

Grumbling and Gratitude
Exodus 16:2-15 and Matthew 20:1-16
Sept. 24, 2023
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Well, there we were at the worship and nurture meeting at the beginning of the month when Adrienne said we'd not yet gotten anyone for pulpit supply for today (the 24th). So, I pulled out my handy dandy little smart phone and looked up the lectionary scriptures for September 24. Exodus 16:2-15 and Matthew 20:1-16.

I did a quick read and there was a word both scripture readings that jumped out at me-- Grumbling. I switched off my phone and said, "I can do it!" Seemed like it was almost type casting. Grumbling... I do it all the time. I grumble about traffic, gas prices, inflation, weather (too cold, too hot, too gray and waaaay too rainy), the list is endless.

As much as I grumble, and yes I sure do, I'm kind of a piker compared to the Israelites as they wandered through the desert or the laborers in the vineyard when they received their day's pay. They did grumble greatly and it's interesting how it plays out in both instances.

Let's start with a definition of grumbling. Grumbling, according Oxford language dictionary, means to complain in a bad-tempered way. And, Boy howdy, did those Israelites complain. Remember, they had just been slaves in Egypt before Moses' leadership got them out from under the oppressive rule of Pharaoh.

It's good to remember here a little of Moses' background. He was familiar with life in the desert. He'd been a shepherd in the wilderness for 40 years when he served his father-in-law Jethro. He was accustomed to the harsh life out in the desert.

Not so much the Israelites. They were used to an agrarian world in the lush, life giving Nile delta. The desert was so foreign and terrifying to them.

Well it didn't take too long for things to get dicey out in the desert. Three days to be exact after making it through the Red Sea. They had problems finding good water at Marah, (back in Exodus 15). There was water, but it was undrinkable. This was the source of the first grumblings by the Israelites against Moses. In response to their grumblings, Moses cried out to the Lord with urgency and desperation. In Ralph Watson's commentary he says that , "often leaders see themselves as problem-solvers rather than pray-ers. Moses calls on God and God gives him a solution." Water problem solved.... check.

Now, only about a month to a month and a half after being freed from Egypt, and soon after the water problem was taken care of, the people ran out of the provisions they'd brought when they fled Egypt. Now they're hungry. So what do they do? Do they beseech God to provide sustenance for them? Do they ask for Moses to intercede to God with prayer? Do they give thanks for being delivered out of slavery? Nope... they grumble, or murmur, as it says in some translations. The **whole community** grumbled

against Moses and Aaron. Instead of remembering the harsh lives they'd had as Pharaohs slaves, they remembered sitting by fleshpots and eating their fill.

They said they would have been better off dying by the Lord's hand in Egypt, during the Passover, rather than starving to death in the desert. They were free from tyranny. But they were hungry so they grumbled.

Here is an important point: Yes, they grumbled to Moses and Aaron, but more importantly they were grumbling **against** the Lord and his provision for their lives and safety. The word grumbling is used 5 times in 7 verses. That's a lot of grumbling against the Lord. Something to note here and it's pretty important... if you didn't guess, grumbling is a **sin**. It shows a lack of belief in God. From James 5:9 "Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold the Judge is standing by the door." We may think we're getting away with grumbling, but God hears it all.

Grumbling reveals our rebellious attitude towards God. We, when we grumble or when the Israelites grumbled about the lack of food, are dissatisfied with God believing that He isn't giving us what is best. When I complain about the rain messing with my plans, I'm saying that I'm wiser, or my plans are more important than God's plans. So the Israelites grumbled about the lack of food. Did they cry out to God for food? Did they confess their faith in God who delivered them from slavery and thirst in the past? Do they ask Moses and Aaron to intercede for them? No to all They don't say a word to God, not a prayer, not a confession of faith, not a reference to God's promises. Nothing. BUT, did

God respond in anger? No. The God of infinite Grace heard their murmuring and grumbling and instead of punishing them, he fed them. Before Moses was even able to cry out to God, He heard the grumbling and responded in his magnificent way -- with nourishment. Quail (meat) at night and manna (bread) during the day. They learned to go out early in the morning and gather what they needed, and twice as much on the sixth day so they could observe the Sabbath. Jehovah Jireh, the God who provides God did provide. He does provide. He will provide. God certainly could have punished or destroyed the Israelites for their grumbling disbelief. He didn't. He showed grace and fed them.

For the rest of the journey until they reached the land of Canaan where they ate the food of the land, they ate manna. For 40 years as they wandered they were fed manna, their daily bread. Jehovah Jireh- the God who provides.

Now was grumbling limited to the Israelites and their desert journey? No, it certainly was not. There are mentions of grumbling, and warnings against it in both Old and New Testament-- as is evidence by our Gospel lesson.

