

CMCL
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Susan Gascho-Cooke

So, the title of today's sermon comes from someone who never uttered a sermon in her life, though she's probably *at least* a runner-up in the category of most sermons listened to *ever*. Because this is a quote from my Grandma Brunk, who was married to a traveling, preaching, tent evangelist who would preach not just weekly, but often daily when they were on the road, and she was always there, in the front row, all ears. George was well-known in the Mennonite world of his day for his height, his hellfire and his way with words. But only those who knew her well, had the exquisite experience of Margaret's eloquence, which to my mind, more than rivaled George's in its way. She was from the mountains of western Virginia, close to West Virginia and had the most beautiful mountain—Southern accent.

She was fluent in the descriptive, metaphor-laden sayings of that region, too. There wasn't just "power in the Blood" – there was PARE, PARE, wonder-working PARE in it". You never heard her say she "went through" the store, no – she "trotted 'round the aisles". She never preached a sermon, nor claimed to want to, so in order to experience her linguistic genius, you had to have a reason to find yourself "just a-settin' on the porch" with her, snapping peas or shuckin' "roas'nears" (southern for corn on the cob. When she made a good play at Skip-Bo, her card game of choice she'd never say, "Lucky me!" but rather: "Even a blind hog finds an acorn now 'n again."

I wish I could say these words the way she said them. It sounds condescendingly "quaint" when I try to copy them, I can't convey the beauty and creativity, almost like jazz or bluegrass improvisation, in how she peppered her conversation with these riffs. "Somehow'r uther," listening to her made you want to rise to the occasion and up the literary quality of your own contributions to the conversation. One of the phrases I remember hearing many times, was something she'd say immediately after complaining about something. "Butcha never hear ME murmur or complain." Of course, she was acknowledging that she just HAD, but she was trying not to take herself so seriously, *and in the same breath also* confessing one of the cardinal sins of any saintly woman, from a well-respected Bible-reading, God-fearing martyr tradition: **complaining**. True to form, though, she went right for the King James gold, & trotted out the very phrase that those sinful Israelites employed, just like God and King James intended for now and evermore: "murmuring and complaining".

I'm sorry—not sorry for such a lengthy intro featuring my grandmother, because she never got much air-time in her day, and it has given me such great joy to have her laughing voice in my head all week as I've pored over this story of the Israelites' murmuring and complaining. "Butcha never heard *me* murmur or complain." It's a *fascinating* story, too – these Exodus stories are literary gold. And if you're of such a mind, I encourage you to go home and dive into some Numbers, too. Numbers 11 has a parallel telling of this story that goes into a lot more detail with a lot more drama. Just as the gospels give multiple accounts of Jesus' ministry, so the Old Testament has multiple

tellings of some of its stories. So, Moses, a Hebrew raised with one foot in his peoples' world, and one foot in the household of the Pharaoh of Egypt, was confronted by the voice of God in a burning bush; has responded to God's call to stand up to the Pharaoh and lead the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt. Miraculously, it worked, the Red Sea parted, the Hebrews were able to walk to freedom on dry land and the armies of their oppressors were drowned in the very same waters that parted for the Israelites.

And in today's installment, Moses, his brother & second-in-command, Aaron and the children of Israel have been "free" for some time now. Problem is, they've been a little more free than they intended. There's freedom from slavery – awesome! Freedom from oppression – awesome! But then there's freedom from food and water, and any sense of security for the future – *these* freedoms? Not so awesome.

So, they're anxious and mad when we find them today, and unlike my Grandma Brunk, they feel no shame being heard murmuring & complaining! Murmuring and complaining is practically an art form for the children of Abraham down through the years; whole psalms are devoted to it, many, many monologues by the people against the prophets; many, many monologues by the prophets against God &, frankly, some monologues by God, too. And here's the amazing thing – I say this, as a parent, God is often *amazingly* patient and attentive to it. In this story, the writers attribute no frustration to God. Moses is another story. Moses does get mad at them – although to his credit, he's the one people are complaining to and about, not God (although Moses thinks their complaining is misplaced). And he's mostly angry about their ingratitude to God's response to their complaining, a response which is pretty instantaneous, and pretty miraculous, and unlike many divine interventions, the response to their complaints is actually to get what they asked for: in this case: bread and meat.

