

**September 24, 2023**  
**“No Use Complaining”**  
**Exodus 16:2-15 / Matthew 20:1-16**  
**Pastor Tim**

You probably know someone in your life who is prone to complaining. Or whining, as it's more disaffectionately known.

Perhaps you are that someone? No judgment.

Perhaps, at some level, we all are those someones. As a line from Jane Wagner's play, *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, puts it: "I personally believe we developed language because of our deep inner need to complain."

It's funny cause it's true, right?! Amen?

Perhaps, at some level, at different points in our lives, we are all those someones. Perhaps it's just in our nature to complain when things aren't the way we want them to be, or don't go the way we want them to.

Some people may complain more than others; some people tend to see the world through the half-empty glass. But maybe the primary difference is found in whether we verbalize our complaints or not?

Everyone knows a complainer, right, because they make themselves heard. Even if just mumbling under their breath.

There's an older guy, a regular volunteer at my other job, at the Media Food Bank, who is a notorious complainer. I knew it was bad when people started warning me about him before I ever met him.

We'll call him Bob. I have now experienced Bob first-hand. About a month or so ago, I let our volunteers know that we needed to start weighing a weekly food order that comes in from Trader Joe's. I explained why, even offered to do help with the weighing at the start.

But it was too much for Bob. Now mind you, he didn't complain directly to me. Just NEAR me. A steady series of mumbles as he walked past, back and forth. Back and forth. I got the gist. He even threw in some name-calling for good measure to get his point across.

I was stunned, but not surprised having been duly warned. I held my ground, managed pushing back at least a bit on his hostility in particular, but it was an altogether unpleasant experience.

That's Bob.

But what about the rest of us?

I don't think of myself as a complainer, but I know that when my complaining involves someone else, especially but not only someone else I don't know or know well, that I'm more likely to sit on it. Keep it to myself rather than risk confrontation or conflict. Mumble under my breath, or complain to someone else who's not involved.

Unless I'm driving. Just ask Amy and Gabe.

I'm not proud. I like to think I've gotten better, as I've gotten older, about at least verbalizing. Risking confrontation and conflict, finding healthier ways to express my dissatisfaction, disappointment, frustration, anger. But I remain – as we all do – a work in progress.

And I know, as most of us do, that sitting on our complaints, our dissatisfactions, our disappointments, our frustrations, our anger – even just grumbling like Bob – most often turns to passive aggression. Which, let's be honest, is no good for anyone.

As Shannon Alder writes, "Silence is a passive-aggressive grenade thrown by insecure people that want war, but they don't want the accountability of starting it."

In truth, I'm not sure that verbal, outspoken complainers are any less insecure than the rest of us. Grenades are grenades.

Take the Israelites. Fresh off their dramatic escape from Egypt, fresh into liberation – albeit liberation in the wilderness, they waste no time in complaining against Moses and his brother, Aaron.

They're hungry, and they see no plan to remedy their hunger.

"If only we had died by the hand of the Holy One 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."

A classic case of the devil you know being better than the devil you don't.

Insecurity, and for good reason. If you, like millions around the world, have ever been hungry and have not known when your next meal would come, or where it would come from, you get it.

Even if you haven't known hunger like that, you get it.

Now I'm sure you all also know someone who, when you ask them how they're doing, inevitably responds by saying, "I can't complain." Perhaps you are that someone – show of hands!

When someone says that to me, sometimes, most times actually, I respond by affirming that, of course, they can complain – and

either that they're welcome to complain to me if they want to vent, or just that I appreciate their CHOOSING not to.

In the end, the point is well-taken. What good would complaining do? What difference would it make? What's the use?

As Maya Angelou once said, "What you're supposed to do when you don't like a thing is change it. If you can't change it, change the way you think about it. Don't complain."

Nobody likes a complainer, right?

Or as the German spiritual teacher and self-help author, Eckhart Tolle has suggested, "See if you can catch yourself complaining, in either speech or thought, about a situation you find yourself in, what other people do or say, your surroundings, your life situation, even the weather. To complain is always nonacceptance of what is. It invariably carries an unconscious negative charge. When you complain, you make yourself into a victim. When you speak out, you are in your power. So change the situation by taking action or by speaking out if necessary or possible; leave the situation or accept it. All else is madness."

That's a Buddhist approach. Accept what it is – and either work to change it, or leave it if you can or must. All else is madness. All else is suffering.

The Israelites, as a collective, do complain. Unable to accept what is, and again, understandably so because they are hungry. And as the story goes, their complaining actually does them some good. It DOES make a difference. There IS use in their complaining.

When you're complaining about the weather, say, complaining is indeed nothing more than nonacceptance of what is. There is nothing you can do about it. It's out of your control.

But when you're complaining about climate change, say, complaining may be the first step that leads to speaking out. That leads to action. To doing something about it. To using your power. You gotta start somewhere!

When the Israelites complain about their hunger, perhaps they are simply asserting their power. Not realizing the power they already have as a community. AS a collective.

God hears them. And promises to rain bread from heaven for them. Enough – ENOUGH – for that day.

That is manna, from the Hebrew meaning, "what is it?" – as in, manna rained down from heaven and the Israelites didn't know what it was. They had to ask because they didn't recognize what ENOUGH looked like.

In a world of capitalist greed and self-serving individualism, we don't recognize what ENOUGH looks like. We aren't socialized or economized to consider, much less practice, the common good – which is nothing less than ENOUGH for all.

