Jewish people from bondage and slavery. Yet what does Moses get for his troubles? A lot of grumbling. His people don't like camping out, foraging for food, and living in uncertainty. In what must have been a shock for Moses, they actually forget the awfulness of slavery and begin reminiscing about those good old days in Egypt when they still lived under the Pharaoh's whip. It's not only an attack on Moses and his leadership but also the God who paved their path to freedom. They do not trust Moses or God to see them through what they perceive as a crisis.

Yes, the hungrier the Israelites get, the grumblier they become. The noise of their grumbling becomes deafening, threatening to destroy whatever sense of community and togetherness they have. It's at this point that a provident God sends both quail and manna upon the fields of the wilderness to feed and sustain his people--as Moses always knew he somehow would.

Naturally, all the grumbling ceases. But what remains revealed is the lack of faith that spurred it, which is the deeper sin beneath the sin of grumbling. Of course, God sees this grumbling for it is and he decides the Israelites aren't ready for the Promised Land. Consequently, God prolongs their wanderings in the wilderness for many more years until they are ready to appreciate what he has done and is doing for them.

In his First Letter to the Corinthians the Apostle Paul notes that many Israelites actually died in the wilderness due to their sin of grumbling. (*1 Corinthians 10: 6-13*) He holds up

the wilderness experience of the Israelites as a warning for us all. Just as loose lips sink ships, grumbling undermines the well-being of individuals and communities.

Unfortunately, in his own ministry, Jesus also faced more than his share of grumbling. Although he had thousands of devoted followers, just as many were constantly murmuring against him. They grumbled against his teaching about a God as generous as the vineyard owner in the parable he told. Jesus really set the elites of his day a-grumbling when he declared as he did at the end of his parable that the “last shall be first and the first shall be first” as God’s kingdom dawns. (*Matthew 20:16*) Nor did these grumbletons want to hear Jesus say in his Great Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.” (*Matthew 5:5*) They growled and complained amongst themselves because they were fundamentally out for themselves, in spite of their pretense of religious faith and devotion. Their grumbling was fed by their selfishness and self-centeredness which are sinful and very far from the way of God.

This should lead us to note a certain dynamic underlying all grumbling. Most folks grumble and growl under their breath because they know that if they express their complaint more openly, honestly, and forthrightly they will have to take responsibility for what they are saying. Their deeper motives will become more transparent. Their complaint may not look so good, right, or faithful in the light of day, particularly given Jesus’ warning to us not to judge, lest we be judged. (*Matthew 7:1-3*) How embarrassing! Indeed, grumbling usually emanates from a meanness and orneriness of character that is far from the love that Jesus called us to have for one another.

Sad to say, I think we live in a grumbling age which reflects a wider de-Christianization of our society. Too many leaders in our time have become very adept at cultivating grumbling on our part, nurturing grievances and discontent. Forgetting the teachings of Jesus and the Apostle Paul, we fall right into it. This is not good for our country. This is not good for us, present or future.

Some time back, I came across a minister who was struggling to contain the grumbling going on in his own congregation. He subsequently sermonized on the subject. I found his remarks provocative and illuminating. As he explained in his own words, grumbling is like every other sin offensive to God. He then added:

“Try to imagine any congregation of Christians allowing idolatry to go unchecked in the foyer after Sunday worship. It would never be permitted! No church would ever allow acts of sexual immorality to be committed in the narthex of the church...it would be unthinkable. Would anyone openly test the living God right in front of other believers? Of course not! But what happens when someone begins their weekly ritual of grumbling and complaining after Sunday worship? We not only allow this rebellious act, but we offer a listening ear and sometimes even enter the chorus of complaining. The sin of grumbling is alive and well in many congregations. We often forget that this sin was punished [among the Israelites] as severely as idolatry, sexual immorality and testing God.”

We all need to work harder in resisting “the grumbles.”

Congregation, if we have a concern or complaint, we need to speak up, albeit unselfishly and with love, even for those we might be challenging or critiquing.

In faithfulness to Christ any negativity on our part needs to be matched by a positivity—a desire to genuinely work for the common good. Our focus should always be on uplifting other people and improving a situation rather than tearing them down and becoming part of the problem. As the Apostle Paul declares in his Letter to the Philippians: “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ...striving as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you.” (*Philippians 1:27-28*) In other words, if your concern is genuinely loving and faithful, demonstrate the courage of your convictions by truly sharing what’s on your heart and mind rather than growling about it under your breath. This is good advice to follow for husbands and wives, co-workers, friends, fellow church-members, and citizens.

I love biblical history. In fact, I love all kinds of history. I often find inspiration in a looking back that helps me move forward. Among my favorite stories from history is about a moment between two famous nineteenth century ministers—one named William Ellery Channing; the other, Theodore Parker. Parker was younger and considered radical by many. He was an outspoken opponent of slavery in the years leading up to the Civil War. Channing was an elegant and beautifully spoken man and considered among the greatest preachers of his day. One of his sermons was regarded as the most widely-read document in America, apart from the Bible, for almost fifty years. However, not so attractively Channing had started criticizing Parker behind his back for being *too* brash

and bold on the whole abolition issue. Parker, he claimed, was actually hurting the cause of freedom.

One day at a clergy gathering in Boston, Parker, who had heard about all this through the grapevine, found the nerve to confront Channing directly. Dr. Channing, he said, maybe brash people like me have to speak as we do because more eloquent people like you don't say anything. Channing realized that he was being chastised and called on the carpet for grumbling. He was also big enough--or should we say humble enough--to admit the merit of Parker's openly voiced complaint. You are right, Brother Parker, Channing simply said. Thereafter, Channing, following Parker's lead, became an outspoken foe of slavery, using his national platform to help end that terrible institution of antebellum American life.

Folks, I want to close with the words of that minister, a Reformed minister named Kevin G. Harney, who had to battle grumbling in his own congregation:

"It is time for Christians to repent of their grumbling and being praying and serving. If we spent as much time praying for the work of the Holy Spirit in our church and serving as God's people as we grumbling, we would see radical transformation of our church and lives! We need to drive out the spirit of grumbling and usher in the Holy Spirit in its place. With humble hearts, let's begin to speak words of blessing and healing. We have all had enough of grumbling. Let's uplift each other in the name of the Lord."

Dear congregation, do I hear an amen? **Amen!**

