

September 24, 2017
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

“A Fine Whine”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Exodus 16:2-15 ~ Matthew 20:1-16

Did you ever just have one of those weeks? You know when it seems like everything that was supposed to happen didn't ... and everything that wasn't supposed to did. I can handle the big stuff pretty well (after all that's why I get paid the big bucks) but it's the little stuff that drives me nuts. This week I got into a giant hassle with my insurance company ... I lost my debit card ... and my standby laptop computer at home ... the one with all my favorite recipes on it ... seems to have given up the ghost. It's not the jaws of the alligators that get you ... it's the nibbling of the ducks. So, I threw myself a little pity party and whined about all of it to John. He nodded knowingly, gave me a big hug and promptly asked “what's for supper?” The man has an uncanny knack for putting things in perspective! As the old Arab proverb goes, *“The dogs keep barking, but the caravan moves on.”*

Whether our complaints are trivial or significant ... whether they are peripheral or ultimate ... every complaint adds to the sea of negativity that robs us of energy, enthusiasm, and life ... so that's why our pity parties can't last too long. Whining is contagious. When I give in to it I find myself becoming more and more negative. I sink into cynicism. Do you know what a cynic is? According to Sydney Harris, *“A cynic is not merely one who reads bitter lessons from the past; he (or she!) is one who is prematurely disappointed in the future.”* Well, that's not Christian, is it? Christians believe that a loving God holds a good future secure. But when I get in that mood, I am a misery to everyone. My first words are why something won't work ... how messed up everything is ... how useless it is even to try. And then it occurs to me ... I better do something to snap out of it. That isn't who I want to be. That isn't where I need to stay. I better pray. I better sit in silence with God, because I need an attitude adjustment. Because when I sulk, it doesn't really matter whether what has caused me to be negative is a matter of real importance ... or just a string of petty gripes. If I stay there, I'm going to do damage to myself and others with my wheedling and whining, ... with my carping and complaining ... with my waa, waa, waa!

That had to be what Moses and Aaron were feeling when the Israelites began to grumble in the wilderness. They had faced down Pharaoh. They had escaped the Egyptian Armored Cavalry Divisions. They had led the Israelites safely through the sea to freedom. They were on their way to God's good promised land. And how did the people respond? They didn't give Moses a medal or a plaque ... or a beautiful quilt with squares representing each of the twelve tribes. They didn't even say “thanks!” No, they whined! “Are we there yet?” “This desert is too hot!” “Are we lost?” “How much farther is it?” “I'm hungry!” And on, and on and on. Naturally Moses felt misunderstood and abused, so what did he do? He said, “Don't come whining to me!” Then he went and whined to God. Not the last time we will see this pattern in the story of the Exodus ... or the history of the church.

God heard their complaint, which is the heart of the Exodus story from the very beginning ... God heard their cries from cruel slavery in Egypt and called Moses to set the whole deliverance in motion. Our God is a listening God. God hears our complaints. Thanks be to God!

God heard the Israelites' grievances and provided them with bread from heaven, *manna*, a name derived from the Hebrew word which literally means "What is it?" because when Moses said, "Eat this!" the people said, "What is it?!" The Book of Numbers says that *"the manna was like coriander seed, and its color was like the color of gum resin. The people went around and gathered it, ground it in mills or beat it in mortars, then boiled it in pots and made cakes of it; and the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil"* (Num 11:7-8).

God heard their complaint, and God provided ... not what they wanted (steak and potatoes) but what they needed (their daily bread) ... not more than they needed, but just what they needed (enough for this one day). And what did the Israelites do? According to the story in Numbers 11, they didn't have a Thanksgiving service. They didn't praise God or promise that they would follow forever after, no matter what. No, they whined! They were eating. They were full. They were feasting on the riches of God's grace. But they were dining and whining at the same time!

They were tired of manna. There is only so much they could do with it ... fried manna, boiled manna, baked manna, broiled manna, manna fritters, manna with banana, manna scampi, manna etouff . Again, from the Book of Numbers they said, *"If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."* (Numbers 11:4-6). They whined so much that God finally said, "That's enough. Don't come whining to me! You want meat? I'll give you meat until it comes out of your noses!" Really, you can look it up. That's just what God said right there in Numbers 11:20. So, God put them on that high protein Atkins Diet and said, "Be careful what you pray for because you just might get it. And instead of whining to me about what you want all the time, why don't you ask me what I want ... and trust me to provide what you need?"