God ensured that manna would rain down each day for six days, a double portion on the sixth day so the Israelites could honor the sabbath on the seventh. Honor the covenant with God. Honor their faith that what God promises, God provides. Has provided. Will provide. And that is enough. For today. For all.

Manna.

If you read on you know that the Israelites succumb to their insecurity again, their fear of the unknown future – unable or unwilling to trust in God's promise or provision. They hoard and store away, as most of us do – eyes focused on what they WANT for an unknown tomorrow, not what they NEED for today. Enough. Manna.

Which brings us to the gospel text. Another parable from Jesus about the realm of heaven, the kingdom of God. And another parable involving a landowner and workers (a good plug for our upcoming Bible study – Jesus, Parables & Subversion!).

This one is found only in Matthew.

The landowner goes out early to hire day laborers for his vineyard. The poorest of the poor, not knowing if they will find work when they wake up in the morning.

The landowner hires the laborers and they get to work, having “agreed” to their daily wage. In fact, the “usual” daily wage we're told. A denarius in Greek, traditionally understood as enough to feed a large peasant family for one day; but it's safe to say, as many scholars do, that within the unjust economic circumstances of the day, it was far from a living wage.

But they agreed to it all the same. They are desperate and needed the work, and so some work is better than none.

The landowner goes out later that morning and hires more laborers, offering to “pay (them) whatever is right.” No details are discussed, and “whatever is right,” of course, is in the eyes of the landowner. Again, it’s safe to assume that it was not “right.” Just. A living wage.

We’re also not told that they “agree” to it as the first group did. But they, too, go and start working. Because what choice do they have? Any work is better than no work at all.

The landowner does this two more times, at noon and at the end of the day. Hires more laborers, with no mention in the text at all about wages. It’s worth noting, here, that the presence of so many workers in the marketplace, ALL DAY, indicates a context of high unemployment. Basic supply-and-demand economics reminds us that wages are not high when unemployment is high.

At the end of the day, all the laborers get paid – beginning with those who were hired last. Who worked only ONE hour. This would not have been common practice. Those first hired would have been first paid, and so would not have known what those last hired were paid.

In any case, at the end of the day, they get paid the same daily wage as all the others. Even those who were hired early that morning.

A situation worthy of complaint if ever there was one, and so we’re not surprised that all the laborers who worked more than the final hour “grumbled” against the landowner. Complained. We would too.

“These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.”

Indeed! It’s not fair, it’s not even close to fair.

The landowner thinks it is, arguing that they all agreed to work for the daily wage. It’s the landowner’s money, so the landowner has a right to be generous. Right? No mention, here, of how the landowner acquired the money. Or the land.

Notice how the parable ends, with the bold assertion that “the last will be first, and the first will be last.” At least that’s how the author of Matthew ends it, as scholars argue that the phrase was a Matthean editorial addition meant to tie together with the reference to first becoming last, and last first, in Jesus’ encounter with the rich young ruler immediately preceding this text.

The one where Jesus tells the rich young ruler to sell all his possessions and give them to the poor, and so the rich young ruler leaves in tears. “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

However you read it, this is clearly a parable about the realm of heaven, about the already coming kingdom of God, of love.

Read allegorically, including with the assertion that the last will be first and the first will be last, we could argue that Jesus is pointing to an entirely different paradigm. A radical reordering of the world we share – not one where the last wind up first and the first wind up last and so flip the script, but where there is no longer first and last.

And read this way, God has typically been understood as the landowner, a generous landowner, and so the laborers are invited to consider, in the context of God’s reordered kingdom, the needs of all the other laborers – not just themselves. They are invited to consider the common good, where all the workers leave with enough for the day. Manna.

But we must not lose sight of the fact that Jesus is sharing this parable with actual disaffected workers, day laborers, the poor, who know well the imbalance of power between them and the owning class.

This is where Jesus used parables as code. Code meant to “unveil reality,” as Paulo Freire described it. Meant to draw attention, shed light, on the harsh reality of prevailing unjust practices.

In a superficial reading of the parable, the landowner comes off looking generous, and the laborers ungrateful. That’s how the landowners would hear it.

But in code, the lens shifts. Laborers hearing this parable from Jesus are empowered to see, and see more clearly, how the landowner – an actual landowner, not God – plays the workers against each other. Redirecting their complaint, their anger, away from the landowner where it belongs, and instead toward each other. A classic capitalist ploy to keep protest at bay.

In this coded reading, it is the landowner who's the appropriate target of critique, not the laborers. Jesus hears and affirms the injustice, hears and affirms their righteous complaint, and assures them that in God's kingdom things will be different. Things are different. No more first and last, which is neither fair nor just. No more landowners and day laborers. Enough for all.

So perhaps there is some use in complaining after all. But only when complaining leads to speaking up and speaking out, to reconnection, to action, to change, to justice.

The story of manna and quail reminds us that God provides what God has promised, enough for each day. Enough for all. That promise is built into Creation itself.

Jesus' coded parable of the landowner and the laborers reminds us, as if we need reminding, that we're the ones who get in the way of God's promise and provision. Systems of oppression have always disrupted, and continue to, that divine promise and provision.

And so it is our divine calling in this world, led by those most impacted by those systems of oppression, to complain on our way to dismantling. To restoring. To living and working with eyes focused on bringing the already here-and-still coming realm of heaven, kingdom of God, kingdom of love to earth as it is in heaven.

Where there is no longer first and last. Where there is ALWAYS enough for all.

May it be so.