

Sermon Notes

A New People And Yet....

The Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost

The Reverend Mark Pruitt

Exodus 16:2-4,9-15

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

Then the LORD said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not."

Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining.'" And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. The LORD spoke to Moses and said, "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.'" "

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat."

Ephesians 4:1-16

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said,

"When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive;
he gave gifts to his people."

(When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

i

In the Old Testament lesson from Exodus (16:2-4, 9-15), we hear that the people of God complained – they grumbled against their leaders, Moses and Aaron because, having been freed by God from slavery under Pharaoh, they escaped to the desert and began to starve. They say: *"It would have been better to die back in Egypt with our bellies full, at least, than to starve in this desert."*

The people of God complained because; well, because *people*, sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, *complain*. It's what we do. We do it because, rightly, in an imperfect world, a fallen world, with imperfect people, fallen people, things go wrong. And, because, we either become blind to the ways in which excessive complaining, and habitual complaining corrode our outlook and our relationships—or, if we're not blind to this—because we just can't help ourselves. We caught, trapped, held in bondage to complaining.

We complain about the weather, the economy, the neighbors, the neighbor's dog, the demands of the job, the roads, the traffic, this administration, that administration, our health, our weight, our aches and pains, the poor service at the store...on and on we go. And now, with technology, we've opened a new Pandora's Box and created an even greater power to spread the culture of complaint: we can share our complaints with virtually the whole world. We can express our dissatisfaction often through social media to the leaders of government, industry, and entertainment, and other so that all who have ears to listen, or computers and cell phones to read from, can see texts, blogs, and tweets or complaint. This morning's paper had a presidential tweet taking a shot at our own LeBron James in very unpresidential way. Criticism, complaint, cut-downs, grumbling is everywhere.

No wonder the New Testament Letter of James called out the impulsivity, the lack of self-control in all of us, long ago.

6...the tongue is a fire. The tongue is an unrighteous world among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the cycle of nature,^[a] and set on fire by hell.^[b] 7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by humankind, 8 but no human being can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brethren, this ought not to be so

The tongue, the tweet, the text.....we need more self control!

ii

A 2012 article in *Psychology Today* stated that the average person complains 3 times before even leaving the house. (That sounds *high* to me, but I'll pay closer attention to my mornings!); and stated that the average person complains 15-30 times a day! (The 15 sounds *low* to me...but I'll pay attention to that, too.) To address this, the article recommended a procedure advanced by the *Organization for a Complaint Free World*. They recommended putting a wrist bracelet on in the morning. The bracelet would be moved by the subject from one wrist to the other as soon as he or she uttered a complaint. The idea was that the subject would be so annoyed with the changing of the bracelet that he or she would become more mindful of the surfacing complaint and would arrest the grumble before it got verbal, a process which, ideally, would lead to an attitude change.

That has a certain plausibility I think. I think it could help to reduce the kind of instinctive, habitual complaining that can work its way into a life and actually shape, in a bad way,

character. One of the seven dwarves, I recall, was named Grumpy. And we're all in danger of letting bad habits misshape our character.

But I see some problems with the moving wristband approach. First, if it's safe to assume that complaining happens often when driving, I'm not sure I want to add a bracelet change to the list of temptations – texting, phoning, sipping coffee – that already face drivers. “Well, you see, Officer, I was trying to improve me attitude, and the experiments means I had to.....”

Second, more importantly, the experiment only applies to vocalized complaints. Couldn't this encourage or leave unaddressed internal muttering and grumbling? Real psychological health is having a positive outlook from a true inner peace. Isn't this what we want? Isn't this the key to conquering the kind of grumbling that the book of Exodus laments, the kind that obscures the good things, the great things, that God is doing?

iii

Scripture holds out a better way to us. There is a message to us today about how to handle the complaining that goes beyond accurate corrective comments to a compulsion or to the hurtful tearing down of others or hindering enthusiasm for a project. What is it? It's to accept or identity as God's new people, God's new way of being human in the world—which is what it means to be a Christian, God's new person—to accept this and take on the commission to learn, as Paul puts it, “to speak the truth in love” as our “maturing” till we reach the “full statute of Christ.” This *is* something we have to *learn*. It's a daily challenge, lasting a lifetime...to speak the truth in love, or *with* love (which is the translation John Calvin preferred).