If you imagine their situation, their complaints are pretty legit. "They do not exaggerate their predicament. They are no longer part of the system of labor that fed them in the past. They cannot supply their own needs. They *are* hungry. Their situation is dire and there is no visible way out." (Elna Solvang) There is no over-time they can work, no one to beg or glean from. There is simply no means of getting food. The text goes out of its way to make sure that the reader doesn't miss that God heard these complaints – the text repeats it four times. "God has heard your complaining." "God has heard your complaining." "God has heard your complaining." No, really. "God has heard your complaining." In this story, God tells Moses: "I will rain down bread from heaven upon them, every morning there will be enough for everyone and there will be meat every night." And sure enough: in the evening, quail cover the earth & in the a.m., a flaky substance "fine as frost" covers the ground.

The people have never seen anything like this substance before. In fact, their response is to say, "*Manna?*" which means, "*What is it?*" Yes, by continuing to refer to this daily miracle food as *manna*, the children of Israel were basically calling it *whatchamacallit* (thus the manna that appeared on your seats this a.m.! ☺) (Me: throw out a few *Whatchamacallits* to the congregation). This food, like their entire life outside of Egypt, has no parallels to the only life they'd known. The idea of having food just show up every

day was a dream come true at first, but it was also kind of unfathomable. Food that showed up completely unconnected to labor, for one was completely foreign.

In a way, it must have felt like exactly what they deserved, after so much un-or under-compensated labor. But disconnecting food from labor also means that you can no longer predict or count on food. Hard work not producing the result of food would be an un-mooring reality were it a new one. This was also food that you couldn't gather *more* of, by which I mean, you couldn't ever gather more than someone else. Somehow, when everybody had gathered their *whatchamacallit*, everybody had only enough. Again, how hard you work didn't produce different results, and you couldn't reassure yourself of your own security by comparing yourself to your neighbor, and making sure you had just a bit more than them; therefore you must be doing ok. This freedom might have felt more like an untethered boat than an unshackled chain. And, no matter how much you gathered, you could never store it up to save for later. (Except on the day before Sabbath, when you could miraculously store up exactly twice as much as usual so you could rest for a day).

The Hebrews knew a lot about of stockpiling grain. The Egyptians didn't just have store-houses, they had store-cities, and those cities were built by the enslaved Hebrews, we read in the first chapter of Exodus. I can't help but imagine that the Hebrews must have fantasized, as they built those store-cities, about a day and time when *they* would have their *own* stockpiles and stock-cities. It seems likely that their dream of a just future would look a lot like having what their oppressors had. Imagine then what it would feel like to finally be free, after generations upon generations of scarcity and slavery always surrounded by bounty you were denied access to and then to find yourself in a land where food cannot be preserved. It literally rots if you attempt to hoard it. I imagine this would have been seriously traumatic, actually.

When you live in a land of egregious plenty, like Egypt (doesn't the word *fleshpots* just say it all, even if you don't actually know what it means?), you dream of hitting the jackpot – suddenly having access to the shameful excess others have, you don't dream of jubilee, which is what they got in the manna in the wilderness: They got jubilee – a fresh start every day – everyone back to the same zero. Here's the thing: the God of Exodus and the Christ of the Gospels are all about Jubilee, not Jackpot. We, too, live in a culture of Jackpot, and Oh! Is it hard to leave! We willingly subvert ourselves to a culture and economy that only works because we're all ok with a few hitting the jackpot, as long as there's a mythical "American Dream" out there that says we might win it, too.

Sadly, jackpot is always way more popular than jubilee, whether or not you're a winner. Although jubilee – the practice of redistributing wealth on a regular basis was the intended ongoing practice for the Hebrew people, the only time it actually happened (to my knowledge) is this season in the wilderness, where jubilee *happened to them*, whether they wanted it or not. No people in the stories of the Bible ever willingly chose to practice jubilee, that I know of. Funny how it's not one of those teachings that biblical literalists are insisting that we practice, "because the Bible says so". But whether or not the people could recognize it or *feel* it, the writers are insistent in interpreting God's intention in *hearing* their complaints & *responding* with manna & quail to be reassurance

for the people of Israel “that wilderness is not empty, but is inhabited by the powerful presence of God.” (Walter Brueggemann, *NIB*)

Although we often glibly use the adjective “godforsaken” for wilderness places or times, the text bends over backwards to show that wilderness does *not* mean God-forsaken, “God is near and listening to those whom we might be tempted to call faithless: those who complain to God because they are hungry, anxious, dislocated, in unfamiliar territory and without a clear plan for the future. There God is present ... in daily bread...and meat.” (Elna Solvang) What, you might be asking yourselves, does this story, and all this talk of complaining, and whatchamacallits and jackpots and jubilee have to do with the theme we’re supposed to be exploring in these Exodus stories – that of building community? What does all this have to do with us *here*, and with the community we are and are building of ourselves?

