

Choosing to Not Complain

A Sermon on Exodus 16:2-15 and Matthew 20:1-16 by the Rev. Philip Major
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One of the tragedies of America in 2026 is that people are often separating themselves into isolated groups based on the color of their skin, their age, their political affiliation, or their views about religion. People who attend a church with the name 'St. Paul's' know that identity politics takes us away from the truth and away from God. Our patron saint wrote in his letter to the Galatians: *There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*

We are united as members of God's family, and you are one of God's beloved children. This is your true identity. You are God's beloved child. To know and live by this creed is true freedom. Life becomes sacred when we come to trust in God's promise that we are God's beloved children.

As one created in the image of God, you have been given some of the greatest powers in the world. You have the power to remember. You have the power to create something new and beautiful. You have the power to love another person. You have the power to choose the right thing or to choose to do the wrong thing.

This is one of the main ideas of the Bible. People have the power to choose to do the right thing or the wrong thing. What sorts of choices are being made by the people in our passage from the book of Exodus? *The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to Moses, "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."* The people of Israel are choosing to complain.

There is no doubt that the people have some reasons to be concerned. Moses has led them out of Egypt and into the wilderness. This was not a place with lots of trees and plants and animals and rivers. In the Bible, when they talk about the wilderness they are talking about a very dry place, a place where there is not much water, so there aren't many plants or animals. The Israelites are concerned they will not find enough food and water to sustain them.

In this difficult situation, the people of Israel have a choice. They choose to complain. Let's notice they are not complaining about Pharaoh or about the miserable treatment they received from the people who enslaved them. They are complaining against the people who are trying to help them. They are directing their complaints against Moses and his leadership.

But there is a twist. The people imagine they are directing their complaints against Moses. But God explains to Moses, "Their complaint is against me." Moses is just the servant of the Lord. God sent Moses to lead the people out of slavery. So when the people complain about Moses, they are really complaining about God. The people are complaining about God's insistence that they live and take responsibility as free people.

People have the power to choose to do the right thing or to do the wrong thing. This is one of the main ideas of the Bible. We find another example of people making a choice in our Gospel passage.

In Matthew 20 Jesus says, *"The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard."* When Jesus says, 'The kingdom of heaven is like....' Jesus is talking about God intervening in the world to establish God's kingdom as a direct alternative to the earthly kingdoms that people have established. God's intervened in the world by sending Christ Jesus to bring the Good News and reconcile God with humankind.

Let's notice Jesus does not say 'The kingdom of heaven will be like...' Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like..." Jesus is referring to events in the present tense. The kingdom of heaven is coming into being in his lifetime and in our lifetimes, not in some far, distant time.

In the second half of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells many stories about the kingdom of heaven. In this story we are at least a little disturbed by the fact that the landowner pays all of the laborers the same amount of money, which was the usual daily wage. The laborers who worked all day were more than a little disturbed. When they received their pay, *they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'* The workers who were complaining were upset that the landowner did not follow the human value of proportionality and something we call 'fairness'.

This is a story about the conflict between God's values and human values. God's values are different from our values. People are sometimes surprised by this.

We want life to be fair. God wants people to have enough food to eat. The people who began working at four o'clock in the afternoon have to feed their children, just like the people who began working at seven o'clock in the morning. God is concerned that those parents and their children have enough food to eat. God has no concern for proportionality. Most people think it would be fair to pay the person who only worked for one hour much less than the person who worked all day. God thinks it would be fair to give each person a full day's wages, that way each family would have enough money to buy enough food for everyone.

People are constantly making this mistake. People often think God follows their values. God's values are different from our values. God offers forgiveness to all people, even the people who have acted in terrible ways. God cares for and loves all people, even my enemies. Sometimes people have a hard time with this idea, because our values are different from God's values.

Just like the story from Exodus, the people in the story from Matthew are complaining against someone who is actually trying to help them. Just like the story from Exodus, the people who are complaining about the generous landowner are making a complaint about God, and about God's generosity.

So we have a choice in life. We can choose to complain, or we can choose...to stop complaining. If we choose to complain, we will act the same way as people in the stories we read today: we will complain about the actions of people who are trying to help us. If we choose to spend our lives complaining, our complaints will be complaints against God.

We are like the people of Israel. Many of us have good reasons to complain, just like them. The people who choose to keep on complaining will never run out of material. There are always things going wrong in our lives. There is always someone who is acting in a way that is worthy of complaint, because people are constantly making mistakes.

People who strive to live their lives in the kingdom of heaven make the decision to stop complaining. This is what it means to be converted. We are converted to following Jesus when we decide to stop complaining. This is what it means to receive God's salvation.

Conversion is a life-long process; it doesn't happen in one day or one year. Like the landowner in the story, God is extremely generous. God is constantly offering us a lifetime supply of forgiveness and affirmation. We can choose to accept it, or not.

I might be wrong about this, but it seems kind of obvious when someone is not moving in the direction of being converted, because you constantly hear them complaining about the burdens of life or mistakes other people are making. It's not that the complaining people are completely wrong about life; life has many burdens and people are constantly behaving in stupid ways. But people who choose to spend their lives complaining are imprisoned in their world of judgment.

You and I came to St. Paul's this morning because we don't want to live in that prison of judgment. We are striving to be converted to a different way of living. If we choose to not complain, what will we do with ourselves, especially during times of difficulty? How will we spend our time and energy?

Our situation is similar to the situation faced by Moses' people. We have plenty of reasons to be concerned. The alternatives for us are also similar to the alternatives for Moses' people. If we choose to not complain, we will have more time and energy to encourage one another on the journey.

We might devote more of our energy to solving some of the problems we are facing. We might find ways to create something beautiful together in spite of the difficulty of our lives. We might spend our energy practicing forgiveness. We might spend more time saying 'Thank you' to others for the work they are doing. We might spend more time saying 'Thank you' to God for the gifts God has given us. We might come to realize that God has forgiven us. We might come to realize God gives us freedom to love and to be loved.