

There's an awful lot of complaining and grumbling going on in this morning's readings. The Israelites are complaining, the stiffed day laborers are complaining, everyone's in a foul mood.

Rather than add to the complaining, I thought we'd start by taking a look at the *source* of these complaints.

In the Book of Exodus, there's no doubt that this transitional time between escaping brutally harsh slavery under Pharaoh in Egypt and entering the Promised Land is an unsettling, uncertain, and chaotic experience for the Israelites. There's a reason we call difficult periods in our lives "wilderness experiences." But the novelty of gaining freedom through the Red Sea has evidently worn off. It's gotten so bad they've even idealized the past – saying to Moses, "You brought us out of Egypt just to die in this wilderness? We should never have listened to you."

And as they wander around the wilderness, God's chosen people have other complaints as well and pretty legitimate ones; so they start *kvetching*. "*Kvetch*" is one of those wonderful Yiddish words that sounds like what it's meant to convey. Like *klutz* or *schlep* or *chutzpah* or *schlock*. It basically means to complain endlessly, which is precisely what it must have felt like to Moses as the Israelites kept *kvetching* out in the wilderness.

- They *kvetched* about being hungry and God gave them manna to eat;
- They *kvetched* about being thirsty and God gave them water from a rock;
- They *kvetched* about only having manna to eat and God gave them quail.

But it's not just the *kvetching* in the wilderness we hear this morning. In Matthew's gospel we also get the laborers grumbling against the landowner for paying all the workers the same amount even though they didn't work the same number of hours. And there are a lot of parallels between the complaining in the wilderness and the complaining in the vineyard. "***If only we had died in Egypt...***" is very similar to "***You have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.***"

And while this story does challenge our sense of fairness, the owner of the vineyard can't imagine why they're complaining. He paid everyone the agreed upon wage so there was no duplicity involved, they just *assumed* they'd *get* more because they *worked* more and when they don't, they complain bitterly.

Now, the traditional interpretation of this parable is fairly straightforward – the landowner is God and the vineyard represents the realm of heaven. It doesn't matter at what point in our lives we come to believe in Jesus; whenever that happens we are ushered into the promise of eternal life. And there is some amazing grace in that.

But let's face it: There is also something in this parable that bluntly challenges the way in which our entire society seems to operate. The watchwords for our day seem to be,

- Pull yourself up by the bootstraps;
- The early bird catches the worm;
- The Lord helps those who help themselves (*which, by the way, is a thought found nowhere in scripture*).

Not in this parable.

It calls us to place our focus somewhere else besides where our instincts tell us to focus. And that may just be the point: If we focus on the issue of fairness, we're missing the larger point here. It's not about the laborers' wages and arguing about who got what and why it was or wasn't fair; it's about **God's abounding generosity**.

The door is *always* open, the table is *always* set, the invitation is *always* extended to relationship with God through Jesus Christ. It is never too late to turn toward God and revel in the relationship.

The laborers in the story didn't care about any of this, of course, they just wanted more money than those Johnny-come-latelies who arrived at the last hour, and when it doesn't happen, they start grumbling.

Fortunately *kvetching*, grumbling, complaining, whining, whatever you want to call it, never happens in church. Right? I'm sure no one has ever thought "When will this sermon ever end?" or "Of all the seats in this place, she has to sit next to me?" or any other "impure" thoughts when we should really be thankful that I don't preach for 30 minutes, that we have a church rich with diverse personalities, and that our inner thoughts aren't projected up on some giant screen.

While some of us are “better” than others in the complaint department, if we’re honest we all have our moments. We give in to negative thinking or pile on the grievances without helping work toward a solution.

But the thing is, there’s no contentment in this; nothing good comes out of it. There’s no peace in our souls when we’re always grumbling and complaining; holding onto perceived slights or wishing for a church – or a life – that’s bigger, better, and shinier. When we do this we completely miss the joy of the present; we miss the abundant blessings that surround us; we lose the good things in our lives that are happening *right now*. And that’s a shame.

Fortunately, the inoculation against this resides in the very parable we’re looking at. God invites us to revel in the vineyard that is the realm of heaven here on earth. To accept the generosity of relationship with the divine – which is a stunning offer when you stop to think about it.

God wants to be in relationship with humanity in general and *you* in particular. Yes, you! Even with all your complaining and grumbling and *kvetching* and doubts and missteps, God will never let you just slip away.

Yes, we all have wilderness moments – that’s just part of the human condition – but God doesn’t want us to remain in the wilderness indefinitely. Remember, vineyards don’t just appear out of thin air; they are *formed* out of the wilderness through hard work and intentionality and discipline. God has done the hard work and, having prepared the way, God invites us into the vineyard of relationship; into a place of peace and hope; into the realm of heaven where we can finally experience the full grace and abundance of God’s love for each one of us.