

June 30, 2013

A Gospel Centered Community

Serving Widows and Saving Priests

Acts 6:1 – 7

Verse 1 of chapter six sounds a very jarring note if you have been reading the first five chapters about the growth of the early church. Chapter one has Jesus ministering for forty days among the disciples after His resurrection, teaching them and leaving them with some final instructions – "*Wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father*". We see the Holy Spirit poured out in power in chapter two and five thousand added to the church. In chapter three we witnessed the incredible miracle of healing in a man who had been born lame more than forty years previously; and the Spirit-empowered preaching by Peter that brought another five thousand into the church. And then in chapter four we saw the bold witness of Peter and John before the Sanhedrin, and the earth-shaking prayer meeting that stimulated even more gospel proclamation and brought even more people into the church.

We saw too, how the church was of one heart and soul and all things were shared as anyone had need and there were no needy people in the church because the believer's hearts had been liberated from the bondage to money and possessions. We can't help but be amazed by the powerful witness and incredible unity and radical generosity of that early church. We were sobered and instructed as we witnessed the immediate judgment of God on Annanias and Sapphira, and encouraged and strengthened by the testimony of the apostles' fearless preaching in the face of persecution in chapter five. And it seems that the church is just moving from strength to strength and the gates of hell are collapsing under the onslaught of the gospel – and then we read in chapter 6: *Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.* Acts 6:1

In those days – in those days when the church was growing – *in those days* when the gospel was going out in power – *in those days* when miracles were abounding and people were hanging out in the streets hoping that at least Peter's shadow might fall on them – *in those days* when the opposition was paralyzed and seemingly helpless to do anything against the spread of the gospel – *in those days* a complaint arose. Up to now, the opposition had been entirely external – the Sanhedrin and the rulers, and the priests – all these were outside the church. But now the opposition comes from within. And it might not look like much – a complaint arose. Some whining going on. There was a little problem. Someone was complaining.

The word is *goggusmos* (gong gus mos') and it is one of those onomatopoeic words – words that imitate or suggest the source of the sound of the words they describe; like 'oink' or 'meow' or 'tick tock' (di da). (Barbarian - barbaros) And this word means to murmur or grumble or mutter – mostly under your breath. Not too obviously – just obvious enough that other people understand that you're upset about something. Just a little whining. A complaint arose. And Luke tells us that the complaint came from the Hellenists against the Hebrews. Now that tells us a little bit about the makeup of the early church. The *Hebrews* were the Christian converts among the Jews born and raised in Israel, and they primarily spoke Aramaic. The *Hellenists* were those Christian converts among the Jews who had returned to Judea after having lived abroad in the world, and primarily spoke Greek and had adopted Greek culture. They were not Greeks, but Greek-speaking Jews who looked and talked and lived differently than their brothers who had been born in Israel. And so what we have here is a culture clash of sorts.

Because women didn't inherit property in those days, their livelihood depended on what their father, husband and/or son(s) brought home. If they didn't have a father or husband or son, widows could "glean" and pick up the leftovers after others' fields had been harvested. This wasn't considered stealing or begging, since it was a God-ordained way to provide for those who couldn't provide for themselves: Deuteronomy 24:19-21 And when widows were too old to glean, her other relatives were to provide for her. Here, the family of Christ was providing "daily" for the widows among them, but apparently the widows among the Hellenists had been neglected. And they were upset – some among them were complaining – muttering, murmuring, grumbling. It was like an undercurrent that ran through this community. And it could have been disastrous. It threatened not only the unity of the church – but it threatened the testimony of the church. And the thing is, complaints can even start out as concerns over legitimate issues – in this case, the widows were probably being neglected – a legitimate concern. But the complaint arose, pitting one group against another. The indication here is that there was a genuine problem – but the initial response at least, was not a good one.

March 28, 2013: Police in Kendall Park, New Jersey, said two men got into a physical altercation during Easter service Communion at St. Augustine's of Canterbury Church, with one man headbutting the other. Police said the incident involved two men, both in their 40's, who knew each other prior to attending the church services... Shortly before 1 p.m. during services in the gymnasium, one of the individuals was standing in line for Communion when the other man came up behind him, according to police. A quick physical altercation then occurred, with one man headbutting the other, before both of them left the church, police said...One of the men suffered a cut lip and the second man had a bruise, but neither required medical treatment at the scene, police said.