In our Matthew reading, Jesus uses a parable to show God's grace and mercy even when there is grumbling. There are a few things to think about in this reading. First, it's the landowner going out to hire workers for his vineyard. Usually, a manager would do the hiring, but in this parable, the landowner himself went out to hire help. He starts out at

6am hiring some workers, telling them he'd pay them a denarius for the day. He comes back at 9am and sees more men in need of work so he hires them. This is repeated at noon and at 3pm. And then at 5pm he goes out for the 5th time and hires yet more laborers. Why does he keep going back to hire more people over and over again? Did he not realize in the morning how many he'd need for the day? Or, when he went where the men were milling around, did he think, "I can help these men feed their families. I have enough work in my vineyard. I'll do it." Interesting question to pose. Then at 6 he calls to his manager to pay the men who had toiled in his vineyard that day. He tells the manager to call all the workers over and pay them, starting with the last ones hired. Interesting. He pays them a denarius, which is certainly more than generous for an hour's work. As they go down the line to the ones that were hired earlier, they *all* received a denarius. When he got to the workers that had put in a full day's labor starting at 6am, he also paid them a denarius... Guess what they did? You got it. They grumbled against the landowner. He reminds them that he paid them what he promised them and asks them, in Matthew 20:15, "is your eye evil because I am good (or kind?)."

At the heart of this parable is covetousness. We covet what God gives others. We have a tendency, as the parable points out, to be resentful of what others receive from God. The point is God's grace, mercy and forgiveness are God's (and God's alone) to give away as God sees fit.. As a result of this, we covet God's promise to forgive and God's control

over who is forgiven and how they are forgiven. It's about our frustration with the grace of God as it applies not to us, but to others.

And then there is the last line of this reading, "so the last will be first and the first will be last." It is also said just a chapter earlier, Matthew 19:30 when Jesus tells about who will be seated in the thrones of heaven and who will not. It's also reiterated in Luke 13:30.

"People will come from East and West and North and South and will eat in the kingdom of God. Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last." We can look at Jesus as **both** the first and the last, the Alpha and Omega. We are *all* recipients of God's grace and God's gifts.

And yet, we still grumble. We grumble that we don't have a big house, or that our health is not what we'd like it to be. We grumble because we didn't get the fast line in the grocery store. We grumble about big things and we grumble about little things. We are covetous of what others have, of how God has blessed them and not us. Grumbling is a sin and it's exhausting. As CS Lewis wrote, "Hell begins with a grumbling mood, always complaining, always blaming others... but you are still distinct from it. You may even criticize it in yourself and wish you could stop it. But there may come a day when you can no longer. Then there will be no you left to criticize the mood or even to enjoy it, but just the grumble itself, going on forever like a machine. It is not a question of God "sending us" to hell. In each of us there is something growing, which will BE hell unless it is nipped in the bud."

But there is a remedy for grumbling and the hell it causes. Are you ready? Gratitude.

Gratitude is absolutely the antidote to grumbling. In Philippians 2:14-15, we're told, "Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world."

The Apostle Paul really understood human nature. It's not just what you do, it's also what's in your hearts when carrying it out. It's easy to get into grumbling and man, the downward spiral is quick. One grumble leads to another to another to another, and before you know it, you're stuck in a big pool of unhappiness, anger and resentment, floundering. When we encounter the minor frustrations and inconveniences of daily life, we have a choice to make: gratitude or grumbling. The two cannot co-exist. It's one or the other.

When we choose grumbling, we sin against God. Most of our grumbling and our complaints are rooted in our turning away from God rather than toward Him. Our self-focused grumbling comes from ingratitude, pride and unbelief. In our ingratitude, we fail to thank God for all His good gifts. We focus on what we lack rather in rejoicing in what God has given: In the case of the Israelites it was meat and manna. In the case of the vineyard workers, it was a fair day's wage given to all. In our pride, we think we know what's best for us. Rather than trusting God's plans, we want our own way. In our

unbelief, we don't trust God to give us what we need. We say to God; "What You've done isn't right. What You've given isn't enough. As Marissa Henley writes, "We need the Holy Spirit's help to pull these weeds from our grumbling hearts and instead grow gratitude, humility and dependence on the Lord. "

When we choose gratitude, we obey God and glorify Him as we can shine as lights to the world around us as the Philippians scripture describes.

We can give thanks instead of complaints. Giving thanks, being grateful is very important. Important enough that giving thanks is modeled for us at least 139 times in the Bible. We are commanded, encouraged to see thanksgiving modeled for us.

Gratitude causes us to remember that God is good and working in the brokenness. It shifts our focus to His Goodness. It's easy.... waaaay too easy to dwell on the negative to focus on what we don't have and what's going wrong. Look at our conversations. It's so easy to talk about the negative in our lives the things that irritate us, the people we think should do better. Look at the news, YouTube, talk radio and podcasts. Negativity rules the day. It's everywhere you look.

I'd like to share a poem by Eldred Herbert called "Humble and Grumble."

“Humble and Grumble” by Eldred Herbert

Humble and Grumble were identical twins,
And Humble was ever so meek;
Grumble did nothing but grumble all day,
Some may even call him a freak.
Humble was happy and everyone's friend,
Grumble was jealous of course;
Humble was happy to follow the Lord,
But Grumble, an immoral source.

Humble was never seen wearing a frown,
And Grumble, ne'er seen with a smile;
Humble won friends by just being himself,
But, Grumble, he won them by guile.
So Grumble, please follow Humble, your twin,
And Humble, don't grumble, I pray,
For grumble will make you like Grumble, your twin,
Please Grumble, be humble today

Gratitude is the antidote to the sickness of grumbling. It replaces coveting with contentment. Giving thanks to God allows us to see the blessings all around us. A sunset, a moonrise, a child's laugh, food and shelter, our church and our church family and most importantly God's presence and forgiveness. Even in our darkest hour there are signs of His grace all around us. And I'm working on not grumbling about the rain.