Sometimes when people whine and complain they have a good reason. And the first thing we need to do is listen and ask, "What can I do to help here? Where am I at fault in this? How can I support you and help you remedy this problem?"

Just as often though, people don't actually whine about what's really bothering them. Sometimes, they don't even know what's really bothering them except they feel negative and need to let us know it. So, "You need a haircut because you look like a bum" may actually mean "I am angry and heartbroken that my teenaged son seems to hate me, and we can't get along." "You shouldn't end a sentence with a preposition" may actually mean, "I don't feel like I matter anymore now that I'm no longer teaching English at the high school." "Lord, I'm angry" may actually mean "Lord, I'm scared. Lord, I'm lonely. Lord, I'm having trouble trusting you." So sometimes, when people whine, they aren't really complaining about you. They're crying out for your attention. They're crying out for your help because they're in pain ... and pain can bring out people's darkness. But love means hanging in there with their negativity and whining and darkness without becoming negative and whiny and dark yourself.

You know, that's what Jesus did. He absorbed all the pain, and all the whining, angry, darkness of the world into the cross, and said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

That's how I would encourage you to hear the whines of those around you, and then respond with a strong dose of love.

But it would appear from the Exodus stories that even God has limits ... that sometimes what God thinks we need is not a tender pat on the back but a swift kick in the pants. "Quit your whining," God says. "Put it in perspective. Look at the big picture here. Don't grind everybody up in trivialities. Put yourself in perspective. Stop making yourself the center of the universe."

So, I would encourage you to bear one another's burdens ... to be tender and patient in listening to those who need an ear to hear their whines ... and love them anyway. But where it comes to your own negativity, let me offer a few simple ways to test a "fine whine."

First, ask yourself if the thing that is bothering you really matters. If it does, you need to do something about it. If it doesn't, let it go. If you can't let it go, you might want to ask yourself why this is bothering you so much. Before you dump it on a friend or co-worker or partner or even God, ask yourself what it is that you're so unhappy about. Is it actually this particular thing, or is it something else ... something you may even have a hard time admitting? As often as not, our whines are a symptom of what's going on inside us, and that's what we need to address.

Second, are you taking it to the right person? If not, it might just be gossip, and that does damage to everyone involved. There's no use whining to the person who can't do anything about it but feel negative, too.

Third, consider the effect of your complaint on the person with whom you share it. Do you realize on average it takes about ten positive remarks to balance a single negative one? Is your complaint worth the damage it might do?

Fourth, consider what ways you may have contributed to the problem and how you might offer to help with its solution. Consider, too, the other people in the group whose opinions might differ from yours.

Finally, find ways which express your concern in a context of mutual respect and trust. Seek resolution, not punishment. Seek mutual solutions that strengthen relationships for the future ... not win/lose solutions that leave people frustrated and discouraged and relationships severed. Don't let a minor complaint become a major division. As Ernest Campbell observed "Every battle isn't Armageddon."

Please understand, I'm certainly *not* talking to those of you who are hurting and need someone to pray with you. That's not whining. I'm *not* talking to you hard working First Congregational UCCers who feel passionate about some issue. That's not whining. I'm *not* talking to anybody whose feelings I might have hurt. If that is ever the case, *please* come talk to me. I can't know what I don't know ... but I do know that the only way out of a misunderstanding is through it. Life is too short to waste on whining. Life is too precious to fritter away on negativity. Our mission together is too important to be sacrificed to the nibbling of the ducks, even when we are the ducks. I need positive people to help me keep from getting negative. We need to do that for each other. Don't you think that's true? Okay then, I'm done whining ... for now.

May we pray?

Lord you are so patient with us. Help us to be patient with each other and listen to those who are hurting and need to share. Let us be a community who bear one another's burdens. But help us to keep ourselves in perspective and keep our carping to a minimum. We have so much more to say thanks over than we have to complain about. Give us a positive and grateful spirit, and let us share with the world what you have given us ... a reason to hope ... a reason to rejoice, in Jesus' name. Amen.