

“Cheese with Our Whine?”

Exodus 17: 1-7

What do you call a basement full of Texas Rangers Baseball Team Fans? A whine cellar.

In North America, September 2008, the bottom fell out. In a matter of months, people began to find themselves in dire financial straits as they were laid off or the recession hit their businesses. I don't have to remind us that people are hurting all around us. The New York Times and the Globe and Mail recently reported 9 million Americans have lost their homes. A record number of Master and Ph.D. Graduates now occupy the lanes of Wallstreet and streets of major U.S. metropolitan downtown cores, protesting the greed and entitlement of the one percent of North America's population while they search for jobs. The same thing is happening in Canada, in Calgary, Toronto and

Vancouver. The North American middle class that has carried the largest portion of tax and consumer debt are stepping out of the complaining and grumbling stage of consumerism warfare. We are watching the beginnings of a revolution in the way the working class intends to hold the government officials we elect to office accountable for their back room politics and corporate financial kickback attitudes. Since the ending of WW II, we have been whining and grumbling about the rich who make the decisions for the rest of us while they find loop holes to get around the responsibility of the decisions they have made. Now, the grumbling of those who bear the taxing consequences of North America are rising up into what is now being called an Occupied Movement. What has finally made a difference between whining backwards and movement forwards? I believe the difference is that people are doing three things:

- 1). We are taking responsibility that we have bought into the lies of consumerism that said having the latest and greatest stuff makes us happy;
- 2) We are learning that whining and complaining are the actions of people who want to blame someone else for everything that is going wrong instead of taking responsibility for being part of the problem and part of the solution;
- 3) We are ready to take a deep look at what constitutes a full life as we begin to hold ourselves and our government responsible to co-create policies and financial procedures that promote equality and the sharing of our resources in order to live together in a sustainable partnership that is life giving for everyone. Folks, we are just like the Nation of Israel wandering in the desert, complaining about all the hard times, forgetting about all the provisions we have

enjoyed and pointing the blame at anyone but ourselves. And so we whine about why God has not allowed us to enter the Promised Land. I believe the grace and mercy of God allows us to wander in the deserts of our lives until we are willing to do the hard work of co-creating a life with the Sacred. I believe we will enter the fullness of our relationship with one another and with God when our hearts are ready to receive the blessings of God.

A well-known English preacher was approached by a congregation member who complained about some aspect of church life. The preacher listened to the complaint, paused, and then replied with five words that cut straight to the heart of not only the man's problem, but the problem with all grumbling and complaining in that happen in church. He simply said, "It's not about you, stupid!" and walked off. It was a stunningly rude response—the kind that this preacher seemed uniquely capable of getting away

with in his very English way. But doesn't it exactly express what is wrong with grumbling and complaining in church? It really is the height of idiocy to think that church is about me and my needs and my family and my satisfaction. It completely overturns the teaching of the scriptures—that church is about God and Christ, transforming our self centered natures into the image of God by following the ways of Christ and loving other people. We whine when our favorite sports team loses the game all the while we label ourselves as their fans. If God were a waiter, I can imagine the Sacred walking up to my table and asking me if I would like some cheese to go with my whine.

This is the whining and selfish grumbling that the Hebrew Children were doing while God was meeting their needs. They had escaped Pharaoh's army, consumed all the manna and quail that had been provided for all of them in the desert and they had been filled...but they still wanted more. Now, through the leadership of

Moses, God has led them to Rephidim and there isn't any water. Do they pray and ask God to help them find water? No. What is their immediate reaction? They demanded that their leader fix their situation. So Moses rolls his eyes up at God and says "how long do I have to be with these ungrateful people?" Then he hits a rock and water pours out. Now, I don't think this literally happened but the meaning of the story is that God can provide what we need through humanly impossible means and we are responsible to try to provide for ourselves the things that we need before we pass the responsibility and blame onto someone else. As our parents said, why do we expect others to provide for us what we can provide for ourselves? In the South, since WW II, we call this mentality "The Plantation Method" as it speaks to people willing to be slaves to the government. Folks, how many spiritual programmes have we attended expecting to be divinely hit with a magic bullet that will fix our problems or change our natures overnight? We try contemplation, drumming, dancing, hand analysis,

enneagram, healing touch, and journaling, anything that doesn't demand that we take ownership of the consequences of our choices and enter in to the hard work of healing ourselves. We all know that we need to do our inner work but if we are honest, don't we often choose complaining about someone else or something else instead of holding the mirror up to ourselves. What causes us to play the same blame, shame and run away back to the way things used to be game like the Israelites in the desert? Why do we think that going backwards, returning to Egypt will solve anything? Why do we run back to addiction, to depression, to cynicism, to bigotry, to bias, to fear, to whatever we have conquered and left behind, thinking those things can now move us forward? Why do we think a return to yesterday will ever lead us into a future full of hope, healing and life giving relationships? Why do we expect yesterday's wonderful memories to be enough to heal our relationships today? As we read in "The Observer" and in the writings of old and present day

