

“A Time To Complain and a Time To Refrain from Complaining”
Exodus 16:1–15; Matthew 20:1–16
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A neighborhood restaurant I ate at in Richmond, Virginia had a sign behind the cash register which read, “Thank you for not whining.” It would probably not be appropriate for a church to have such a sign, and I must say some of the loudest complaints I have ever heard came from a waitress in that restaurant, though her whining was justified. This grandmother in her fifties had just learned that she was pregnant again! Some complaints are more justified than others.

But complaining is a part of life for many reasons. Life isn’t fair, work isn’t done to our satisfaction, others are to blame for our problems, the official made a bad call, the sermon was too long. We complain to and about others, and we complain to and about God, and the truth is some complaints serve a purpose while others accomplish nothing but irritation. We might say there is a time to complain and a time to refrain from complaining. That’s in the amplified version of Ecclesiastes 3.

But complaining is nothing new. We have read two texts today in which complaining is a central theme. In the reading from Exodus, the Israelites complain that they have been delivered from bondage in Egypt only to starve to death in the wilderness. In the reading from Matthew, some workers in Jesus’ parable complain that other workers have received the same pay as them, even though they have not worked as many hours. They are very different stories — one is a historical narrative while the other is a parable. They have very different endings. But both stories offer insight into our complaints, even if they don’t tell us exactly when it is OK to complain.

In the reading from Exodus, it is important to pay attention to some details. We read this story with an awareness of how often the Israelites whine and complain right after God has delivered them from bondage. We wonder how they can complain about things like food and water

when they are free, and when in most cases, they have what they need to survive. The lectionary editors encourage us to read the story in this way by beginning with verse two which says, “The whole congregation of Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.”

But verse one, which we have included, not only tells us the people are now in the wilderness of Sin — “Sin” being a word related to the word “Sinai,” not sin in the usual sense of wrongdoing — it also tells us it is the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. Details of time and geography matter. It has been long enough for them to have run out of the provisions with which they started, and they are now in a barren land. In other words, they are starving and there is no sign of where they might find something to eat!

So, they complain. They may feel grateful for their deliverance, but they are still hungry. Was there no plan for how to get to a better place alive? We might think they should trust God by now, but they don’t complain to God. They complain to Moses and Aaron, and God responds, not with judgment but with compassion, promising to rain bread from heaven for the people even before Moses tells God about their complaint.

God sends quail in the evening and a dew-like substance in the morning which the people call Manna, but it’s not a name. *Man-hu* in Hebrew means “What is it?” It’s like a family we knew in another setting where what the father had with supper was called “Not Pepsi” so that the children who had Pepsi didn’t know what Daddy was drinking, and thus couldn’t betray Daddy to their grandparents. Daddy drank “Not Pepsi” with dinner. The Israelites ate “What Is It?” for breakfast.

Many efforts have been made to find natural explanations for these miracles. For example, the Manna could be the sap exuded by the parasites of the tamarisk, but tamarisks grow only in the western Sinai Peninsula and the phenomenon described only occurs in late May and June. This could not account for forty years of breakfasts. Natural explanations may be appropriate, but in the story, what happens is a miracle, it is of God’s doing, however it happens. The people have food to eat. This is the result of their complaining. God treats their complaint as a kind of prayer and then provides for their need.

The message for us is that some complaints are justified, perhaps necessary even. If nothing else, they can be a way of honestly expressing feelings we have, something God always encourages us to do. And there are times when we have genuine and profound needs.

I think of a woman I recently met whose husband and two other family members died within a year, and then her twenty-three-year-old daughter died. Grief often comes in bunches. It seems unfair because it is. I think of people in our church who are managing multiple crises at once — parents struggling at the same time as children, stress at work and home, one problem after another, they cannot seem to catch a break. My alma mater's basketball coach uses the term "buzzard's luck." Often that is what we have. How can we not complain?

We might also think about those living in poverty, not just in third-world contexts but right here in our country, those who don't have enough to eat or an adequate place to live, those who have to choose which bills to pay, those who work themselves to exhaustion and are frugal with their money but are still one medical crisis away from the kind of debt from which they will never recover. We might think of those who have been overlooked because of the color of their skin, those who have been bullied because of their identity, those who have been left out because of some limitation. Is their complaint not justified?

