

Sermon for the Third Sunday after Pentecost
June 21, 2009

TEXTS: 2 Corinthians 6:1-13
Mark 4:35-41

...Rev. Charles R. Exley

I love a creative solution. It just makes you feel good when you realize someone has come up with a brand new way to solve – or at least neutralize – some long-term problem. Our normal reaction to problems is simply to complain. Complaining – that continual moaning and groaning about life – is such a big part of who we are and what we do that it becomes, in itself, one of life's biggest difficulties. We say we hate complainers – but we love to complain.

If you are one who pays attention to the news of the day you know how bad it can get. You know that vociferous complaining has made some people rich. The meaner and more vicious they become, the greater their audience. I refuse to even mention the names of these famous complaint jockeys: they receive too much press as it is. Their name-calling and personal attacks drag everyone down – even as their listeners seem to crave the poison they spew. It's one more case of profiting from the ability to tap into the vile and hateful side of people. There's nothing good about complaining – but, doggone it, I'm happy to say that it seems some people have found a creative and positive solution.

How do you combat that loud voice of negativity? You join a "Complaint Choir!" This is a brand new fad that is breaking out all over the world. I'm serious. It seems to work. The idea started in Finland in 2005. It's really very simple: you invite people to list the things that irritate them, hire a local musician to convert those complaints into lyrics and set them to music. Then you all get together as one joyous bellyaching band and belt out all your beefs together. And it works. The idea of relieving oneself of all this negativity in an artful and fun way is delightfully satisfying. People are actually helped. If you're interested you can see it up close by going to YouTube.com, searching the words "Complaint Choir," and listening to people from all over the world. Finland, Germany, Canada, Korea, Singapore, Russia, England, and, of course, the US. It's a marvelous idea.

And, the idea of creatively combating our tendency to complain is as biblically sound as it could be. Paul could well have been the conductor of a "complaint choir." What he does, however, is to battle with the forces of resentment, negativity and complaining in quite a different way. Paul, in his typical fashion, uses his own personal example to demonstrate moving beyond the negative side of our lives through our trust in God. Our second text from 2 Corinthians is that famous passage where Paul lists everything he has endured; everything about which he could very easily complain. He dredges up the memory of everything he has gone through: afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger – you name it, Paul's endured it.

For Paul, all the circumstances that stand in the way of our living as part of the Kingdom of God - all the bad things that happen - must never be given enough credibility to stop us. Instead he shouts, "...now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" Despite everything you think – and complain – is working against you, now is the time. This is the day when God grants you everything you need to turn this world into God's kingdom. Now is the day when your life

can be about love and peace, as opposed to the hatred and negativity that is destroying so many others around you. Complaints are almost always about someone else - blaming. Becoming positive is about you and what God is making possible through you. And, you may as well admit to the truth: there is no possibility of getting through to God with your complaints against others. It is not to be. As far as God is concerned, we are confessors not complainers.

Just as it was for Paul, recognizing God as a positive force for truth and goodness is Jesus' message in the gospel text as well. The point of the story about Jesus and the disciples in the storm at sea is not so much about a miracle as it is about identifying Jesus as the one who can master the unruly forces of life, holding them at bay. Just look at where we find the disciples in this scene: the storm is raging so badly that they wake him and say, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" That's not a statement of fear, it's a complaint! "Don't you care?" Of course Jesus cares. What he brings is rescue in the form of relief. Have you ever asked yourself why Jesus would be able to sleep through such an event? The answer to that question is about trusting, and goodness, and knowing a positive God who makes all things possible.

What we learn through this nautical image is that faith isn't about harbor hugging. Faith is about bungee jumping. It is a reality that no one understood and appreciated better than Jesus. Everything that happened to and through Jesus demonstrates precisely that reality. Were you aware, for example, that there are only two examples in the gospels where someone asks Jesus to rebuke a third party - where someone utters their complaint that is focused on someone else? One is the occasion where Martha complains about her sister Mary for not helping with the household tasks of entertaining. The other is the incident when Jesus is asked to intervene in an inheritance squabble between a man and his brother. In both instances, Jesus' rebuke is not to the one who is complained about, but to the complainer. Everything about Jesus' life involved risking to be positive out of trust in a loving Father God.

And, yes, this is the spot where I pay homage to the cultural character of this day for us: this Father's Day. It has been said that Jesus loved like a mother and taught like a father. That's also a statement about trusting the possibility of a positive outcome. That's a father thing. Dads parent differently than moms. They protect differently. They teach differently. Moms buy bumper pads; dads buy band-aids. Did you ever stop to notice how Jesus did not have his disciples sit in a yeshiva learning tidbits of the Torah? His method was quite different - fatherly, if you will. He took his disciples to work with him, to apprentice with him, to be their mentor so they could learn by doing. You do realize, don't you, that this is why we see the disciples get it all wrong so often. Jesus took the risk of allowing that to happen. It was a positive approach to learning; the opposite of complaining.

Realize as well the fact that the story of the miracle at sea is set in the midst of rich and complete metaphors. The sea is almost always a metaphor for life. A boat is almost always a metaphor for the church. And the complainers in the church? Well, you get the idea. Watching Jesus is the key. First he is resting comfortably, then he is aroused as those around him are fussing frantically. Finally, Jesus readily and without comment stills the situation. It's not until afterward that he raises the question: do you still not get it? It's the same question that remains with us. Do you still not get it? Does the negativity of complaining still control your spirit and your life? Or can you take the risk of trusting?

I'm reminded of a story about risking for the sake of others. Many years ago there was a man in Ohio whose oil well caught fire. He put out an all-points' bulletin for help, hoping that anybody and everybody would come to help him. He offered a \$30,000 reward to anyone who could put out the fire. There were large firehouses in the cities around him, like Newell, Chester, Wellsville, Dillonvale – and they all sent help. They sent their best companies with the most modern firefighting equipment available. But not one of the trucks could get within 200 yards of the blaze. The heat was too intense and the fire was too big.

Finally, the Calcutta Township Volunteer Fire Department showed up. Amazingly, they had only one rickety old truck equipped with a single ladder. They had only two buckets of water, three buckets of sand, and a few blankets. They didn't even have a hose. When that old truck reached the point where all those other fire companies had stopped, the driver didn't even hesitate. He just kept barreling ahead until he and his crew were right in the thick of that blaze. They jumped out of the old truck, threw the two buckets of water and the three buckets of sand on the fire and then furiously beat the fire out with the blankets.

The oil man was so impressed by this unbelievable display of courage that he gave the driver \$30,000 in cash right on the spot saying, "What are you and your men going to do with all that money?" The driver, who was still shaking, said, "The first thing we're going to do is get new brakes on that stupid truck!" A positive faith can take you farther than you think. Complaining will stop you before you get started at all.