June 25, 2013: A dispute over leadership at a Henderson County church has turned from angry words to fist fights. About 30 police officers from five agencies were called to break up fights Sunday at Greater New Zion Baptist Church in Fletcher. Henderson County Sheriff's Capt. Jerry Rice says the brawl is under investigation, and no one appears to have been seriously hurt. Rice says there were about 75 people at the church when police arrived, but not all of them were scuffling. Church members are divided over the recent ouster of the Rev. LeVon Ray as pastor of the church. The fighting apparently began over whether a vote should be held to reinstate Ray. No charges have been filed.

June 23, 2013: In Lexington, Mississippi, a 26-year-old man showed up with a shotgun Sunday outside the Asia Baptist Church where a fight was taking place and was fatally shot by police, authorities said. Albert Gipson said his son had shown up at the church to protect him during a fight in the back of the church. Witnesses told police the fight broke out between the church's pastor and some congregation members. A complaint arose – that's where headbutting and fistfights and eventually shootings begin. It begins with mutterings and murmurings and grumbling and complaining.

In a letter to the Philippians, written to a church by the way that had a serious problem with grumbling and complaining, the apostle Paul wrote to them and said: *Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.* Philippians 2:14-16 Do all things – not just some things – do all things without grumbling or questioning. The word Paul uses here, translated grumbling is the same one Luke uses in Acts 6 – complaining. Do **all things** without complaining. That is fairly comprehensive.

But he ties another word to complaining – **questioning**. Questioning – or more accurately, **questionings**, is a word that means **'inward reasonings or doubt'**. And the idea here is that this is a kind of **internal questioning leading to disputes or ill-natured controversies and grumbling**. The word is used in Matthew 15 where Jesus says that *'out of the heart proceed evil thoughts or reasonings'*. And it shows up also in Luke 5 in the story about the paralytic who was lowered through the roof of the house for Jesus to heal. And instead of healing him right away, Jesus told the man that his sins were forgiven and with that the scribes and the Pharisees began this dialog in their minds: *And the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, [dispute within themselves] saying, Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?* The fact that this word indicates a thought process is made clear in the next verse: *When Jesus perceived their thoughts, He answered them, Why do you question in your hearts?* Luke 5:21-22

So when we put these together – grumbling and complaining, questioning and reasoning – we begin to get the picture. Grumbling and complaining start in our hearts and minds in reaction to our circumstances as a kind of questioning or reasoning. Grumbling and questioning are linked because grumbling happens when we harbor this kind of doubt and questioning in our minds. Things like, 'Who does He think He is to forgive sins?' or 'Why are those Hebrews cutting our widows out of the loop', or 'What she said to me wasn't nice', or 'that isn't fair', or a myriad of other doubt-inducing conversations in our minds that lead directly to grumbling and complaining.

I say doubt-inducing because **behind our questioning and reasoning lies unbelief in a sovereign and gracious God** who is for us in everything, and who lovingly orchestrates all the events and circumstances of our life for our good and His glory. When we murmur and complain about the way God is dealing with us in our circumstances and situations, we run from the cross, we try to save our soul life instead of losing it. Just before telling us not to grumble and question, Paul tells us to work out our salvation in fear and trembling, and links saving faith to not grumbling – to not harboring doubt-inducing conversations in our minds. Paul is saying, **'Apply the cross to all your grumbling and evil thinking and kill it and so prove to be children of God'**. We are supposed to shine as lights in the world and by our conduct prove to be children of God. Grumbling makes us look like children of the devil.

Every grumbling and every reasoning is rebellion against God. Turn to Exodus chapter 16 and look at what it says: *And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and the people of Israel said to them, Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger. Then the Lord said to Moses, Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily. So Moses and Aaron said to all the people of Israel, At evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because He has heard your grumbling against the Lord. For what are we, that you grumble against us? And Moses said, When the Lord gives you in the evening meat to eat and in the morning bread to the full, because the Lord has heard your grumbling that you grumble against Him what are we? Your grumbling is not against us but against the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, Say to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, Come near before the Lord, for He has heard your grumbling.* Exodus 16:2-9

Two things are abundantly clear from this text – and from many others like it I might add. First of all, **the Lord hears our complaining.** If nothing else, that ought to give us pause to reflect. The Lord hears our grumbling – and I don't think that it pleases Him. Secondly, **all our complaining is really against God** and not the circumstance. Ultimately all our complaining is against God because at the heart of grumbling and reasoning is a heart of unbelief. If we dig deep enough, I think we will find that all sins come from unbelief in the promises of God. **We simply don't believe in God's willingness and ability to work for us in every circumstance of life so that everything turns out for our good.** Anxiety, complaining, grumbling, doubt, evil reasoning, covetousness, envy, lust, bitterness, impatience, pride – all spring from the root of unbelief in the promises of God.

