

"GRUMBLERS AMONG GOD'S PEOPLE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
February 15, 1998

## "GRUMBLERS AMONG GOD'S PEOPLE"

### INTRODUCTION

At a certain popular resort there are some hot springs and some cold springs...side by side. Local people had been known to wash their clothes in the hot spring and then rinse them in the cold spring. A tourist, watching the procedure, said to one of the natives,

"How wonderful of nature to supply these springs".  
"Not so wonderful...." said the native. "You may have noticed that there's no soap...."

The new pastor was full of enthusiasm as he came before the congregation on his first Sunday. He spoke to them of the thrill of accepting the call of the congregation, especially since it was a unanimous vote. After the service, the Chair of the committee responsible for calling him said,

"I told you that it was nearly a unanimous vote....I never actually said that it had been unanimous". The pastor then asked, "What do you mean...nearly unanimous?"

The Chairperson explained that it was practically unanimous. "What was the vote?" asked the pastor. The Chair replied, "Well...it was 96 to 2".

That first year the young minister spent much of his time and energy trying to determine who those two people were. When he finally figured it out, he then invested most of his second year wooing them to become his supporters. At the end of the second year the congregation voted whether to renew the contract with the pastor. The vote turned out to be "2" in favor and "96" against.

### A WARNING FROM ST. PAUL

St. Paul was warning the people in the little church at Corinth about the sins that hindered the people of Israel in the time of Moses from being all that God wanted them to be. Paul wrote,

"Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry'. We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did - and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. We should not test the Lord, as some of them did - and were killed by snakes. And do not GRUMBLE, as some of them did - and were killed by the destroying angel."

My eye fell on that word, "grumble". You mean grumbling is a sin? Yes, yes, according to St. Paul...grumbling is a sin. It does prevent us from being all that God has intended us to be. And since grumbling is such a favorite topic and prevalent theme in Paul's writings and also in the Book of Exodus, it's OK for us to deal with it in a sermon for it does creep into our life...our organizations and churches....and we need on occasion to do battle with it.

Now, no sooner did Israel gather into a congregation than they began to have grumblers. Those of you who have had small children in your family know

about grumbling. With whiney voices, children will often complain, "We're starving...we're hungry". We can be patient with such "age-appropriate" behavior among small children...we expect a certain amount of it...but it does become a bit more of a problem and more irritating when you find it in adults. Thus we read in Exodus 16 that the people began to complain and murmur against Moses and Aaron...."We're starving....you just brought us out here to watch us die of hunger". (Exodus 16: 1 - 3)

#### WHAT IS A GRUMBLER

Before we go any further, perhaps we should define the grumbler. I think just being discontent is not enough to be labeled a grumbler. All of us, at some time or another, have probably been discontent with something...in the office, or in the organization and perhaps in the church. We may be unhappy with a motion or a position taken by a group we belong to...it could be the denomination or the leadership of a church. We cannot support a particular view of the pastor. That happens. That's normal. Disagreeing doesn't automatically make a person a grumbler.

A grumbler is apt to be a person who doesn't know just how to handle his or her unhappiness which naturally occurs when parties disagree. Grumblers are people who do not know appropriate ways to express their disagreements with leadership. Sometimes instead of finding appropriate ways to show their discontent, they'll tend to stir up unhealthy conflict. And when they cross that imaginary line, they're on their way to becoming a grumbler. They may have good intentions, yet the results of their grumbling can be harmful and hurtful. It takes a lot of patience and a lot of love to deal with the grumbler.

One writer has compared grumblers to termites. They slowly chew away at the foundation of confidence and vision of a group...a church. They don't always seem to know how to talk about their discontentment in ways that are open and honest and kind. Let me offer some common factors that may help us to identify potential grumblers.

#### ANONYMOUS

First, some grumblers prefer to remain anonymous. We could probably form an organization called GRUMBLERS ANONYMOUS, but then the more I think about it, it would be a silly name since it would be redundant. Grumbling and anonymity go hand in hand. Since grumblers have difficulty being honest about their disagreement or their unhappiness, they tend to send a message of discontent by indirect means...the whisper..."let me tell..."

