

**Proper 20A Sept. 24, 2017**

**Grumbling is a Biblical Condition**

**The Rev. Deborah Woolsey**

**Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio**

What does it take to disrupt a good friendship? When I was in seminary, for me the answer was a grade on a paper. Many of you know I graduated from Nashotah House Episcopal Seminary, which is a small school located in Wisconsin. The goal of Nashotah House is to prepare its seminarians for life as a parish priest, and they take that goal seriously by making the demands and schedules intense. Because of its small size, each person in each class has the same class schedule, which can be beneficial in building community, as we all suffer the same academic rigors and expectations at the same time. This also creates transparency, it is almost impossible to hide anything from the community. Which can also lead to lack of privacy. And sometimes we found out things we really didn't want to know.

This is what happened with a friend of mine. While I will sometimes talk about the challenges of seminary, my time there was richly blessed by a group of good friends. No matter what, we were all there for each other in good moments and not so good moments. With perhaps one exception, the second semester of my middler year. Middler is the seminary term for second year. Because seminary is a three-year program where a person graduates with a master's degree in divinity, the years are given different names. Junior year is the first year, Middler is the second year, and not surprisingly, Senior year is the third and last year of seminary.

As in many disciplines, it is the middle year that can be the most demanding, and seminary is no exception. At Nashotah House, the demands aren't just academic, there are many additional community requirements, field education requirements, individual diocesan requirements, and learning to balance them all is one of the most important skills we are taught in seminary. Which is one of the tricks of seminary, because some folks think it is all about grades and GPA's and things like that, but it really isn't. And the time one of my good friends was upset at me was the time we both learned that lesson in different ways.

The end of the second semester was two weeks away. I had a lot to do, including a paper for a theology class on the historical Jesus. I had not yet started researching that paper. While I could have panicked, rushed to the library, checked out bunches of books and articles and spent many hours late into several nights, reading and researching, the truth was I had too many other commitments and not enough energy to cram like that. So I took another approach. I talked to my professor, told him my situation, and asked his advice. It was a vulnerable position to take with my professor, and an honest one. My professor did not chastise or judge me; instead

he gave me some good advice: he told me to read *The Meaning of Jesus Two Visions*, a book on the historical Jesus co-written by Marcus Borg and NT Wright, write a summary of Borg's view, a summary of Wright's view, and compare the two. I was grateful for this advice, especially because I had already read this book in my New Testament class the previous year. (Yes, my professor was well aware of that.) So, I did what he said, turned in my paper on time, and all was well. Until we got our grades back.

I got an A. And when my friend, who sat next to me in every class, one of the same people in my group of wonderfully supportive friends, saw the grade on my paper he just about exploded. Because he knew what I had done for my paper and he was incredibly upset that I had received an A for what he called a "glorified book report." My friend had also received an A on his paper, however he had chosen to write a paper on the nature of evil and had spent the past 3 months researching this topic. One of the things he learned was researching evil had made him feel depressed, discouraged and unwell at times. He had spent a lot more time on his paper and suffered far more than I had. In his mind, therefore, he felt he deserved more because of his effort and his suffering.

And my friend grumbled, he complained against me and against our professor. Not unlike the Israelites when they complained against Moses in the reading we heard from our lesson from Exodus. It is perhaps an understandable reaction to a perceived injustice, or scarcity. However, it was one that, as the Israelites will learn later in Exodus can have a cost. For my friend and I, his complaining or grumbling, put some distance between us, and caused a strain on our friendship. The grade I had been given somehow hurt my friend, even though he had been given the same grade. And he shared his pain with me, but not in a way where I could walk alongside him, he shared it in a way that also hurt me and could have detrimentally hurt our friendship.

It wasn't until after he talked with our professor that my friend began to see the situation differently. He came to understand the root cause of his grumbling and complaining really wasn't my grade, it was how he had wanted to be rewarded for his work. When my professor reminded him, seminary isn't about getting A's, it is about being formed for a different way of life my friend's perspective changed. The professor reminded my friend he didn't ask him to spend all that time learning about the nature or evil, he could have handled the topic the same way I had, only he didn't ask. In the real world of parish ministry, the professor said, there may not be time to spend three months researching a topic, so knowing what resources you already have and who you can turn to for help is what is important.

