

**September 24, 2017**

**TEXT: Exodus 16:2–15**

**TITLE: The Art of Complaining**

*By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf*

Most of us have levied our share of complaints—we've politely sent our mashed potatoes back to the kitchen when we found a hair on the plate, or we've filled out the proper form at the post office when a package we received arrives damaged. And we know that there's a right way and a wrong way to complain: its best to ask nicely for a resolution; to use "I statements" so that the other doesn't take things too personally; to go directly to the person with whom you have an issue rather than talking behind their back; to offer a potential solution along with your critique.

And so we practice asking nicely when we want our neighbor to finish cutting the grass before 9 pm, so that the sound of the lawn mower doesn't wake up our kids. Or we say things like:

"Oh, I'm sure you would have remembered to take out the trash if you hadn't of had such a hard day."

Or

"Its not that the soup is too cold—it's just that I like my soup extra hot"

We try to convince ourselves that a complaint really isn't a complaint—lest we risk appearing ungrateful or arrogant or rude. And we sometimes seem to forget that complaining has become such an integral part of our society that most major companies have whole departments in place just to handle complaints.

Our passages for this morning offer us stories in which people are no strangers to complaining. Whether the narrative features hungry, scared Israelites in the desert or laborers in the vineyard, Biblical complaining cuts out these niceties. In fact, the complainers seem to add a dose drama, with a splash of "how dare you!" self righteousness.

The complaints we hear in our passages today remind us of the child who cried that her parents never did anything nice for her when they refused to buy her another stuffed animal—in *Disneyland*. Passionate, dramatic, convicted, and often attached to a very short memory.

The laborers in the vineyard have forgotten that the terms of their agreement were honored. They had negotiated a fair wage and a fair wage was what they had received. They were not made more vulnerable or hurt by those who received the same wage for less work. They lost nothing in the deal.

And then there are the Israelites. Their memories were so short that their perceptions of the past became utterly distorted. Even slavery held greater appeal than their place in the desert.

And frankly we get it. The norms of our own meritocracy make us uneasy with workers being paid the same rate for half the work. Wages must be earned—as must things like degrees or promotions or titles. We easily forget that the system by which we earn our wages or degrees or promotions is weighted, scales tip to favor some to the detriment of others.

But we can surely leap to the defense of the Israelites in a heartbeat. They were hungry...maybe even starving. What were they supposed to do? They were speaking from fear and frankly, who could blame them? We get it. We feel their pain

As we hear these texts we remember that our tendency is to identify with those who are most like us. And so when we read these passages we identify with human weakness and fear and sense of rightness. We know how it feels to be vulnerable even when we are cared for. We know how it feels to doubt that we matter or will be kept safe, or that someone we once trusted really does have our back.

Because, you see, *we know how people are*. We know that even the sweetest neighbor doesn't always make good on their offer to make a meal after surgery. We know that our friends are too busy now to help us move in exchange for some beer and pizza like they did in college. And we know that even the kindest employer might pay a woman a little less for the same work because she has a husband at home who is surely bringing home the bacon, after all. And it's not because anyone is mean or bad, but just that people are limited.

We know that sometimes people we love and trust will not really look out for us when the going gets tough. And we know that systems of this world—even those constructed to protect—have inherited their share of brokenness too. We know that lots of times we have to fend for ourselves because no one else will, and that often that which is labeled complaining is really a courageous act of self-advocacy and personal agency seeking to right a larger wrong.

That's not always the case—but we've learned from experience that it is true enough of the time that we can't rest. We must alert, ready to make a move.

But the trouble is that we miss the message if we simply focus on our own identification with and of human limitation. If we fix our gaze on the relatable broken people in our text, we miss the story of a God who does things differently.

What we have alongside one another are two stories of grace. And frankly, grace doesn't always make sense. The laborers encounter an employer who chooses to be generous to those who have worked only part of the day—not because they deserved it but because he could afford it. He made sure that everyone went home with enough on

their pocket to feed their families, whether they worked 10 hours or two. Without taking away from some he gave to all.

And then we have God's provision of manna and quail in the wilderness. This food is no banquet, but it is sustenance for the journey that lies ahead. There is never enough to stash any away for a rainy day—unless the Sabbath is approaching and they need to gather food for two days. There's not extra for those with pantries or storehouses—but there is always enough for everyone.

When we take a step back and look at these texts we see that God is a God who provides—in spite of our ability to earn or secure. God provides—the same wage for all workers, the same food for all hungry bellies. And God's provision has a particular quality to it—one that might seem exciting to some or distressing to others. In God's economy, hierarchies are wiped away and distinctions diminished—but everyone has their daily bread.

Our texts show us a portrait of a God who hears God's people—complaints and murmurs and grumbles and all. And this God provides. Now it is true that the provision is more in line with the Rolling Stones song whose chorus says: "*you cant always get what you want, but if you try sometimes you just might find you get what you need.*" There are no jackpots for the day laborers, only decent wages. There are no banquet tables in the shadow of this valley of death—just flakey bread that looks like dew each morning.

They are reminders that in God's kingdom abundance is often measured by securing enough for as many people as possible, rather than trying to secure as much as possible for a chosen few. They are reminders of the leveling work that takes place in God's economy, in which no one is shown partiality or favoritism. We see a model that defies our cultural expectations, and offers a holy affirmation that all are created, all are redeemed and all are sustained by God's grace alone.

These texts include an invitation to trust in God. The call is not to a prosperity gospel message, but rather to trust that God isn't going to strand us in the wilderness. It's a call to dare to hope that God is who we hope God is—a God of love & a God of life—for us and for ALL of God's creatures. It's a challenging reminder that God might not like us any better than someone else—even if we've got good reason why we think God *should*—but that God loves us ALL, and God's care extends *even* to us.

What if we lived like we believed this? What if we lived like God could be trusted to care for us even if God was still caring for someone else? What if we could believe that God had enough love to offer that God could wind up loving *us* and our enemies at the same time?

I'm challenged to think, and even suggest, that such a belief could change the world. What if this left us feeling so secure that we no longer felt that our wellbeing hinged on our being better than or more favored than another? What if this message was filled

with enough good news that it could impact even the national healthcare debate or our international dialogue with North Korea. It might give our leaders the grace to say that all are welcome here, regardless of the country of their birth—and that all deserve the same full protection of the law, regardless of skin color, of gender, of sexual identity.

Those are ambitious optimistic ideas, I know. So let's at least start by allowing this good news to change us and our small corner of the world. Let's relax our gaze just enough to try to see things a bit more as God might, and let that truth make all the difference. Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

If...you are willing to look at everything that comes to you as coming to you from God, then there will be no end to the manna in your life...Jesus is God's manna in the wilderness, the one who reminds us day by day that we live because God provides not what we want, necessarily, but exactly what we need: some bread, some love, some breath, some wine, a relationship with this ordinary looking man, who comes from heaven to bring life to the world.<sup>1</sup>

Thanks be to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Bread of Angels, Barbara Brown Taylor p 10-11