The unsigned note is the common style of the grumbler. I've had a few across the years...some of them I've kept. I've found messages on Sunday bulletins left in the pews. I have a friend who says he is afraid to walk into his office on a Monday morning for he knows he'll find "the anonymous note"... no signature, just a bit of criticism of a sermon or a staff member. Oh, sometimes the content is serious, but more often than not the notes are just petty complaints. Like the person who left an unsigned notes that said, "Sunrise on Easter morning is at 6:05 - not 6:30!". The pastor who received that one wondered if the author of that note understood the purpose of a sunrise service is not to identify the actual moment of sunrise so much as to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. Grumblers I've noted often like the cloak of anonymity.

The Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, one Sunday morning, found an anonymous note with just one word written on it - "FOOL". Holding up the note to his congregation he said:

"I've known many an instance of a man writing a letter and forgetting to sign his name, but this is the only instance I have ever known of a man signing his name and forgetting to write the letter."

DIFFICULTY EXPRESSING THEIR DISSATISFACTION IN SPECIFICS

Another thing I've noted about the grumbler is that he or she has difficulty expressing his or her dissatisfaction in "specifics".

That is, they tend to talk in innuendoes. They hint around without saying what they really mean. Subtle innuendoes, rumors and suggestions that cannot be pinned down can be hurtful. We know this and yet, some of us are guilty of doing it. Gossip. Instead of gossiping the Gospel, we end up passing on things that fail to pass through those three gates: Is it kind? Is it true? Is it necessary? If it passes, then it's OK to pass it on.

Oh, sometimes it shoes up in phrases like, "I'm just not being fed". What does that mean? The grumbler doesn't even know for sure what it means. They know they're spiritually hungry, but they do not know why. They know they're not happy and the only thing they know to do is to grumble. Grumblers to me sound a bit like the serpent questioning Eve in the Garden of Eden.

"Did God really say you can't eat that fruit?" It was just an innuendo. Yet, it was enough that Eve began to wonder....."Maybe God is holding back on us...maybe God wasn't completely honest with us...."

Eventually her trust in God was undercut. All it took was the whisper of innuendo...a subtle suggestion. "Forbidden fruit can soon get you in a bad jam".

THEY TALK ABOUT PROBLEMS...WITHOUT OFFERING SOLUTIONS

There's a third thing that I've noticed across the years about the grumbler and that is that he or she tends to be a person who talks a lot about problems, but is slow on the uptake in offering a solution. They're really great at criticizing what's wrong, but so often in unhelpful ways. Who was it who said,

"He has the RIGHT to criticize who has the HEART to help"  
(We celebrated his birthday this past week on February 12th)

In the church where I grew up, there was an elderly gentleman whose name was George and two or three times a year George would get up in the service before all the people and make a speech. Sometimes he would make the same speech at the annual meeting, but it was always delivered with feeling and passion and conviction and I remember it because it was about the youth of the church. It went like this:

"We're not doing enough for the youth. There aren't enough youth in our church. They are the future of the church. Why aren't we doing something for our young people? We need to be doing more for them. If we don't get the young people in here, our church is going to die...since the young people are the future of the church!"

Oh, it was a great speech. I remember hearing it half a dozen times as a teenager....always delivered with feeling and passion and conviction. However, you know George never really got beyond the words. He never once invited the young people over to his home. He never offered a scholarship to a young person to go to church camp. He did nothing for young people. He just gave his speech. You know the type. Lots of problems, but no solutions. These aren't bad people. Most of them are sincere folks who will tell you they "love the Lord". Press them and they'll tell you they're helping the church....at times, however, they fail to realize how destructive they are.