The lesson my friend and I both learned at the end of the second semester of our middler year in seminary might be helpful for all of us when we look again at the parable Jesus told in today's Gospel lesson. In part because of the current climate of job loss, the need for a living wage, this parable can easily be seen through that social justice lens, and that is not necessarily a wrong way to interpret the parable. And we need to remember parables are not events that happened; there was no real landowner, no workers, this is a story Jesus told to help share a truth. Which means that for us reading this parable thousands of years after Jesus told it we need to balance both the context of this parable in the Gospel and what it could be saying to us here and now, as we continue to strive to follow Jesus in our daily lives.

Many scholars and commenters are quick to focus in on the workers standing in line waiting to get paid and how easy it is to relate with the grumblers who complained about getting paid the same for working all day as those who worked less, even though they had already agreed to the wage and knew what they would receive at the end of the day. There is something in our human nature that says those who appear to work harder should receive more than those who appear to work less.

Or perhaps we human beings can be rather unimaginative, or rather untheological when it comes to rewards and payment. Perhaps it is hard for us to imagine anything other than what we have already decided is the way to compensate a person for work, but from our view point only. My friend may have been very aware of his efforts, and perhaps had not considered the whole of my experience, as he was just looking for a bigger reward for himself. Perhaps we can get so stuck on rewards or what we think we deserve, that we miss something really beautiful in this parable, the behavior of the landowner.

The landowner who was up early in the morning and found workers for his vineyard and then did not go back to his office and do paperwork, or sit and watch TV for a while, he did not consider his work done for the day. He repeatedly went back into town, to find more workers all day long. This guy seemed obsessed, he didn't seem to know when to stop; it almost seemed what he really wanted, more than anything, was to give each and every person he could find what they needed to meet their daily needs by offering them work in his vineyard.

A historical detail that isn't in Jesus' parable is the amount of money paid by the landowner was what was needed for a person in Jesus' time to survive for one day; it would cover one day's rent and one day's worth of food. It seemed the landowner wanted to give them their daily bread. Not because they worked a certain number of hours, but because that is what the landowner wanted to do: to give people what they needed.

Which sounds like what Jesus taught us to pray when we pray in the Lord's prayer: *give us today our daily bread*. That could make the landowner God in an allegorical reading of this parable. And reminds us that when the Israelites complained in the Exodus lesson, God provided what they needed, and only what they needed for a day. Which in a way makes things a lot easier for us, right? It means this parable could be about being grateful for what you have instead of grumbling against what others have, and to not worry so much about our place in line; it reminds us that life isn't fair, and neither is God, at least not in the way we might define fairness. And it makes the radical behavior of the landowner off limits to us, no one is going to expect you or I to behave like the landowner, because that's God's job, not ours. But let's remember the first words of Jesus' parable isn't God is like a landowner who, but the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner. The kingdom of heaven is Jesus' way of saying what things are like in God's dream for us, it is how the world could work if we let God have God's way with us instead of insisting on our own way.

If we see the landowner not as a stand in for God, but as someone, anyone, who works to make God's dream for humanity come true, then maybe we'd see someone like my seminary professor. He wasn't so concerned with the number of hours a seminarian poured into a paper as he was about a person learning how to do the best they can in the time they have with the resources they have and their willingness to be honest, open, and vulnerable enough to ask for help when they need it. That is a type of relationship that is holy, that connects people to each other and to God. It isn't just seminary professors who can do this, maybe you can think of other teachers, friends, doctors, parents, maybe even priests who are like that landowner. In both the reading from Exodus and in Jesus' parable, we might see God provides what we need, and we may need to help each other see how we can live into what we have been given.

It was that discovery that restored my friend's relationship with me, and helped us both grow closer to God and the life God called us to. So the next time we are tempted to grumble or complain, or hear grumbling or complaining, perhaps we can find the courage to look deep into the root cause of the grumbling. If we do, I am sure we will discover, as my friend did, and my seminary professor showed, God is there, in whatever pain or sorrow or fear sparks the complaining. Perhaps then we can let God's healing transform us from grumblers into landowners who tirelessly seek to do what we can to bring the kingdom of heaven a little closer to the hearts, minds and souls of all people.