Unbelief is dissatisfaction and discontent with God's presence and provision and from this dissatisfaction and discontent come the inward reasonings and doubt that lead to grumbling and complaining. Look at what Israel was saying: 'We would rather have died under the cruel bondage of slavery rather than here in the wilderness of freedom, because at least there, our stomachs were full'. What an amazing statement! God had not only given them His promise that He would bring them out of Egypt and into the good land, but He had also worked miracles almost daily that all of them saw with their own eyes. God had proved good on His word at least to this point – the Egyptians were dead, they were free, He was sustaining them every day, and they were headed for the good land. But ultimately they didn't believe God and that kept them out of the land God had given them to possess.

If there is grumbling coming from your lips, be sure that there is unbelief in your heart. God has given us His precious and magnificent promises so that we will have a sure and certain refuge in bewildering and uncertain circumstances. **And it is the circumstances that test the veracity of those promises and our faith in them.** Remember what the Lord said to Moses: *Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not.* The only way to test the truth of the promise that God will provide for us is when there seems to be no food around. **The test is whether we will believe His word or the circumstances.**

Reasoning comes from looking at the circumstances and drawing wrong conclusions. Israel looked at the circumstance – no food – and began to reason in their hearts. They concluded that not only was God not going to feed them – He actually wanted them to die in the wilderness. So they grumbled. It was the manifestation of dissatisfaction and discontent with the way God was leading them. There may have even been the thought that they could do a better job of things and that God was not holding up His end of the bargain. So they began questioning His power, His ability, His very goodness. They were dissatisfied and discontent with God and so they grumbled. The Hellenistic Jews looked at the fact that their widows were being overlooked, and they concluded that the Hebrew Jews were behind this plot.

Our joy in God – our contentment in Him in all things – our satisfaction in Him – are meant to stand out as a beacon of light in this world: *that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world,* Philippians 2:15 The way of the world is the way of grumbling and questioning and reasoning and complaining and Christians ought to stand out **precisely because they don't. It is natural to grumble and complain – it is supernatural not to.** The Bible says, 'Don't grumble against God in your circumstances – don't murmur and question His provision and providence for you because your life is meant to be a beacon of hope in a world that does not trust in God or value Him'.

We need to understand that grumbling and complaining goes viral really quick. Some years ago this church went through a very serious and trying time that began with a single complaint. A complaint arose. And that complaint sparked other complaints until the church was divided and discouraged and disheartened. People became verbally abusive and even threatening in their conversations. Secret meetings were held, alliances were formed, strategies aimed at takeover were implemented, leaders and others were publically slandered. Fortunately no one was shot. But it was a real mess. All because a complaint arose. Grumbling, murmuring, complaining is the single most effective tool in Satan's war against the church. It destroys unity; it trashes the witness of Christ; and it renders the saints ineffective in the proclamation of the gospel.

Provisionally, God had some men in leadership who understood the viral nature of complaining and came together to cut it short. *And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."* **Acts 6:2-4** A lot of people look at this passage as instituting the office of deacon, but that really isn't the point. The noun **diakonia**, that is sometimes transliterated in English as deacon, actually appears three times in this passage – twice as a noun and once as a verb. And the basic meaning of the word is service or ministry or minister or serving one. In verse one it says that the widows were being overlooked in the daily **diakonia** – distribution; in verse 2 it is used to describe serving tables - **diakonio**; and in verse four it is translated as ministry – **diakonia**.

