

March 11, 2018  
Exodus 17:1-7  
Complain, Complain, Complain  
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From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. <sup>2</sup> The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" <sup>3</sup> But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" <sup>4</sup> So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." <sup>5</sup> The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. <sup>6</sup> I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. <sup>7</sup> He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

If you were given two words to speak every ten years what do you think they would they be? Well it so happens that a young Catholic priest who decided to enter a monastery, joined a particularly strict sect. At his indoctrination, he was told by the abbot that all monks there were sworn to TOTAL silence. They could not speak one word at all. However, every ten years, they would be permitted to speak two words.

Well, after 10 years of total silence, the abbot indicated it was now time for him to speak his two words. The monk said, "Bed hard!" And then he resumed his silent study and work.

Another 10 years passed and the abbot again indicated it was time for him to speak his two words. The monk said, "Food bad!" And then he resumed his silent study and work.

Another 10 years passed and the abbot again indicated it was time for him to speak his two words. The monk said, "I quit!"

The abbot shook his head and said, "I knew this was coming. You've done nothing but complain for the past 30 years!"

Comedian and actress Lilly Tomlin once said, "I personally believe we developed language because of our deep inner need to complain."

Complain, complain, complain. All of us do it at least some of the time. But it would appear that the Israelites made it their daily mantra. After 400 years of slavery, they are freed by God. They have their whole future and the future of their children before them in a new way. Yet all they seem to be able to do is complain.

Complaining – it’s like a disease. It infects us and when it does, it takes us over. We are helpless before its power. And it embitters our souls and drives the people around us who have to listen to it crazy.

Certainly the complaining of the Israelites in the wilderness was driving God and Moses nuts. In fact, God says that their complaining is doing two things:

- a) It is “testing” God and
- b) And it is questions God’s faithfulness: Over and over again the question that is posed by the people is: “Is the LORD among us or not?”

These are serious breeches. Yet, God chose and continues to choose us complainers for a reason.

Because, often at the core of one whose default is complaint, is an insatiable spiritual hunger for God, and an insatiable appetite for human intimacy. It is an attempt to find connection to a solid other in a situation in which one feels bereft – bereft of meaning, bereft of love, bereft of comfort for one’s soul.

But the irony is that the very thing that is a sign of one’s desire for a deeper, more satisfying connection with God and others – namely complaining - is exactly the thing that will almost guarantee that one will remain disconnected. I am not talking about sharing with another what you need. I am talking about complaining. There is a difference. Sharing what you need makes you vulnerable while complaining leads you to attack by assigning blame. And that is more destructive to a community than anthrax – tearing at the soul, picking apart people; and making real fellowship impossible.

But at the root of complaint there is a seed – a potential for goodness and communion, placed in the human heart *by* God for communion *with* God and communion *with* others – a potential that, while good, is being expressed in the absolute wrong way.

I think God chose the Hebrew people and that God chooses all of us complainers because God sees past the complaint to that potential – the potential for fostering deep and abiding relationships

And complain they did. That God wasn’t doing enough to allay their fears about an uncertain future. The pillar of fire, the column of cloud, the defeat of the entire army of Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea – not enough, they complained. But be reminded, these are a people who have had 400 years of practice just barely surviving as slaves. 400 years of learning not to trust anyone but family. 400 years of learning to live with little more than a faint hope of God.

So there’s poor Moses, whom God has called to transform a climate of complaint into a culture of connection: an overqualified nanny running about trying to pacify whoever might complain next – about a difficult situation that even vexed Moses from time to time.

But when God looked at his people, he saw not what they seemed to be – a bunch of complainers

– but what he knew they could become – a people among whom God could live and move and work out God’s creative purposes. Of course, their complaining was so bad that even God took some convincing by Moses of this from time to time.

But together, God and Moses stick with them beyond all reason – sometimes patiently and sometimes not – but always trying to provide a cure for their complaining.

There are, in fact, four remedies that God offers as cures for complaining. But be warned, the cure can seem at times, worse than the disease:

1. One cure for complaining that God offers is to do something to foster a sudden insight that things in the life of the Israelites could be much worse:

If we were to read on we would discover that at one point, God sends poisonous serpents among the people. Many are bitten; some die. They quickly realize that things could be worse – much worse and they repent of their complaining.

This reminds me of the story of the cowboy who was known for his penchant for complaining. He seemed to have the knack for finding something wrong with even the most joyous occasions and the most lavish of gifts.

Well, one day, he was driving down a dirt road, his dog riding in back of the pickup truck, his faithful horse in the trailer behind. He failed to negotiate a curve and had a terrible accident. He lay there for some time, unable to move but completely conscious.

Soon, a highway patrol officer came on the scene. An animal lover, he saw the horse first. Realizing the serious nature of its injuries, he drew his service revolver and put the animal out of his misery. He walked around the accident and found the dog, also hurt critically. He couldn't bear to hear it whine in pain, so he ended the dog's suffering as well.

Finally he located the cowboy – who suffered multiple fractures – off in the weeds. “Hey, are you okay?” the cop asked. The cowboy took one look at the smoking revolver in the trooper's hand and quickly replied, “Never felt better in my life!”