One book about the grumbler is called, Well-Intentioned Dragons. Its main thesis is that these people sincerely think they are helping. Nevertheless, they breathe fire and swing a tail, like a dragon, so that friends and fellow church members get hurt. It happens. These "well-intentioned" dragons don't realize what they're doing to everybody else. Perhaps they don't know how to handle conflict or ways to express their unhappiness. What do we do about the grumbler. Moses had a few around him. They complained,

"Moses...you just brought us out here to starve us....and we're going to die! Moses! Moses!"

#### LEADERS HAVE TO BE TOUGH

I'm sure that Moses quickly learned that the man or woman "out front" has to be tough...has to have a thick skin. Toughen up, Moses....taking criticism is a part of the job. Remember you're never going to please everybody. And, if you take the criticism personally, you're only going to make things worse.

Bruce Humphrey tells a good story about his wife's grandfather. Once, when her grandfather was a young man, he pulled into a gas station to fill up the tank and to let the six children go to the bathroom. A few minutes later he pulled away, not realizing that one of the girls was still back there in the bathroom. The other five children whined, "...but you've forgotten Peggy". Instead of listening to them, he drove on angrily demanding that they be quiet and stop their complaining, their whining. After having driven for close to an hour, he calmed down enough to realize the mistake. When he turned the car around to go back for Peggy all he said was: "Why didn't someone tell me?"

Leaders who are oversensitive tend to get "defensive" and fail to listen to the legitimate concerns of the grumblers. Sometimes the concern is legitimate.....it may be just the manner which the grumbler uses to convey what is inappropriate. Leaders who have broad shoulders, tough skins and who don't take themselves too seriously will be able to hear the complaints and concerns while helping the grumbler in a healthier style of expressing what may be on his or her mind.

#### APPROPRIATE WAY TO EXPRESS DISSATISFACTION

Jesus taught us in Matthew 18, verse 15 that we are to go directly to the person with whom we disagree in order to express our concern face to face. It is not helpful to carry messages on behalf of others. We need to remind each other to keep our disagreements honest, forthright and always shared in a kind and gentle way. Here are the words of Jesus on this concern:

"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother....."

And one final lesson. The best remedy for grumbling is working together toward a common goal. Don't you agree? Whether it's grumbling in the church or out there in the marketplace....as one author has put it,

"The best way to prevent weeds is not to attack them individually....the best way to handle weeds is a thick, healthy lawn...which keeps them from springing up in the first place."

As I see it, the goal of a church is to be so healthy as a congregation that the grumblers can't be destructive. A healthy congregation encourages its members to find the right ways to handle those occasional conflicts that occur between people.

One of the most common causes for grumbling is lack of involvement. Most grumblers are people who are under-employed or unemployed for the Church. They haven't found a place in God's Kingdom where they feel important, where they feel they're making a difference. The result is that they complain about what's going on or not going on in the church. The goal, I feel, of a healthy church is to be a "full employment" church where everybody is needed, where everybody is contributing, where everybody is doing his or her part. "Take an assignment" said Sister Corita with great wisdom, "And then you won't feel responsible for the whole thing".

A woman came to her pastor and said,

"Our Church has a fellowship group of older members, retirement age, and there's a fellowship group for the younger members of our congregation, for the Baby Boomers and young families.....some of us in between - in our fifties - would like a fellowship group."

That person could easily have become a grumbler. There was the opportunity to complain, but instead she said, "Can I get something started?" The pastor said, "Go for it"....and she did. A most successful fellowship group was born. It happened because somebody, instead of grumbling, got to work and made a difference. It's happened here in our church. That's the way our Rummage Sales got started some twenty years ago.....somebody got to work. That's the way our monthly birthday celebrations got started...a cake and some singing. Somebody saw the need and stepped in...got to work and made it happen...instead of grumbling.

That's the difference between healthy people and the grumblers. People with a positive attitude are like Isaiah. When they see a problem, they say, "Here I am Lord.....use me!" That's always the best way to eliminate grumbling...act first, grumble later. Said Paul, "And do not grumble". Good advice for us all.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your spirit in these moments, O God. Forgive our much complaining and move us to action...in a positive and healthy way....that we may make a difference for Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen

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