

“All the Whiners”

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; James 5:13-20 Mark 9:38-50, Psalm 19:7-14, October 1, 2006

Years ago, very early in this adventure of mine known as professional ministry, I helped plant a church. When we plant a church it does not mean that we bury it but that we start it. During this time period of about 2 years I served with a very interesting senior minister. Long before the new church was established, he had gotten into some difficulty with the large congregation he was serving and had left the pastorate to spend about ten years in the business world. A group of people he had worked with in the large church decided they wanted a church all their own so they gathered and gave him a call.

I had completed seminary and was hoping to be ordained in the not too distant future. In our system candidates for ordination need to be called to a pastorate before hands are laid on and one is called “rev.” One is only a “reverend” as long as one is serving a church. Theoretically, when one is between churches or is no longer leading a church, the title is dropped.

Anyway, I was away on vacation with my family when the phone rang in our cottage and it was this aforementioned minister. He wanted to know if I would work with him as the education minister in establishing the new church. I agreed to do so.

From the very beginning it was never a struggling church. Captains of industry and presidents of businesses in the Milwaukee area made up its founders. That church is now more than twenty years old and still moving along. It seems to have reached a growth plateau, but the church building is so small that is a good thing.

The senior pastor retired six or seven years ago. This came as a surprise to many. He was one of those fellows we thought would never retire. In his letter to the congregation upon his departure he mentioned all the good years he had in ministry and the great satisfaction establishing the church had for him. He concluded the letter, however, with a little zinger. Loosely quoted, he told his congregation that it was time for him to retire because he was tired of “all the whiners” among them who expected him to provide answers to their life problems. Needless to say, he was not much into pastoral care. He had become a minister to preach prophetically, baptize, marry and bury. In the two years we worked together, all that “other stuff” fell to me.

“All the whiners”—poor Moses, poor Jesus, poor James. What a struggle to deal with such negative folks day after day after day. Especially, being out in a desert with no sign of relief.

Whiners are folks who simply cannot seem to see life through anything but cloudy, disappointing lenses. Whiners are those persons for whom nothing is ever right; the people who cannot take any disappointment and turn it around.

The nation Israel suffered wherever it went. Moses heard the voices of the people loud and clear. At times, their whining rubbed off on him and he, in turn, would whine a little to God. God would then straighten things out until the next time when the whining became too intense once again.

In this morning’s reading, helpers were appointed to assist Moses in the task of taking care of the nation. They were an early form of our deacons. They were to act as buffers between the body of the people and their leader. Two men had not shown up for the consecration meeting and were overheard speaking in Moses’ name. Jealousy flared

up over this and Moses reminded the others that they all should be so blessed, and that they should leave them alone.

Jealousy makes us all whine a lot. If someone has something we do not or is doing something we cannot, we have a tendency to be a little jealous. Instead of rejoicing in the good fortune someone might have, we feel disappointment. Unable to contain our disappointment over what we see as a world that is not fair, we whine. We complain about big things and little things and, most often, over things that really do not concern us at all. It exhausts those around us.

Jesus had to feel the same tiredness Moses did over the way his disciples responded to those who were casting out demons in his name. The push to explain the gospel and to lead others into the pathways of God had to be set aside while he had to deal with this distracting anxiety and jealousy his closest followers allowed to enter their lives and minds. He basically told them to “get over it.” If someone were acting in his name in a positive way, it would not harm them. That was how the movement would grow and strengthen. There should be no whining about it. And he warns them in very strong language of what would happen if they tried to put stumbling blocks in the way of those who believed in him.

In James, the author spells out some of the essentials of the faith. He lays out the ground rules for living in a community of caring people. He told them just how they are to live and support one another as they worked to remain strong in their faith. Nowhere does he say that being a bunch of whiners will further their cause. And, indeed it doesn't. All it does is create an annoyance that eventually causes others to close their ears, hearts and minds to those doing the complaining.

The gospel of love and truth is best carried by and spread by those who have a clear vision of what it means to be Disciples of Christ. It is promoted to those who will listen by those who willing take up the cross and all that entails without complaints about how heavy it is or how clumsy it may appear. The Good News is carried forth best by those who do not desire to pick at others because they seem to be practicing their Christianity a little wrong. Our religion is one of relationships and inclusion. It is not one that draws tight little circles intended to close the other person out. The sooner our eyes may be opened to this important truth the more effective we will become in being true disciples of Christ. The sooner we understand that working together is the only way we will move forward, the more we will progress in bringing about the Kingdom of God. And that, folks, when we stop to think about it, is what it is all about. Amen