And we might consider the Ukrainian people now, the people of Morocco in the aftermath of the earthquakes, the people of Libya in the wake of flooding, the people on Maui after the fire, Palestinian people whose land was taken and residents of modern-day Israel who live with violence. The world can be unjust, life can be unfair, we may not know where to register our complaints, but there is reason to complain and doing so can help us even if it doesn't change anything. But sometimes it does lead to change, especially if we are complaining to God. God hears the Israelites' complaint and responds with compassion.

In the reading from Matthew, Jesus tells a parable about a vineyard in which the owner hires people at daybreak and promises to pay them a fair wage, but then hires people at various times later in the day all the way up until it is almost quitting time. Much to the irritation of those

who have worked all day, the owner pays the late arrivals first and pays them the same wage as the early birds. When the latter fail to receive more payment than promised, they complain bitterly. Wouldn't we? It isn't fair that workers who have been idling their time away get the same payment as the hard workers!

Yet we don't know that they have been idling their time away. In our translation, at five o'clock, the owner does ask them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" But the Greek is better rendered, "Why are you standing in the marketplace without work (*agora argous*)?" To be without work is not the same thing as being lazy. And all the workers have the same basic needs.

So, even in the framework of the parable, it is not clear that the workers' complaint is completely justified, but this is a parable. It is not a story about workplace practices. Jesus says that the kingdom or realm of God is like this. God extends mercy to all, it is God's choice to do so, and thus none of us has any right to complain about how much grace someone else receives. The workers in the parable do not receive anything in response to their complaint. They are reprimanded, and by analogy, so are those who would begrudge God's generosity to others.

The message for us is that there are times when our complaints are not justified, or at least less justified. And once we set aside what we think are unfair payment practices and realize this is a story about the kingdom, about grace, we could conclude that we get it, we have no problem with others receiving grace, no need to complain, but we do.

How do we feel about foxhole and deathbed conversions, people who live selfishly and recklessly until the very last moment and then embrace faith? How do we feel about people we think are less noble than we are, and worse sinners than we are, coming to Christ? We're all sinners, we all stand in need of grace, but some people need it more! We might not say it out loud, but we feel it deep down. In the words of an old Kris Kristoferson song, "Everybody's gotta have somebody to look down on ("Jesus Was a Capricorn")."

There is a story about a rabbi who gets on his knees at the bema and cries out, "O God, I am nothing, I am nothing." Seeing this act of piety, the president of the synagogue walks to the bema, gets on his

knees, and cries out, “O God, I am nothing, I am nothing.” At this point, a man known by few and not respected by them walks to the bema, gets on his knees, and cries out, “O God, I am nothing, I am nothing,” whereupon the president of the synagogue looks at the rabbi with disgust, saying, “Would you look at who thinks he is nothing!”

Arrogant humility is the ultimate oxymoron. Those who know their condition and receive mercy from God freely extend grace to others. We struggle with comparative feelings of worth, as well as a works-driven perspective on salvation, but Jesus rejects this thinking. God’s realm is like a vineyard where the owner gives all what they need, he says. It may seem unfair to us, but this is God’s business, and in the end, it is good news for us all!

I’m not sure any of this tells us exactly when it is okay to complain. There are times when our complaints are more justified than others, but God hears us with compassion whenever we express frustration. We are always encouraged to express whatever we feel to God. But once we have, we need to get on with life. The Israelites complain, God provides for their need, and then they continue their journey.

There is a scene in “The Last Crusade” in which Indiana Jones complains to his father about the latter’s parenting style, saying he wasn’t there enough, they didn’t talk much. Dr. Jones, Sr. insists he was a wonderful father. He never told Indiana to eat up, go to bed, wash his ears, or do his homework. He respected Indy’s privacy and taught him self-reliance.

After further debate, he says, “Okay, I’m here now. So, what do you want talk about?” “I... can’t think of... anything,” Indy says, to which his father replies, “Then, what are you complaining about? We have work to do!”

We all do! There is a time to complain and a time to refrain from complaining, and then, there is a time to get on with life. May God help us to do so!