

Proper XIII Year B: 4/5 August 2018
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
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“And the Israelites complained . . . and God heard their complaining!”

Exodus 16: 2-4, 9-15
Ephesians 4: 1-16
John 6: 24-35
Psalm 78: 23-29

“It simply isn’t about “doing” church as much as it’s about “being” church. It’s not about complaining about what we don’t or no longer have. It’s not about financial or ideological survival: it’s about spiritual survival. It’s about spiritual food that feeds our souls, our hearts, and our minds. It’s about Jesus, the Christ, leading us into deeper relationship with God, the Source-of-our-Being.”

Complaining seems to be an essential part of the human condition. We humans are somehow hardwired through our DNA to complain. Sometimes it occurs in the form of whining – something my partner says I do too often when I get frustrated with a situation and the individuals involved within them. Other times in the form of opinions, which, by the way, do matter. However, do we always need to share our thoughts and suggestions, which is another form complaining often disguises itself as. Complaining can also take the form of blame or guilt, and it often presents itself in the form of questions. The Israelites had several of them:

Why did you bring us here?

We had it better when we were under Pharaoh’s whip.

We should never have followed you, Moses.

We don’t have enough food, and we’re hungry.

Do something about it, Moses.

Where are you taking us?

Are we there yet?

Imagine having to listen to that over and over for days on end. It’s no wonder that Moses loses it and complains to God basically saying “They’re your people, do something with them, I’ve

had it!" There are days I can deeply empathize with Moses, not that anyone here ever complains. No, that doesn't happen here. Never! And Jesus doesn't escape this phenomenon; even he has to deal with it.

When did you get here, Jesus? That was some neat trick you did over there, feeding us as you did. What signs are you going to do for us now? What about this food that will keep us satisfied? Where do we get it and when will it become available? Unlike Moses, Jesus doesn't complain to God about the situation. Instead, he keeps nudging them to think beyond their complaints.

One of the things Buddhism has taught me is that questions match the situation. In other words, if you're not getting the answers you seek, you may be asking the wrong questions. Whether it's Moses or Jesus, the people miss the point – they're asking the wrong questions, so to speak. It isn't about being satisfied or comfortable. We all want for something; however, God isn't a fairy godmother who grants every wish or demand. We're no different from the Israelites and the Jews of antiquity. The point Jesus is making is one of being invited into relationship with God, who is the source of all that satisfies. A transformative experience to say the least, and one that Jesus offers, not for his own benefit, but for ours. The hunger Jesus is trying to satiate is a spiritual one.

Moses isn't the one who provides for the needs of the people. Jesus isn't the one who feeds the multitudes. God is. God is the source of all that is and shall be. It's in Christ and through Christ that we enter into this relationship with God as the source of spiritual nourishment. Christ is our spiritual soul food. That's the point Jesus is trying to make to those who are following him. Our relationship with the material world will not satisfy our desires. Quite the opposite happens actually. The world fosters greed where consumerism is a competitive driving force for more and more material goods. Instead, it's our relationship to God through Jesus that will bring satisfaction.

Saint Augustine writes: "*Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.*" Our hunger is to be one with the Source-of-our-Being and we remain restless until that source is found. That's the food which nourishes our souls as well as our bodies. It's a not so subtle reminder that all things come from God, the Source-of-our-

Being. That's what's meant in the Eucharistic prayer when you hear: we offer to you, O' Holy One, from *your* creation – this bread and this wine – as well as ourselves. This is the relationship Jesus is inviting us into. Yet, just like our ancestors, we seem to miss the point by asking all the wrong questions.

As communities of faith, we're about welcoming folks into our midst. Or at least we ought to be. Yet, good intentions often get hijacked by ulterior reasoning. You see, the church is infected with consumerism. We fall prey, time and again, to this consumerist mind-set through its many guises that reduces religion to a product we then market. For example, there are those who want to be part of a church that offers the right kind of worship, participates in political engagement or strives to make America Christian again; a church that has a strong youth ministry and family program, one that goes on mission trips or participates in missional activities. These are good things to strive for, but they don't matter if our souls remain restless for spiritual nourishment; for relationship that fosters care and compassion; for witness that seeks justice and peace. It thus becomes about inviting people into relationship rather to welcoming them into another program. We need to **be** church, not just **do** church.

Consumerism is a dangerous mind-set that focuses on our wants instead of the needs of others, especially those who differ from us. Too often I hear people say they yearn for the "good old days" as if the fleshpots of Pharaoh were the ideal. They yearn for the hay-day of the church when pews were full and families socialized together. I have to remind myself when I hear that kind of thinking, that we all tend to romanticize the past like it actually existed the way we remember, which is often only in our mind. We ignore the trials and tribulations present in every era because those difficulties didn't impact us directly. We forget that times change and with it social organization. Change is inevitable, but often we get stuck asking the wrong questions as those changes occur.

It simply isn't about "doing" church as much as it's about "being" church. It's not about complaining about what we don't or no longer have. It's not about financial or ideological survival: it's about spiritual survival. It's about spiritual food that feeds our souls, our hearts, and our minds. It's about Jesus, the Christ, leading us into deeper relationship with God, the

Source-of-our-Being. Jesus, is the prescription, the antidote to unbridled consumerism. As such, we need to be asking different questions.

John F. Kennedy, in his inaugural address said: “ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” Our question, then, is ask not what your church can do for you, ask what you can do for your church. What can you offer to help us **be** the church?