

Have you ever travelled with a group?

Perhaps you have been part of a mission trip from St. Andrew's to Mexico or you have accompanied teens and young adults to Canada Youth for a week at Brock University in Ontario.

Travelling with a group can be exciting yet also exhausting if your expectations are not met or there are surprises along the way. It is always fun to attend a national or regional event and listen to the stories of what happened to folk en route.

For example last week a youth was travelling to Edmonton for a national Healing and Reconciliation event and his plane was delayed one day because of fog.

When I was at Capilano College in North Vancouver, the battery in my car died. It took me some time to get out of the parking lot because I had to find an Albertan, apparently only Albertans will have jumper cables on the coast.

It is fun to figure out how to get to a place when the GPS in your car rental doesn't work and you are not quite sure where the detour is taking you.

Pilgrims of the Camino de Santiago in Spain are often eager to share the life lessons they learned when they return home. Claire Marshall in a blog tells of how her journey enabled her to connect with others and most importantly reconnect with herself. Through blisters and back ache she learned to live in the present moment. By continually walking she learned there will be good and bad days, and that is OK, because that is how life is. "The sun will rise again." She says, "Conquering challenges leads to transformation."

In our scripture passage for today from Exodus we see the Israelites are on the move. In fact we learn that they are in the middle of their second month after escaping Egypt with 39 years and 10 months to go.

To set the scene the people of God were exhausted, disoriented, and they are bumping into one another.

The adrenaline of the flight from Egypt has worn off yet they are struggling to cope and trying to accept this unique place as home.

Their journey has not been one of leisure nor by choice, rather their flight resembles the path asylum seekers take or evacuees after a natural disaster. They left suddenly and quickly, probably with the clothes on their backs. While they are free from the tyranny of Pharaoh, they have not yet arrived in the Promised Land of milk and honey.

The circumstances surrounding the Israelites have thrown them into massive change. Being stripped of everything that was familiar, they are living on the edge. They are vulnerable to the elements and bad weather as well as stressed out by their new environment. Daily rhythms have changed and they now live with more uncertainty as reserves of water, fuel, food, and sleep are limited. The "new normal" for the people of God includes feelings of restlessness, confusion, disorientation and anxiety.

We get a sense of how they are coping in verse three. Speaking to Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, the Israelites said: "We wish that the Lord had killed us in Egypt. There we could at least sit down and eat meat and as much other food as we wanted. But you have brought us out into this desert to starve us all to death." (Good News Ex. 16:3)

The Israelites have become complainers and murmurers for they are angry with God and frustrated with their circumstances. “Oh, why did we ever leave Egypt?”

The people were not really grumbling against their diet but casting doubt on God’s power and omnipotence. The act of wandering in the wilderness has depleted them and they are discouraged, confused. They yearn for the life back home because the physical, psychological and spiritual demands of living in the wilderness are tough. The crush of the challenges of life are pressing in on them. We can see the Israelites being blinded by nostalgia, thinking their former days were so much better, rather than trusting in God to help them look forward with vision into the future.

Making a change in life is hard and it can be unsettling. Richard Rohr said, “We do not think ourselves into new ways of living, we live ourselves into new ways of thinking.” Listen to this again: “We do not think ourselves into new ways of living, we live ourselves into new ways of thinking.”

Having hope, being agile can help us face changing circumstances. If we don’t have this resilience and hope we can find ourselves burdened by resentment. If we allow embers of anger or bitterness to fester we can get stuck.

In A. A. Milne’s Winnie-the-Pooh and The House at Pooh Corner, there is the character Eeyore, a pessimistic, gloomy, depressed, old grey stuffed donkey who appears to be about chin-high to Pooh and about hip-high to Christopher Robin.

He has a long detachable tail with a pink bow on the end, of which he is very fond, but which he is also prone to losing.

Eeyore has a poor opinion of most of the other animals in the Forest and Eeyore’s favourite food is thistles.

He lives in the southeast corner of the Hundred Acre Wood, in an area labelled as “Eeyore’s Gloomy Place: Rather Boggy and Sad.”

Eeyore often brays in negative ways. His focus on the negative prevents him from seeing anything positive. His negativism reinforces itself so that negative outcomes and consequences are all he is able to see.

Have you ever spent time with people like this?

They can deplete our energy and discourage a team from going forward.

Negativity leads to grumbling and grumbling becomes complaining and if we let this simmer, it can turn into a more sinister form of murmuring. This can be a more dangerous behaviour.

While grumbling is out in the open, murmuring will go underground and can be toxic. Murmuring can happen when one person here talks to that person there and begins to say negative things about a situation or another person. Some people choose to be locked into a mindset that assumes and expects the worst. Murmuring can subvert those in leadership. It can communicate a false impression and encourage mistrust. It may lead to alliances made in secret to create harm.

