

“MOSES: III – MURMURING . . .”  
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Exodus 16:1-15

Matthew 20:1-16

Anybody here remember a group from the 1980’s called “The Mamas and the Papas”? Well, I was thinking of them the other day – actually thinking about a song they sang which was called “Monday, Monday.” Anybody remember that? “Monday, Monday, so good to me, Monday, Monday, it was all I hoped it would be,” then “Monday, Monday, can’t trust that day, Monday, Monday, somehow it just turned out that way.”

The reason I was thinking about those words was that I was thinking about my own Monday mornings. Because that’s the time I get my first look at the scripture or scriptures on which I’ll be preaching the next Sunday – six days away. Sometimes I read them and it’s “Monday, Monday, so good to me” – right away as I read the scripture an inspiration comes to me and I’m off to the races.

But sometimes I read them and it’s “Monday, Monday, can’t trust that day, somehow it just turned out that way.” In other words, nothing strikes me, nothing

really perks me up and grabs me. Then it is that I know I've got my work cut out for me that week.

Well, let me tell you, friends, this past Monday was a "Monday, Monday, so good to me" day and I'll tell you why. It's impossible to read those two lessons we just heard this morning without feelings stirring up inside of you.

I mean, you can't read that Gospel lesson and not understand the feelings that were being thrown around. We totally get what all the murmuring was about in that lesson. We totally get why people were feeling cheated, why they felt what the vineyard owner was doing was totally unfair. How could it be that the one working long, long hours would get paid exactly what the person working one hour on the job was getting? There's really no way to read or hear that lesson that doesn't stir up something inside of the reader.

Maybe your feelings weren't as stirred up as you heard the lesson from the Hebrew scriptures about Moses and the murmuring, grumbling Israelites, but mine were. Poor old Moses had done exactly what God called him to do, and what was he

getting for his sacrificial effort? – a bunch of people (whom he had rescued from the grip of the Egyptians, by the way) grumbling at him, whining and complaining.

Have you ever been on the receiving end of whining, complaining and murmuring? I'll bet you have.

Maybe you worked yourself silly for a week getting ready for Thanksgiving, preparing the perfect feast for your family and guests, and you sit down ready to enjoy the fruits of your labor, the bounty God has given you, the joy of being surrounded by those you love, and boom! Somebody says, "How come there's no cranberry jelly?" And when you reply that there's a wonderful cranberry relish, they shoot back, "But I wanted the kind that slides out whole from the can."

Or perhaps it was on a family vacation. You've scrimped and saved and are so excited about taking your family away for a week, and from the backseat all you hear is whining, murmuring and complaining. Admit it, you were probably thinking, "When I was a kid, I was grateful to get to go anywhere . . ." And now, these murmuring kids . . .

Or let you tell me one of my favorites (and don't worry, it's doesn't involve any of you here today!). As I hope you've noticed, I try to design the worship services around a theme, including using hymns that support that theme. One day, I thought I had done that pretty well – and things had gone well all the way around, until I'm standing downstairs shaking hands, and a person comes through the line and says this: "Thanks a lot for ruining the service with that last hymn."

Murmuring, whining, complaining. Oh, how it can hurt, and oh, how it had to have hurt poor old Moses. And you know what? It didn't just happen in today's lesson, it actually happened ten times on the Israelites' journey to freedom. Ten times!

Remember Moses never wanted any part of this leadership that God had given him in the first place! Remember he had tried every angle to get God to pick somebody else – but God persisted, and Moses finally said yes, and did everything God asked along the way – and now, what does he get for his efforts – a bunch of whining, complaining, murmuring people. Oh, he had to have been at the end of his rope a whole lot on that journey. He had to have wanted to just walk away from those ungrateful people and not hear another thing they said. Wouldn't you?

Yet, not God. Amazing, isn't it, that God doesn't strike out in anger against these ungrateful Israelites? Amazing, that he doesn't call them out and shame them because of their doubt.

Instead, God listens to their murmuring, he hears not only their words, but understands far deeper what's going on beneath those words. He doesn't appear to take it personally, instead, hears their real needs.

He knows they are suffering, that they are hungry and thirsty, that they're trying to be faithful and follow where he leads, but the physical conditions and emotional reality of it all is caving in on them. And so, he cares for them. In the words of one preacher, "God does not reprimand. He provides." (On-line, Rev. Dr. Dwight Andrews, "A Wilderness People in the Promised Land," 9/21/14)

He provides for them – he gives manna in the wilderness – enough to ease their suffering for that day, and then for the next, and the next. He doesn't resent their cries, he hears them and helps them. He makes a way for them.