scholars, why do we expect to experience God in our lives when we have all but taken God out of our sermons, our hymns, and our prayers? The church today is full of whining people, ministers included, who are playing the Israelite game of Spiritual Monopoly, looking for a lucky roll in the dice of life so we can get to our idea of Boardwalk and Park Place...the Promised Land. And we want to get there as fast and as cheaply as we can. We are just like the Israelites when we say to God, "Your expectations of us and your instructions around how we are to live with one another are not relevant in our contemporary agendas." We want a "Get out of Jail Free" card in our back pockets, aka the grace of God, and we want to follow our own desires, rather than the directions of God. And our attitude of ingratitude says that someone else's head besides our own is going to roll if we don't get what we want now. Why do we believe that choosing old ways of being will produce a different outcome today? As Dr. Phil says, "How's that dance working for us?"

I believe we take three steps forward and two steps back for the same reasons the Israelites did...because we forget about all God has provided for us and all that God has helped us through so far. Christian history teaches that we are very slow in learning our lessons from history. A lesson we need to learn today is one of gratitude. This may sound like backwards thinking but I believe that when life gets hard, we will find a way through the hard times when we remember to be grateful for all that we have learned and experienced with God and others. Sure, as spiritual leaders help guide the church into the necessary changes it needs to make in order to be a relevant destination for people, there will be times for some of us when we feel like we are lost and wandering in a desert. So we need to remember that although times have changed, God has not and the Sacred is still with us. When we miss all the youth being around, we need to be aware that ministers are still spending time with them during the week because this is the new way the church is leaving the building and

meeting them where they are. Just because the high school generation and their tired and busy parents don't believe they need to nurture their spiritual life doesn't mean that the church stops taking the love of God out to them. God is in their DNA and memories and the Holy is speaking to them through the unfolding of their days. As the church and our choirs move forward into music that reaches young people, Generation X and the Baby Boomers who are returning to their faith journeys, we will thirst for the music we are comfortable singing. So we will need to remember and be grateful that we can still play the hymns we love on our stereos at home and like Bill McLeod, we can whistle them while we work, and like Frank Broeke who now sings in the presence of God, we can hum them, barely on key, wherever we are. God is in the old and in the new music because God is I AM. Our foundation is still firm and God can still be our vision if we choose to see.

Human nature is perverse at times. It seems we're never happy unless we have something to grumble about. Instead of looking forward to the wonderful opportunities that God has in store for us, we complain that nothing ever stays the same. Instead of opening ourselves up to new experiences and new horizons that God sets before us, we close ourselves down and whine "what about me?" When we keep looking back, it's impossible to look forward to the future that God has planned for us. It is a true statement that says, "You can take a girl out of Texas but you can't take Texas out of the girl." I love my journey in Canada and in the UCC but it often feels like a dry desert to me. The landscape is radically different. The climate is radically different. The food is radically different. The hymns are radically different. The liturgy is radically different. And when I get preoccupied with all of my losses, with all the familiar wonderful people and things I left behind, I am blinded to the fulfilling life that is waiting for me to co-create with all of you. What keeps me moving forward is

remembering to be grateful that God led me to Canada, to the new home that I love. I remember and I am grateful that God has provided a soul mate for my journey, and friends and wise elders who listen to me without prejudice and help guide me through new territory. I remember and I am grateful for the opportunity to offer my gifts and all that I am to you. I trusted God to help me provide all that my children and I needed when we left everyone and everything familiar in 1996 in order to create a new life in Canada, a land that boasted of inclusivity and open mindedness. Like all of you, I want and need to hold onto some of the old ways of being Texan that move me forward in my faith journey, while I also want and need to let go of the things that lead me backwards to ways of being that are no longer relevant or needful in my life. Canada may not have some of the things I love that filled my soul but it sure has new things that can fill me just as deeply. We are all like Israel in some way. It was easier to take them out of the bondage of Egypt then it was to take Egypt and a slavery

mentality out of their hearts. The good news is, like Israel, we all have reason to hope for a brighter tomorrow when we stop and remember who God is and what God has already brought us through. When we remember the sunsets of Lake Huron, or the fields in Holland, the winters in England, or the summers in Texas, when we remember all the ways God provided for us during feast and famine, it becomes easier for us trust that what we need will be provided as we continue to journey and co-create our lives with God. The moment we become aware that the Promised Land has and will always be when people are walking with God with humble hearts seeking justice and mercy for all, we will be free to lay hold off the palpable holy ground around us and choose attitudes of gratitude, no matter where our journey takes us. We are the people that God has chosen, we are the children of the Holy. When we stop complaining and pointing fingers of blame, we will find water. When we begin accepting one another as God accepts us and when we remember to be grateful for our

neighbours, we will find water. And when we are open to how the experiences of others can offer us hope and quench our thirst, we will find rivers in our deserts. May we choose to occupy attitudes of gratitude so we will not be occupied and enslaved to a life of whining which is a desert of debt no one can afford. May we be people who are occupied with the action of being Christ to one another. Amen and amen continually.