

From Grumbling to Letting Go

If we walk for a while with our three readings today, the Israelites grumbling for water, Paul trying to sooth ruffled feathers in this his most beloved community of Phillipi, and the changed minds that Jesus coaxes us into today, what we get is a really good sense of what our journey into a fuller life, a deeper life, a Kingdom life, looks like.

In Exodus this morning, the lesson is loud and clear, grumbling is how we get what we want.

Last week for the newly freed slaves it was all about meat and bread — as in “where is it Moses and why’d ya bring us into the desert to starve?” — and lo and behold!

Quail by the thousands and something like croissants appear out of nowhere.

But once we’ve eaten, we gotta drink, which is what this week’s grumbling is all about!

And lo and behold, while you can’t squeeze blood out a turnip, God can apparently cause water to gush out of a rock!

Grumbling has brought the desired results to these newly freed, very frightened, slaves.

Their journey is just beginning and just like any infant beginning its own life journey - hungry, wet, cold or tired, what’s she gonna do?

Cry out!

That doesn’t change much for a good part of the growing up years.

It just gets more sophisticated, usually moving from whining, to manipulating to charming to demanding - but what motivates it all is the essential source of all grumbling....

"I don't have what I want and if I make enough noise to the right people I will get what I want."

Notice the frequent appearance of the word "I."

And this is all fine and dandy.

This is the process of normal human development, both as individuals and as communities of faith.

The experts in human development tell us that the most important task of an infant in growing up is learning how to tell where he ends and other people begin.

For an infant, at first, the whole world not only revolves around her, **she is** the whole world.

As we grow into maturity, we free ourselves from the illusion that we are all there is in the universe, yet ironically, we find ourselves on the hunt for a similar, but very different kind of unity; not one in which I am the center of everything, but one in which I surrender all that I am into the true unity, this Unity that we call God.

Perhaps that's what the poet is getting at when he says: "the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started — and know the place for the first time." TS Eliot.

How does that happen?

It happens as we move from grumbling to letting go.

And that movement, that transformation, is almost always accompanied by conflict.

I've told you before and I'll tell you again, while conflict, whether in a friendship, a marriage or a church, is never any fun, it always has the seeds to grow something completely amazing and wonderful.

Today's letter from Paul is just one of many examples of that.

Two of his leaders in the church in Philippi are beefing.

We don't know what is causing the problem but we do know that the people of Philippi are among the first to welcome Paul and the first to really get the totally weird up-side-down-ness of this strange God — and Paul loves these Philippians.

His heart must be breaking when he hears of the conflicts happening; and yet, instead of giving them a Dear Abby dose of useful advice, instead of yelling or pleading, he takes them by the hand and reminds them of who brings them together in the first place.

He ever so gently coaxes them to remember who they are and who they are called to become...

Let the same mind be in you that is in Christ Jesus,

who, though in the form of God,

empties himself,

becoming a slave;

born human,

he humbles himself

becoming obedient to the point of death--

even death on a cross.

He takes his friends who are having trouble seeing eye to eye and reminds them that the way out of every conflict is surrender.

Not a grudging or angry surrender, but a letting go of who's right and who's wrong; a willingness to step across the room and look at things from the other gal's perspective, a willingness to die to one's need to be vindicated — and in that death, to come out the other side, not into darkness, but into a new kind of life.

"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves."

"Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."

"Let the same mind be in you that is in Christ Jesus..."

Now translate this into our daily dealings with one another — at home, at school, on the job.

What does such a life look like?

Then translate it into our politics and community life, and suddenly perhaps we begin to form a more human society — one that begins to look more like the people we were created to be — people made in the image and likeness of God.

"Ah!" you may say, "your wishful thinking is sweet, even endearing, but totally unrealistic!"

And yet, that's exactly what Jesus is getting at when he urges us to change our minds.

Another way to say "repent" is "metanoia" and another way to say metanoia is "turn around", and another way to say turn around is "change your mind."

If we stay stuck with our I centered lives, we will never see that which is truly Real.

Another name for the Truly Real is the kingdom of God.

And the kingdom of God only becomes visible to those who are willing to change their minds: about suffering, about surrender, about salvation.

About suffering: it is a necessary path to enable us to outgrow the small ego centered me first infantile focus that consumes far too many people.

About surrender: that in giving up what I think I need, I am finally in a position to receive what I actually need.

About salvation: that we are saved not because we are deserving or adorable or sweet, but because God is gracious and kind.

This is the change of mind Jesus calls us to yet again today, because it changes everything we think we know about this life, about each other, and about the Creator of all things.

In today's gospel, the religious big shots ask Jesus by what authority he's doing what he's doing.

What Jesus shows us is that the real authority, the authority that changes us into who we were always intended to be, "is an authority that emerges from loss, from letting go," only to find that having endured what seemed to be unendurable, "we come out the other side knowing something essential" — we come to know a truth about ourselves, a truth about God. R. Rohr, Eager to Love, 19-20.

We come to learn that "the promise of health out of sickness, peace out of conflict, hope out of despair, is wild beyond all imagining.

We discover that the gift of life is in the midst of death, and that the God who has been with us all along in the old world will be with us forever in the new." Capon, The Parables, 515 (paraphrased).

It is Jesus who causes all of this to happen.

In his life, death and resurrection, heaven and earth are joined, the sacred and the secular become one, and the whole earth is enveloped in the glory of God.

"Therefore, my beloved, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." Phil 2:13.

+amen