The reason this scripture lesson is so rich for preachers is that we know that all of us – you and I – can see ourselves in each of the positions in it. As I said earlier, we've all been Moses at one time or another, on the receiving end of murmuring and complaining. And surely, sadly, at one time or another, we've been the murmurers, the complainers. And hopefully, all of us, at one time or another, have been able to see beyond the complaints, and help others anyway.

So this lesson is full of wisdom for us. Let me suggest some things we can learn from it:

First, (and please don't take this too literally around here), it's okay to murmur and complain. It really is. It's actually Biblical. Take a look at the Psalms or Lamentations, and you'll see a whole lot of it.

Friends, we are children of a God who wants us to be honest and open before him. One pastor wrote beautifully about it when he said, "There's dignity even in murmuring, in any and all crying out. God seems fond of crying out, in its pious or baser forms. The secret isn't in learning how to pray better; the secret is realizing we are hungry, we are desperate. We abandon politeness and simply voice our

despair, acknowledging it even in our *I'm okay, you're okay too I hope* culture.” (Online, Rev. Dr. James Howell, “Small and White, Clean and Bright,” 9/18/11)

To murmur, to cry out when we're hurting means we're opening our hearts and being honest with God – and God honors that. Sometimes things hurt, things aren't fair, and rather than storing up the anger and pain in our hearts, we would do well to pour our feelings out to God, as did the Israelites and the Psalmists.

A second thing we can learn from this scripture this morning is, when we're on the receiving end of murmuring or complaining, to try not to take it personally – way easier said than done, by the way. That complaint about that last hymn in the service really got to me. The whole service had gone well, in my opinion, but that comment at the door stuck with me, and turned a good day into a bad one in the blink of an eye. I shouldn't have let that happen, but sadly, I did.

We would do well then, instead, to take a deep breath in the face of murmuring and complaints, and remember it's usually not about us, there's something else going on. It wasn't about Moses (for the most part) in this lesson –

the people were just plain hurting – they were hungry, they were thirsty, and he was the easy target.

If you can take a step back and not take complaints and murmuring personally, most times you can figure the situation out. There's something else going on. That's what God did.

I don't think I ever told you about something that happened early on in my ministry here. Not many months after I'd been here, I began to hear murmuring that all I cared about were the young people, that I didn't care about people who were older in the congregation. That really hurt, because I didn't think that was true. I was starting to take it personally, until one day a wiser older person in the congregation sat me down and had a conversation with me that had an incredible impact on me and my ministry. He wanted me to understand the "why" of the murmuring and complaining. And he talked to me about what it was like to get older and feel like you didn't matter as much anymore. He told me about people who had been in positions of power in their jobs, now trying to figure out who they were in retirement. He told me about losing physical and mental abilities and how painful that was. He helped me to understand that it wasn't about me, it was about them and their fears. What a gift he gave me that day – the gift of learning about



that situation, yes; but even more, the gift of learning that there's always more beneath murmuring and grumbling than meets the eye. A great lesson for all of us.

Which leads to a third learning from this passage of scripture – the importance of listening, really listening. Oh, Moses listened, but didn't really hear the Israelites. God listened, and heard their cries.

People want to be heard. You know that! You want to be heard. You know what it's like to be in a conversation with someone who clearly isn't listening, but rather anxious to give you their response. Listening is hard. Listening means putting yourself and your self-interests on the back burner, in favor of the one talking. Listening to someone, really listening and hearing them, is a great gift – one we so rarely use. It is, indeed, one of God's greatest gifts, and a gift he invites us to use.

Finally, and perhaps the greatest lesson of all from the Biblical story is this – trust that God will do something. Whether you are the murmurer (the one in pain), or the one being murmured to or about – trust that God can and will do something. God surely did something in the situation in the lesson. He helped Moses carry on

despite his discouragement. He walked with him and held him up the whole journey long.

And he gave the Israelites manna – just what they needed, when they needed it – nothing more, nothing less.

And he will do that for us, as well. This story is an invitation for us to trust that – to trust in God who always makes a way just when we need it. To trust in the God who hears our cries and says it's okay to cry. To trust in the God who has our back and supports us when we're the ones being criticized, when we're the ones feeling hurt or unappreciated. To trust in the God who is always there to listen. And most of all, to trust that He will make a way, always and forever.

Give thanks, dear friends, with a grateful heart for our God who never lets us go, no matter where we are on our journey. Give thanks.

Amen.