The fundamental understanding is the idea of service – serving others. It is carried out in practical, hands on ministry and in the ministry of prayer and the word of God. The problem here, the reason for the complaint, was that the church was neglecting the basic function of a follower of Christ. First and foremost we are called to serve one another. In **Matthew 20:28** Jesus described His mission with these words: *"...the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."* In other words, the thing that characterized His mission was service – **diakonia**. And Jesus brought the message home to His disciples in that last night together in the upper room when He took a towel and a basin and knelt down and washed twelve pairs of dirty feet. *If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.* John 13:14

This is repeated over and over in the gospels and the rest of the New Testament. Over and over the point is made that **we are called to serve one another**. Peter tells us: *As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace.* 1 Peter 4:10 Paul tells us: *For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.* Galatians 5:13 **Loving, humble, self-sacrificing service to one another kills the virus** of whining and complaining. It is born out of a deep, real understanding that our Lord and Master first served us. We serve out of a heart awareness that we have **been** served. One of the most visible hallmarks of genuine, saving faith is shown in our loving service to one another and to the world. And for a moment, they forgot that.

But they were brought back by the decision of the apostles: *And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.* Acts 6:5-6 Now we don't know how the whole situation really started – whether there was a conscious effort to exclude the Hellenistic widows, or they were simply overlooked. But it is, I think, instructive to note that the men now charged with serving the widows all had Greek names. And it likely means that they were from the Hellenistic Jews. Which might mean that those of the Hellenistic Jews should have been taking some oversight and simply failed to do so, or that the leadership, composed of the Hebrew Jews had allowed their cultural differences to blind them to the need of their sisters in Christ.

Whatever the case was – it opened the door for complaining. And that tells us two things. **First, there will always be things to complain about.** You don't even have to think very hard if you want to complain about stuff in the church. Somebody's always stepping on someone else's toes. Somebody is always being overlooked. Somebody is always being offended by someone else's insensitivity. Things are always being done wrong. People are always being offended. Just the fact that we are different will always create uncomfortable tensions, and misunderstandings and give us reasons to grumble and complain. That is going to happen. There will always be stuff to complain about.

But secondly, **we cannot afford to live there**. We cannot afford to give vent to our complaints. We cannot afford to grumble and whine and mutter and murmur against one another. Because what is at stake is nothing less than **the testimony of Jesus and the proclamation of the gospel and the glory of God in the world**. Look at what happens as the church is turned back to serving one another: *And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.* Acts 6:7 **The gospel is going out and widows are being served and priests are being saved**. You have to understand that we are talking about those people who have a vested interest in Judaism coming to faith in Jesus. And if you think it would be hard for Jew who is not a priest to come to Christ, especially in that day and at that time, just think how hard it would be for a priest of Judaism to turn his back on everything he believed in up to that point and trust Christ for salvation.

But I think one compelling witness was the way Christians served one another. In fact I believe that **the authenticity of our faith will be seen in how we serve one another**. Once Gandhi was asked, 'What is the greatest hindrance to Christianity in India?' And he replied, **'The greatest hindrance to Christianity in India is Christians'**. He said, **'I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ'**. In a time when you mainly looked out for your own blood family, here were the Christians giving sacrificially and serving across cultural and ethnic lines. In fact, many church historians can only account for the incredible spread of Christianity over the whole Roman Empire in a few short years by the fact that they seemed to take the commandment 'love one another' literally. They shared what they had with one another and they also shared freely with those in need who were not part of the Christian community. In fact, one testimony from a pagan source, quoted by one of the early church fathers in the third century captured the essence of the Christian community: 'See how they love one another and how they are ready to die for each other'.

And Luke says that the word of God continued to increase and lots of people were coming to faith – along with the hardest ones. The word was spreading out there because the love of Christ was spreading in there. It was going viral out there because it was going viral in their beings. When that revolutionary word of Jesus' otherworldly, sacrificial, servant-hearted love spreads like wildfire in our souls, it will start a fire in the world that cannot be contained.

Our good and gracious Father,

Grant your children hearts of humility and trust in Your gracious power and goodness. May we embrace the cross as we work out our salvation with fear and trembling because it is You working in us. Let our unbelief be swallowed up with contentment in Your presence and provision as we feed our souls on Your great and precious promises. Give us the will to battle every temptation to look at our circumstances and draw the wrong conclusions. Oh that we would not be overcome by unbelief and found grumbling and questioning but that all the heartaches and dangers and trials of life instead drive us to You – our joy and rest. Show us the infinite and all-satisfying glory of the risen Christ so that discontent and dissatisfaction are destroyed in the mighty strength of Your all-sufficiency. Grant it Lord, that we would delight our souls in You and spread that joy through the gospel to all people we pray, in the all-sufficient name of Jesus Christ our Saviour, Amen.