

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Cycle B-2024

The first line from our reading from the Book of Exodus really captured my attention: “The whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron.” They were grumbling because they were not enjoying a steady supply of food since their deliverance from slavery to the Egyptians. Jesus proclaimed: “Where two or more are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” I am a big believer that where two or three are gathered, there will be grumbling. This is usually not from God. There is something about group dynamics that often lends itself to frequent grumbling. This can be a harmless way of getting things off our chest, but it also has the potential to create a toxic environment within our relationships, communities, and institutions.

Bringing God into the equation, the 64,000 dollar question is this, Do we bring our grumbings to God in prayer, so we can bring God’s grace into the situation? Fr. Henri Nouwen perceptively writes: “Prayer is the presentation of all thoughts to our loving Father so that He can see them and respond to them with His Divine compassion. Prayer is the joyful affirmation that God

knows our minds and hearts and that nothing is hidden from Him.” We are invited to bring our grumblings to prayer, so that the grace and mercy of God will come into our lives and those who are the focus of our complaints. Whenever we find ourselves grumbling about the church, we pray for the church; society, we pray for our country; another person- we non-judgmentally lift them up in prayer, and even against ourselves, we commend ourselves to the grace and mercy of God. Let’s not underestimate the power of transforming our grumblings into prayer, especially in situations where we feel powerless or are powerless. Whenever we have the opportunity to act, may we seek positive change with the guidance and help of the Holy Spirit, and not become the devil we seek to confront.

Another question for us to ponder is whether it is okay for us to grumble about God or at God? The Scriptures make a strong distinction between grumbling at God and complaining to Him. Grumbling about God would involve talking bad about God to other people, or actively nurturing those sentiments in our hearts. Grumbling at God could involve the use foul language or blasphemous words directed towards Him, or blaming God for something bad or evil that has happened. The Bible refers to grumbling as “faithless complaining” and it is

considered sinful because it is accusing God of wrongdoing. Grumbling against God reveals that we doubt or reject His divine attributes such as His goodness, faithfulness, love, wisdom, power, or competency.

Complaining to God is a completely different story. “Faithful complaining” does not accuse God of doing wrong. It involves honestly, boldly, and respectfully sharing our thoughts and feelings about Him and our situation in life. For example, we share our discouragement and anger with Him or about Him concerning our physical health or the loss of a loved one.

God encourages this form of complaining and teaches us how to do so through Psalms of Lament. In these laments, the writers share with God their wide range of thoughts and feelings: sorrow, anger, fear, longing, confusion, desolation, repentance, disappointment, or depression. One example of a complaint to God can be found in Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Why so far from my call for help, from my cries of anguish? My God, I call by day, but You do not answer, by night, but I find no relief.” It is interesting to note there is a four-part structure to every lament: a direct address to God, a complaint, a request, and an

expression of renewed trust in God. Over the years I am aware of many people who have grumbled or complained about God behind His back, so to speak, but very few have addressed Him directly.

Within our Catholic culture, I believe the hesitancy to do so flows from a belief that if we grumbled or complained to God directly, God would punish us in this life and for all eternity. I have some Good News. If we have ever grumbled to God or about God, we are not guilty of an unforgivable sin. We can be forgiven. The bigger challenge is to trust God's love enough that we feel free to complain directly to God, in a spirit of honesty, boldness, and respect.

I remember the first time I had the courage to do so. I was in college seminary. I was staying up late to finish a paper that was due in the morning. When I was almost finished there was a power surge, and I lost the entire paper. Back in the early 90's there was not the automatic save function on the computers, and I had forgotten to save it along the way. Without censoring myself, I began to tell God how angry I was at Him for allowing this to happen. To my surprise, I was immediately filled with an amazing peace, and in my spirit, it felt like God was telling me, "Well it's about time!" For the first time in my life, I was able to be real

with God and it felt so good! And apparently, God approved of it as well. Ever since that night, whenever I have complained to God, about matters of a more substantial nature than a lost paper, I have had a similar experience of God's peace and presence. That has allowed my relationship with God to go the next level, because I am able to be real with God about everything going on in my mind, heart, and life.

God wants the same for you! As you pour out your hearts to God in thanksgiving, petition, and complaint, you will personally experience God as your refuge and your strength. Whenever you complain to God you will eventually come to a new level of trust in God's unwavering love. As the Psalmist in Psalm 22 expressed his faith-filled complaints to God, he eventually came around in the end to proclaim the following: "For God has not spurned or disdained the misery of this poor wretch. Did not turn away from me, but heard me when I cried out. I will offer praise in the great assembly: my vows I will fulfill before those who fear Him. Like the Psalmist, let us complain to God with a living and transparent faith, if needed, and ultimately come to experience His caring, merciful, and faithful love.