Sadly, congregations can experience seasons when grumbling and complaints hurt the witness of followers of Christ. If a church is full of strife or is unable to strive for excellence because its focus is diverted, the people of God are not living up to their full potential as they seek to serve in the reign of God.

Although there is murmuring among the Israelites we see that God is very patient with them. God hears their

grumbings and reminds them of the promises already made. God not only hears their need for food but meets their need with a double blessing: Manna is provided in the morning and quail (meat) for dinner.

God uses the murmurings of the Israelites as a way to test the peoples' will and to see if they will abide in him. Working with the people, God tries to open their eyes to see the bounty that surrounds them. God gives daily bread, daily meat, just enough for all to be nourished for the daily journey to the Promised Land. The gift God offers is a relationship based on trust.

In our churches as we face all kinds of transitions, we need the gifts of adaptability, flexibility, openness to change and dependence on God. In this age of rapid change we are being called to be "grace-full," to share an abundance of grace with one another as we seek God's guidance in our life together.

One gift of discipleship that helps to counter grumbling is the spirit of mutual forbearance or patience. Listen to some examples of what that is from the New Testament.

In Romans 12:10: "Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves."

In Philippians 2:3: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves."

In Philippians 4:14. "Do everything without complaining or arguing."

Forbearance is a necessary quality in the life of a disciple. To forbear means to tolerate less than what is due; it means to be patient in dealing with difficult circumstances, to be gentle or calm, not easily provoked, and it calls for self-control.

In the Greek, the word Makrothumia, μακροθυμία literally means "long temper." Makro means long and thumia means temper or anger.

Makrothumia means long temper or patience, long suffering - essentially a long fuse. It is the ability to wait sufficient time before expressing anger. It is the ability to embrace steadfastness and staying-power.

Another way to think of makrothumia is 'the grace of getting along,' an essential gift for a congregation as it explores new practices in worship, creates new structures in governance or as it journeys through times of transition in ministerial leadership.

How do we make space for people who are different from us in order for them to have their needs met in worship so that they may take delight in God? This morning in the hymn sing there was patience to let different people call a hymn to sing. We may not like all the music we sing or listen to all the hymns in our living room during the week, but makrothumia means we are willing to make room for a variety of music or programmes in the church so that people are included and spiritually fed. The gift of makrothumia grants us the grace to be patient with others and to make room for the sake of others.

If you have planned a trip to Europe perhaps you have come across the guide books written by Rick Steves. He offers tours and those who wish to travel with him must agree to sign in advance a Tour Member Participation Agreement. This form includes some information on typical things one might expect to encounter on the way such as what happens if you get sick and need medical help. But if you wish to travel with Rick Steves you must also embrace and participate in his NO GRUMPS Policy.

Have you ever signed a NO GRUMPS Policy? It might be a good idea before embarking on a family road

trip!!

For Rick Steves he asks fellow-travellers to sign the No Grumps covenant so that people will embrace meeting and appreciating others. He knows our behaviour, good or bad, can affect the entire group. That is why he asks for people to practice considerate social behaviour with fellow tour members as well as with the local people they will encounter. Steves knows that if we respect one another, as well as people's habits and cultural differences our "grace" and "openness" will help create a caring and compassionate community.

As we in the church are intentional about adopting new practices or habits in our congregational life, or we even create behavioural covenants, if we have makrothumia, "the grace of getting along," our attitudes and our openness can help the church shift to embrace change in positive ways.

If we are patient and make our circle wider to include those who are different from us, we can be intentional in reaching out to a younger generation or the unchurched by risking to express our faith in new ways in worship and mission. If we are willing to trust God while encountering new situations and experiences we are being given an opportunity to grow and mature in our faith.

Living with "the grace of getting along with others" calls for humility, a willingness to learn to die to self, to be a living sacrifice, to seek the will of God and to live by faith. When we live with gentleness and patience we can influence the lives of others and bring them closer to God. When we live by faith we too may receive the strength and wisdom to forbear difficulties or challenges and we may discover Christ working in our lives and the lives of others to bring about peace and reconciliation.

This past Friday night and Saturday, the Session of St. Andrew's met for a retreat and at the same time I was with nine churches at Sylvan Lake. For many Christians in North America we are striving to go forward faithfully in mission but we are not sure of the way to go. At times life in our congregations can feel like we are in the wilderness and we have not yet arrived at our destination. I think God invites us to place our trust in each other and encourages us to build up the body of Christ with love. We are invited to be aware of our attitudes and the condition of our hearts. Are we living with makrothumia, an abundance of grace for others as well as patience and hope as we journey together in faith?

God takes delight in us and wants the best of us. We have already been blessed abundantly! As we journey with God may we place our trust in the Creator who answers our grumbling with grace, complaints with provision, and faithfulness with food. May we remember that our God is a generous and loving God whose grace overflows.

Amen.