Jim's Sermon September 24, 2023

I thought for a long time about a theme for today's sermon and made three or four false starts. There is a lot in these readings. But what finally stuck with me is an element in both the Exodus reading and the gospel that characterized the experience of the Israelites as they followed Moses through the desert for 40 years. It is certainly not something that is restricted to the Jewish race, but it has been the bread and butter of Jewish Comedians throughout history. What I want to talk about Complaining.

I think of the Jewish grandmother who was walking on the beach with her grandson when a giant wave came and pulled him out to sea. She looked up and cried out, "God, how could you do this? It's too hard to bear. Please bring him back." The next wave deposited her precious grandson on the beach, sputtering but alive. She looked at the boy then looked up to heaven, at the boy again, and then up to heaven again, and said, "Wasn't he wearing a hat?"
Or I think of the group of Jewish mothers having lunch at the local deli, and the waiter coming to their table after they've started eating and saying: "Is *anything* OK?"
Complaining is so common in Jewish culture, there is a special word for it: *kvetching*, which means complaining with lots of sights and eye rolls and dramatic shoulder drooping.

Chaim Steinmetz, a young rabbi from New York has this to say:
"Certainly kvetching is not the Jewish ideal. The Mishnah tells us that the truly wealthy man is the one who is content with his lot, not one who complains about its shortcomings. The Bible emphasizes over and over that the person of faith does not complain but places their trust in God. And because of this, it is tempting when reading the story of the Jews complaining in the desert to look down our noses at them. Grieving and crying, they complain that they are sick of eating manna; it is just too boring. Then, the complaint jumps to the absurd, when they say they would rather return to Egypt, where at least they had real bread to eat. At first glance this looks silly, and we are tempted to dismiss them with condescension. But actually, the lesson of this scripture is how ordinary and human kvetching is."

In today's Gospel we have yet another group of Kvetchers. This time the complaining is about the lack of fairness they see when their employer pays everyone the same daily wage, when they worked a full day and others worked only part of the day. Here it isn't even a matter of the complainers not getting what they want. Their complaint is that others got more than the complainers thought they should.

So let me ask: How many of you in the last few months, have (either in your head or out loud) complained about something, either not getting your way, or about someone else benefitting who you didn't think deserved it? Guilty.

Or we might have complained about life being too hard. Or about someone's driving. Guilty and Guilty.

The story in Exodus isn't designed to provoke finger pointing, but to help us recognize that we're not very different than the Jews in the desert.

To continue with Rabbi ***Steinmetz, he writes:***
"Kvetching is universal, not just a childish habit that people will simply grow out of. So how does one end kvetching? One could maintain a stiff upper lip or put on a happy face. And at times, it is important to do exactly that. But the problem is that changing one's outer demeanor will often fall short. It requires us to suppress our actual feelings; afterwards, we are often left grumbling inside.We are not commanded to change our human nature. Instead, we are invited to reflect on who we are. Our perspectives, priorities, and sense of purpose shape us; we only complain about things that we consider important. In the end, an empty soul will always be dissatisfied."

Complaining has a few sources, but almost always it is the expression of an unmet need. The biggest problem with complaining is that it identifies the source of our problem, our challenge, our unmet need outside of ourselves. If I find someone difficult to get along with, what do I do, I blame that person. Oh, that was easy. If I am unhappy there is always someone or something to blame. But why did the Jews grumble about having nothing but manna to eat? Rabbi ***Steinmetz*** says that a careful reading of the text indicates that their complaint arises from a lack of spirituality. The text interweaves the story of the complaints about meat (and the quails God sends in response to the complaints), with another story about Moses's disciples receiving the gift of prophecy. These two stories are linked by the Hebrew root word for gathering, he says. The people are gathering the quails that land around the camp at the same time that Moshe is gathering a group of future prophets. The contrast is clear: some gather birds, while others gather inspiration.

When we complain in the context of our church life, the question that we might ask ourselves is this: "How is my complaining contributing to the building up of the Body of Christ? How is it relevant to my core purpose for being here? In other words, how does complaining bring me closer to God and to the community?" And the answer is virtually always the same. It doesn't.

It is important to distinguish between complaining and expressing a need. What is the difference? When we express a need we are being direct, we are taking responsibility, we are solution focussed, we do not blame or judge, we are engaged in spiritual work, because needs are sacred, they are what connect us to God and to one another.

When we compliant we are placing ourselves in the role of victim, we are problem focussed, we are judging and criticizing, we are putting the responsibility to others, we are isolating ourselves from God, from others, from our selves.

Complaining will never cease; as long as desire exists, so will disappointment. We can always find plenty of things to complain about. So, try as we might we will never stop kvetching. What is important is that we develop the ability to see it for what it is.

This is why Jewish humour (including some of the parables of Jesus) is so powerful, why it is so enduring and why it is so funny, because it portrays life as it is and holds us up to scrutiny. Complaining only becomes worse when it becomes serious, as if the fact that my preferences are not being attended to is something that anyone besides myself cares about or should care about. It really is laughable.

There is an old Jewish joke about the prominent businessman who gets sick and is taken to the best hospital in town. A few days later, he abruptly transfers to a small hospital nearby, which is best known for its mediocrity. When he arrives, the attending physician is intrigued, wondering why this man left a world class facility to come to his humble hospital. So the attending physician quizzes his new patient about the previous hospital.
“Was the medical care not good enough?”
“No, the medical care was remarkable, with one doctor more brilliant than the next. I can’t complain.”
“Was the nursing care OK?”
“The nurses were absolute angels. I can’t complain.”
“What about the food and the rooms?”
“The food was exceptional, truly restaurant quality; the hospital rooms were just redecorated. I can’t complain.”
Finally, the doctor asks: “So why did you come here?”
“Here…I CAN complain!”
The real punch line to all of this is that as much as we complain, as much as we lose hope and feel overwhelmed, as much as we feel at times that we are abandoned, we never are. God is always there with abundant blessings, unconditional love and limitless mercy. God will always send quail.

Sometimes the best thing we can do when we hear ourselves complaining is to do what the great saints and the great comedians remind us to do, to laugh with recognition at our lack of faith; and to come again to God in prayer and in faith knowing that God cannot refuse us, anymore than a new groom could refuse his bride, or a mother her child.

Let us come to the altar with love and joy in our hearts for all that has been, all that is and all that will be.