

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 17th Sunday After Pentecost, Oct. 1, 2017
World Communion Sunday

Grumble, Grumble, Grumble!

October 1, 2017

Exodus 17:1-7

Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt. Were they happy to have been released from slavery and to be headed for a promised land? Probably, at least initially, but that quickly changed to grumbling and dissatisfaction. God's promises were quickly forgotten as they faced an unknown future. They knew what Egypt held for them and had nostalgia for it. It wasn't a bed of roses but at least they knew what to expect. They had food and water and the bare necessities of life. It certainly wasn't an easy life but at least it was familiar to them.

After they left Egypt they were pursued by Pharaoh's army. Seeing the army coming, they feared death and longed to be back in Egypt. At least there they knew what to expect. But their concerns were for naught. God told Moses to hold his staff over the waters of the Red Sea and the waters divided. They were able to escape. God heard their prayers and gave them a path to freedom.

They were ecstatic and celebrated their gratitude to God with dancing for three days, but their excitement didn't last. The grumbling began anew and they longed to be back in Egypt.

Slavery was a known quantity. Freedom was not. Slavery was comfortable. They knew what to expect. Freedom, on the other hand, was something new, and they had no idea what the future would bring.

They arrived at a place called Marah. There was water at Marah, but it was bitter and undrinkable and the grumbling was as bad as ever. God intervened and showed Moses a piece of wood which he tossed into the water. The water suddenly became fit to drink. Even so the Israelites still longed to be back in Egypt. At least they knew what to expect there.

Next the group came to Elim, a place with much good water and palm trees. It was an oasis. They camped there and Egypt was forgotten for a short while.

Then they came to the Desert of Sin and food became scarce. Once again the

grumbling arose. *“If only we had died by the Lord’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted ... you have brought us out into this desert to ... starve ... to death.”*

Grumble and complain they did and God gave them manna to eat each day and quail in the evening. God met their needs.

They were told to gather only as much food as they needed --- nothing extra. Some of them gathered too much and it quickly spoiled. The only exception was the sixth day of each week. Then they could gather enough for two days and it would not go bad. Ant other time it would spoil. God provided what they needed, when they needed it.

Grumbling began again when they camped at Rephidim. There was no water there and the people said to Moses, *“Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?”*

Again the Lord intervened and told Moses to strike a rock at Horeb with his staff. When he did this, water came out of the rock.

Brian Erickson ⁽¹⁾ wrote that *“Nostalgia never leads you forward, because nostalgia casts an impossible standard --- a candy-coated much improved rendering of what once was ... The present can never match an idealized past, leaving us stuck in the quicksand of our edited memories, perpetually ungrateful for the place we now find ourselves.”*

The Israelites longed for their edited version of life in Egypt, and we also tend to long for edited versions of the past.

Brian Erickson ⁽¹⁾ put it this way. *“This postmiraculous stress disorder still strikes God’s people leading some faithful Christians to remember earlier days through a Norman Rockwell revisionist lens. Whether it is holding on to the church of our youth (which ceased to exist many years ago) or clinging to a season of our own lives in which things were better than they are now, nostalgia quietly steals our joy and makes us indifferent to the flowing streams of living water God has provided.”*

In the case of this small church we must be careful not to cling to the past when the congregation was much larger than it is now and be satisfied with the past. It is vital that we look to the Promised Land ahead and exert every effort to bring new people into this congregation. That requires actively working to draw people in.

The Israelites, with their grumbling, did not look to the future and God allowed

them to wander in circles for forty years until no one was left who remembered what it was like to be a slave in Egypt.

God miraculously provided what the Israelites needed, their grumbling notwithstanding.

These Days (Sept. 24, 2014) said, *“Whining in one thing. But honest expression of need and emotion is another. Honesty in our spiritual life opens the way to a richer, deeper relationship with the One who loves us wherever we are ...”*

We can grumble and whine about the decline in our membership, or we can look to the future and do something about it.

The original Israelites died off in 40 years or wandering but were replaced by a new generation. There will not be a new generation in this church. The present generation will eventually be gone and this church will cease to exist unless you go out and bring in a new generation. Will you do it?

Amen.

(1) Brian Erickson in “A Preacher’s Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series”,
Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2016

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011