

Grumbling and Complaining

Grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ...

This week as I was preparing to speak to you I remembered a quote from Mark Twain...

He said, “don’t spend your life being a complainer – because 80% of the people you talk to don’t care - and the other 20% of the people believe you finally have what was coming to you”...

Listen , the truth is no one’s life is perfect (and either is the world that we live in)... and we can all find something to grumble about... everything from a job - to the politics we disagree with, to the way that the pandemic is affecting our lives – we might even feel the need to complain about our lot in life (how things aren’t fair – and how the world is going to hell in a handbasket)... there’s certainly a lot to complain about today...

but the problem with complaining (for those of us who are Christians) is that it prevents us from realizing what we do have... and maybe that’s why they say that *“complaints can’t live in a grateful heart”*...

In fact, there’s an old Arab proverb that says, *“I once complained that I had no shoes, and then I met a man who had no legs”*... (which is a reminder that things can always be worse – and every one of us is wise to remember that – even in these dark days)...

You know, there a story I heard (in reference to complaining) about a tour guide who worked at Blarney Castle in Ireland... and one day as he was working he met a group of travelers who were the ‘complaining’ type...

And these people complained about everything; they didn’t like the weather, or the food, their hotel accommodations, the prices of things... every possible thing made them grumble... but to make matters worse the tour guide had to inform them that Blarney Castle was closed due to the pandemic – and that they wouldn’t be able to kiss the Blarney Stone...

Well, as you might imagine these visitors were very angry and had no problem expressing their feelings to the tour guide... in fact, one of the women in the group

spoke up and said, “*do you mean to tell me that I’ve come all the way here - and I can’t even kiss the Blarney Stone?*”...

“*Well, you know,*” the tour guide said, “*according to legend, if you kiss someone who has kissed the stone, it’s the same as kissing the stone itself.*”...

“*And I suppose you’ve kissed the stone?*” said the very bitter old lady...

“*Even better!*” replied the tour guide... “*I’ve sat on it*”... (you have no idea how many people I’ve wanted to tell that joke to through the years)...

Now, although ‘constant complaining’ was never mentioned as one of the 7 deadly sins - I do see it as a sort of spiritual cancer... because not only does it fill a person with an ugly spirit – but it also makes it impossible for a person to appreciate the blessings they do have...

St. Paul once said in 1 Corinthians 10, “*Do not complain... do not murmur... do not grumble against God*” – and then goes on to say, “*as some of them did*” ...

And what Paul was referring to was the passage we just read this morning from Exodus 17 – where the Israelites have just been freed as slaves from Egypt and are now wandering in the wilderness (on their way to the Promised Land – which is often understood to be a reflection of our own spiritual journeys through life)... and even though they were still on their way to receiving the promises of God (just like we are) – they complained every step of the way...

Ever meet people like that?... people who complain all the time?... who are never happy?... who don’t even see the permanent scowl on their own faces?...

If so, you’ll get a sense of what the Israelites were like wandering in the desert... always saying, “*why me?*”... or “*why does this always happen to us?*”... sort of like - people who are always focused on the negative and always complaining about how bad they have it (ignoring the fact that some have it even worse)... and never able to see the ‘good’ in what they do have...

And I think the problem with always focusing on what we don’t have, or staying focused on the “*good ‘ole days’ when things were easier*” (or in our minds ‘better’) is that we also give up on what God is doing in our lives today... and might I say,

“to always complain about your life – is to lack faith and to grumble against God”...

I mean, think about that for a moment – if you can’t see the blessings in your life (how can you say that you see God?)... and even if you can list three things in your life right now that you don’t like – or hate – or wish weren’t going on right now (you serve yourself best in keeping a list of three things you do love – and that you are proud of)... and then move in the direction of embracing those good things...

And if you can’t do that – another choice you have is to start looking for solutions..

Now, had the Israelites, in our story this morning, trusted God - they too would have seen what God was about to do... God was already planning on giving them the land of Israel... Scripture even says that people in that day referred to it as the land of ‘milk and honey’ (because it would have room for them to shepherd sheep and goats (which produce milk) – and it was green and lush in other areas (where bees would pollinate the beautiful plants and flowers) ... in other words, it was a land that would allow the people to be self-sustainable (and not dependent like they were in Egypt)... a land of milk and honey...

and yet instead of being excited for all that was to come – the people of God spent all of their time complaining, grumbling and letting everyone (who would listen – like we hear many doing today) know how bad they had it... because they couldn’t see the blessings (and none of them were focused on God...

And friends, the same thing is true of our spiritual lives as well... no one ever said that life was going to be easy... because there will be struggles... there will be pain... there might even be great losses along the way...

But I am also a firm believer that (like it was for the Israelites making their way back to the Promised Land) that God gives us – *like I said last week* - (not always what we want) but what we need (when we need it the most)... and God was giving to the Israelites everything that they needed – **yet they failed to see it...**

and as Children of God we too are wise to hear the words of Joshua (1:9) when he says – **“Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.**

in other words, let every challenge be an opportunity to serve God (and not another reason to grumble and complain)...

Now listen, I understand that those words will fall on deaf ears – but I want to close with something that a woman I met (a while back) made me think about... she was a woman I met at a funeral home (who I spotted across the room wearing a big silver, cross around her neck)...

Not really knowing anyone I decided to do what I always do (and make friends with her)... and so – of course – I pointed to the one thing that I thought would provoke conversation and I said to this woman, “Nice cross – come here often!” (I mean, what do you say at a funeral home?)...

And after looking at me like I was crazy she surprised me and said, “*Actually I do*”... and she went on to tell me that about 7 years ago she lost a whole list of her loved ones (and the most painful being her 10 year old daughter)... and of course the conversation grew more serious immediately and she started telling me what that experience had been like...

and she said, “*You know Pastor – if you ever have to walk down that road yourself you may find yourself at the same crossroads that I found myself standing*” ... and trying to make sense of her loss she said, “*the first path was to accept God’s will and accept my loss – but I couldn’t do that so easily... because I just can’t accept that God wills 10 year old little girls to die like that*”...

“*And then there was the second path that lead me to search for intellectual answers – using science and reason to make sense of all of it... but this didn’t feel right either... how can you ever make sense of such a loss?*”....

And then she went on to say, “*But the only way that I have been able to find peace with my loss is through gratitude... and every single day when I wake up I remember something I never thought about before losing my daughter*” – (and this is what she said) “*that life is a gift (and none of us are entitled to it and we have to make the most of it) – which is why I no longer live my life sweating about the*

small stuff (but appreciating the time that I do have now – and trying every day to be the best person that I wanted to be for my daughter)”... and it’s when I do that (that’s where I meet Jesus)...

And friends, the point, I want all of us to see this morning, is obvious – don’t waste your time complaining and grumbling to God (as some in the wilderness did in our reading this morning from Exodus – or as many people feel comfortable doing today) but keep your eyes focused on the presence of the Lord (who promises us that these days will not last forever) and that in time – we too shall overcome...

But even more importantly – our faith will be strengthened because of it...

May the goodness of our Lord bring you peace in these days... May your faith be your shield and your hope... and may your witness to the love of Jesus Christ (be made known - in all that you do)...

In Jesus’ name we pray...

Amen!