One of the quickest cures for complaining is realizing without a doubt just how much worse things could be. However, while changing one’s perspective, it offers no real solution. So the complaining is bound to return.

2. That’s why God offers another cure for complaining that goes deeper: relief of intense suffering.

This will usually not only stop all complaining but will result in the experience of sudden joy. At this point, usually all complaining stops; after all what could be better than relief from suffering? However, there is only one problem with this kind of cure – it is only temporary.

The Israelites were starving; they complained; God gave them the manna from heaven to eat. They were overjoyed. But it wasn't long until they became tired of this stuff; they complained again that they were tired of eating that old manna; God gave them quail to eat. They quit complaining. Then, in today's text they got thirsty; they complained; God provided them water from the rock. They quit complaining. And on it went.

One cure for complaining is the relief of suffering. But if this is all one does to attack the problem it should be known that this will be an ongoing work that never ends. Because as our good Buddhist brothers and sisters remind us, "All life is suffering."

3. A third cure for complaining that God offers and which is much longer-lasting is: receiving a new understanding of the suffering coupled with patience.

If I understand something of the larger picture that is beyond just me and my immediate needs but serves some higher purpose, I am able to endure hardship with little or no complaint. Nothing brings a joy that is deeper, or a calling that is more unshakeable than a conviction that you are serving the plan of a loving God for the betterment of all humankind.

But understanding, if it comes at all, takes time, and effort. It would take the Israelites forty years of wandering to reach this – to understand that God had called them for something more special and a future more bright than at any other time in history. Another drawback of Human understanding is that it has its limits. Ultimately there is a mystery to God and to life that is beyond our comprehension.

4. That's why the ultimate cure for complaining that God provides is to be found in trust, born of the experience that you are unconditionally loved and thus also capable of loving unconditionally. It is to experience this God as trustworthy – one who is powerful enough and loving enough to sustain us through anything and to ultimately provide us with exactly what we need and what we truly desire – a relationship with the source of love and a community of love in which God is at the center to which we know we belong. As the scriptures will go on to show, there is nothing more powerful than a community of people who know that they are loved by God and chosen by God for a purpose.

Complaining may be a sign of a deeper gift for connection but by itself it is like poison in the belly of a bitter soul that hates to be alone. So it spreads, it infects, it subverts, it multiples ... until the community can become one bitter belly, full of illness, leaving God little wiggle room.

In fact, the complaining of the Israelites led them to consider breaking their commitment to God and to one another by murdering Moses. Murderous violence is finally the "reasonable" solution of the sin-sick soul that only knows how to complain. In fact, it is symptomatic of the very sick culture in which we now live.

So, what's the prognosis for an uncured complaint epidemic?

Fortunately with God, it is favorable. With God, we are assured that we *are* somebody – that we

are valuable; we are assured that we belong; with God, in Christ, our lives are attributed infinite meaning and value.

In the Movie titled, *A Lesson Before Dying*, there is a young African American man on death row by the name of Jefferson. He was caught by police officers at the wrong time, having been with two friends in the wrong place.

Within hours he was arrested as the accessory after-the-fact... and blamed with the murder of two men shot who had actually been shot by one of the man's so called "friends!"

He had been considered to be one of the young African-American men in that very tough neighborhood, "who would make it!" Although, he had completed 4 years of High School, with stellar behavior, his reputation under teacher, Grant Wiggins, did not protect him. The Prosecutor referred to Jefferson in his closing wrap-up statement, as "a taker who did not know how to change."

Jefferson was thus sentenced to death row and became embittered. So, his grandmother enlisted the help of his beloved teacher, Grant, "to visit him everyday in prison so that he could teach him 'how to die like a man.'"

During each visit, Jefferson paced up and down his cell and asked Grant Wiggins many questions. Grant admitted that he did not know all of the answers. At the last day's visit before Jefferson was either to be executed or freed, it came time for Grant 'to say good-bye.' It is at this point that Jefferson makes one of his grandest statements of summing-up his gratitude for Grant. "Nobody ever make me think I'm somebody before!"

"Nobody ever make me think I'm somebody before!"

That's what God desires to do for us – in spite of all that may appear wrong – God finally offers a cure for the complaint disease through offering us Jesus – the one who shows us that the way to ecstasy and deep joy in this life is not *around* suffering but through the very heart of it. So, it is through Christ and his suffering that God reminds us that we *are* somebody – all of us.

So, let's begin our treatment of the complaining disease: let's turn to the Christ cure, knowing that those in Christ live and forgive like Christ, heal and lift up like Christ, welcome and affirm like Christ, love and forbear like Christ, suffer and endure like Christ, do acts of kindness and mercy like Christ. For through Christ, we know without a doubt that we are somebody – even when nothing seems to be going our way.

Let us pray

Gracious God relieve us of our complaining. Give us faith that surpasses all understanding that we may be patient, knowing that in spite of any present discontent or suffering, you are sovereign and in charge. And now bless these gifts that they your good news may reach the complainers of this world just in time to turn considered violence into humble joy. In Christ's name we pray, Amen