This verse has many virtues. In the time we have, I will name three: it's practical, it doesn't encouraging stifling our expression, and it will make us more alive (if we take it on as a daily project, lasting a lifetime) to God's transformation.

First, what could be more practical on a daily, even hourly basis, than to speak truthfully with respect and gentleness to others? What we are dealing with is not some peripheral topic of Christian theology—like the role of angels or what clergy wear. No, this is something about how to live out the second commandment—loving others—and the Golden Rule—speak as you would like to be spoken to—so that we can enjoy life more (for one thing). We know that quality relationships are central to living and loving well. And we know that communication is a key to quality relationships. So the apostle sets out before us God's wisdom for living with a maximal degree of truthfulness and harmony: learn to speak the truth with love.

In this, we see that God is concerned that every area of our lives—home, school, church, workplace, grocery stores and so on—have the highest degree of unity and truthfulness and harmony happening all the time. And each of us knows how things said sharply or scornfully in the name of truth can divide and scar. Each of knows, by contrast, how empowering it is to be helped by truthful but loving comment.

Second, the apostle starts with speaking the truth. Speaking! The second virtue I see here is that the vision of Paul for Christian disciples is in no way of silent, submissive folks who clam up, who pretend that nothing is wrong when something is, or who stifle speech. (Remember that

famous TV character who was always telling his wife—rudely—to “stifle.”) That’s not the vision. Christianity is about truth and truthfulness or it’s about nothing at all. We live from the good news that God has come and spoken truthfully about the our condition and about who he is. We see Jesus as the truth of God showing us how to live in the truth and more and more truthfully.

Speaking the truth with love will take courage. Why? Because sometime truthful speech will strain or threaten the relationship or have costly consequences. This week CNN reported in the Mueller inquiry that an accountant admitted to falsifying tax returns—designating \$900K as a loan when it was income—because the ‘client was a long-term client.’ She didn’t have the courage, she lamented, to speak the truth. Courage will be needed, but the Christian believes that what God commands us to do, God also gives us the power to do. It’s called empowering grace. And that same grace will help us to speak the truth with love and stay the course, patiently, in the relationship that we have challenged with the truth.

And third, here is something that happens if we chose to make speaking the truth with love our daily aim. It’s what happens anytime we take on a spiritually significant project that is at the core of Christian living—whether the project is the striving for purity, being vigilant over how we spend our money so we can be good stewards—whatever the project is, if it’s serious we will learn how to be more dependent upon God. We won’t be able to sustain speaking the truth with love over time, or over the whole range of our relationships, on our own.

We will ask for God’s help...for the courage we will need...for finding the right words or the right time to speak...for bearing the consequences that may follow. And when we become more intentionally dependent, we became more aware that God really is alive and at work in us. God is not slumbering or sleeping through our challenges. God is at work transforming us. And so we became more alive to the truth that God is alive. Slogans like “we are a new people” or “God is doing a new thing” won’t hang in the air as much as they will be in our hearts and spring from our own lips.

Our perceptions will change, by God’s grace. We will be chastened for times when we lacked courage to speak or love in speaking, when previously we would have brushed off our experience with “that’s the way life goes.” We will see, that is, patterns of avoidance that we didn’t recognize or suppressed before. And we will learn more about ourselves: how hard it I to speak lovingly when under pressures. And much more. But in all of this we will be more and more caught up in the transformation God has for us.

Don’t resist the new thing God is doing. Take on the daily charge, brothers, to speak the truth. Take on the charge, sisters, to speak the truth. And when you speak truthfully do it with brotherly and sisterly *love*, and you’ll see a change, you’ll be a change in this world of too much grumbling. Amen,

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