I find myself coming to some conclusions that I didn’t expect to, even just on Thursday of this week. I come out of this story and this text saying, “Sorry, Grandma Brunk, but I think we *do* need to speak our murmurs and complaints” and we do need our murmurs and complaints to be heard. Well, she was doing it, I guess, but I’m saying maybe we don’t need to hide it or maintain a false pretense that we don’t do it. One commentator, Elna Solvang, wrote this, which I’ve been pondering: “At its core, complaint is a turning *to* God—not away—trusting that God ... does not ignore, dismiss or punish those who call out in fear, anger, suffering, and need.” Sure, complaint is grating. Believe me, I know. My kids can pretty accurately sketch out for you the limits of my patience when it comes to whining and complaining. Let’s just say it’s not a vast tract of land. But it’s honest communication, and it’s often indicative of underlying anxiety, fear, insecurity and sometimes trauma. Yes, it’s sometimes about being spoiled or entitled. But there’s usually an underlying fear. And I’m becoming a bigger and bigger fan of cutting to the chase—go ahead and murmur, go ahead and complain, if that’s what will put in motion the gears that will bring about change and movement toward one another and toward God.

I think of the medical use of the word “complaint” – and remember how heartbroken we were in the Cancer Center when someone came to us diagnosed in late stage disease because, despite having symptoms, they “didn’t want to complain” and so no physician had a chance to respond to those symptoms in their early stage. One of the loudest, most surprising, messages in this text, is its silence on naming complaint as a vice. That said, there are things that this text *does* suggest to folks who find themselves in the wilderness: having left one thing, but not yet found the other: First – “draw near” Moses says, “Draw near to God, for God has heard your complaints.” For me, drawing near is about the last thing I want to do when I myself am full of complaints, or when I’m being complained *at* or *to* or *against*. After all, I’m a good girl, so “you never hear me murmur or complain.”

But let’s face it, that usually just means that the murmuring and complaining is happening, it’s just not being directed to the object of the complaints but instead being offered to a third party or as gossip. “Drawing near” in this text means both: moving toward the object of your complaint, counter-intuitive as that might be, but in the Old Testament context it also literally means, “draw near” as in “draw together in worship”.

Come together with your people, come together *as* a people, even (maybe especially) when you have complaints. Don't stop gathering together in a season of wilderness, when murmurs and complaints live near to the lips. Make your worship and your community a place that can hold honesty and even complaint. Discern together whether the complaints are against circumstances, or leaders, against obstacles within, and be able to admit when the complaints are against God.

One of the things that we're trying to make some changes with here at CMCL, is making some clearer channels for complaint. That's not really the language that Pastoral Team has chosen, but we're scheduling listening times when any CMCLer can come to Pastoral Team during Adult Christian Ed a few times a year to share what you're thinking, how you're feeling, even if it's a complaint. You'll be hearing about them soon. Unspoken complaint frays the weave of community. Yes, spoken complaint should be done with care – but we aim to be a community who responds to complaint with invitations to “draw near” and discern, trusting that God does not forsake us in wilderness, and that God's love is big enough to hold even conflict.

So: complaining and “drawing near” are both part of building community among the Exodus people. Thirdly, the people are called to specific practices designed to shape them into the community of freedom and faithfulness they left Egypt to be. This story really emphasizes the daily nature of character and community-building work. You get up every morning, and look for and gather the bread of heaven that has been prepared for you. You may find yourself surrounded by more nourishment than you knew – after all, one of the characteristics of *manna* is that it's disguised as “What's that?” Every day you open your eyes, prepared to find it, in whatever guise. Every day you eat it, and every day you let go of it when you've had your fill. And every week you make preparations so that you can rest on the 7th day. These are the practices that Moses and God prescribed for the children of Israel to eventually free themselves from the mindset of their oppressors, which was: anxiety and greed and hoarding and comparing.

Again, the practices were: daily gathering of bread, and daily letting go of excess. Openness to nourishment that looks totally foreign. Weekly rest. Regular “drawing near” to God, and “drawing near” to and with community, in worship, in mutual care, and even in complaint. Being free and faithful people, in free and faithful community, is counter-intuitive work in this world. It requires steady presence, and intentional practice, repetition and relationship. *Give us this day our daily bread*, said Jesus, who knew and recited this story of manna in the wilderness in the history of his people, and in the same breath said: “I am the Bread who comes down from heaven” John 6: I am *Manna*, sent from heaven. We are not a God-forsaken people: So, let us complain! But let us also trust that we have a God who listens and who wants and expects us to draw near. And let us be on the lookout for how God is providing, and how we might participate in that providence here and in all creation. Amen.