Sunday, July 17, 1983
HOW TO DEAL WITH DISSATISFACTION
LUKE 10:38-42

Why is it that some people seem always to be complaining? What causes them to be so dissatisfied with life and with people around them? For some people, nothing is ever right or good enough. They are impossible to please.

One ill-tempered husband was sullen and silent at the breakfast table. “How do you want you eggs cooked?” asked his wife gently. “One fried and one scrambled,” he answered gruffly. When she placed the eggs before him, he was furious. “What’s wrong?” asked his wife. “You fried the wrong egg!” he snapped.

In fact, there are some individuals who have nothing to say unless it’s a complaint. There was once a little boy who never talked. As he reached the age of two, and three, and four, his parents worried more and more because he said nothing. Finally, in desperation, they took him to every kind of specialist they could find, and no one could find any reason or cause why the child didn’t talk. Time passed, and the parents became more anxious. The child seemed intelligent in every other way. His hearing was good, his eyesight was excellent, and everything else seemed normal. Finally, one day at the breakfast table when the boy was about five years old, he suddenly spoke and said, “The oatmeal is cold.” “Billy!” shouted his mother, “You can talk! Why for all these past years have you never said anything?” And Billy replied, “Up to now, everything’s been all right.”

Winston Churchill used to tell the story of the British family that went out for a picnic by a lake. In the course of the afternoon, the five-year-old son fell into the water. As the child was bobbing up and down and everyone on the shore was dissolving in panic, a passerby saw the situation. At great risk to himself, he dived in fully clothed and managed to reach the child just before he went under for the third time. He was able to pull the child out of the water and present him safe and sound to his mother. Instead of thanking this stranger for his heroic efforts, however, the mother snapped peevishly at the rescuer, “Where’s Johnny’s cap?” Somehow in all the commotion, the boy’s cap had gotten lost. Out of all the facets of that episode, the woman found something with which to be dissatisfied, something to complain about.

In his book, Living the Bad Days, James Sparks writes about “one of the most tragic and isolated people” that he ever knew. She spent all of her days fretting about how badly life had treated her. A bright career woman who had once had a responsible government position, she had become bitter because of a series of events that resulted in her dismissal. To cut expenses and to conserve a meager income, she moved into the basement of her house and rented out the upstairs. There she lived in chilly isolation with her car, brooding on ways to get even. Every waking minute she stewed in her own misery, calling anyone who would listen to her story. She bemoaned her helplessness, accused family and friends of conspiring to injure her, and blamed the community for being heartless and cruel.

Sparks said, “She would call me and talk nonstop for an hour or more. If I tried to limit her, she would say, ‘You’re just like all the others — no time to listen to someone who needs help.'” She pleaded for friendship but seemed only to want an audience. Sparks tried to connect her with potential friends (people who were untiringly patient and caring), but she soon sucked them dry by her endless wailing. All the did was cultivate her own misery.

On the other hand, we've all known people who have had more bad luck than usual, people who have suffered deeply, yet have handled it differently. They reel temporarily under the bad things that happen to them, but bounce back with greater courage than before.

What is it that then makes some of us such complaining, dissatisfied people?

1. Most of the obsessive complainers I know seem to have a self-indulgent, negative attitude toward everything, not because they have suffered more than anyone else and are trying to live with more pain than the average, but because that's the way they handle everything. If they feel frustrated, resentful, fearful, or lonely, instead of trying to solve the problem, they just complain about it. They never hear that portion of the weather report that says, "Tomorrow there is a 50 percent chance of sunshine." Instead, they notice only that there is a 50 percent chance of rain.

By itself, excessive or obsessive complaining solves nothing. It bores our friends and sets up failure. We tend to fall in love with the sound of our own voice and the cadence of the story, until we have lost sight of the original problem and delight only in the suffering.

Listen to yourself sometime to see if you may have fallen into the habit of becoming an obsessive complainer. Some complaining is just that — habit. We get into the habit of always being the fault finder.

2. Secondly, people who are complainers most of the time are usually those who are dissatisfied with themselves. And, of course, there's some of that in all of us. We seem to be born with a "bentness of spirit." We seem to enter this world suspicious of "the way it is" and at odds with life as it is given to us.

Karen Horney, the psychologist, wrote somewhere a description of the difference between a psychotic and a neurotic. "A psychotic," she said, "is a person who says, 'Two plus two is five'; that is, they are completely out of touch with reality. A neurotic, however, is a person who says, 'Two plus two is four, but I do not like it!" There is something about the way life is put together that does not suit them. On these terms, of course, we are all, to some degree, neurotic, for again and again we find ourselves at way with the way it is. This can, of course, be good, for it helps bring about constructive change, but it can also be bad if all we do is complain about it. And, of course, as Niebuhr pointed out, we have to be able to distinguish between those things that can be changed and those things that cannot be changed. Too often compulsive complainers keep complaining about those things that cannot be changed.

But again, the main point is that obsessive complainers are dissatisfied with themselves. Where this self-despising comes from is hard to trace. One man I know says he remembers that again and again in his early days, he was told, "If you are ever going to amount to anything, you have to make something of yourself." Undoubtedly, those who kept saying this to him meant it to be a source of motivation, hoping to inspire him to make the most of what he had been given. "But," he said, "I took these words as an assessment of my condition, rather than as a challenge to my potential. I interpreted them to mean, 'As you are now, you do not amount to anything, and if there is ever going to be any significance to your life, you are going to have to go somewhere else and import it and become something other than what you are right now.'

“I cam to believe that I was not good enough as I was, and so a mood of dissatisfaction settled over my whole existence and became the vantage point from which I interpreted everything.”

Remember the words of Jesus, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The truth is there: we will love our neighbors as we love ourselves. If we despise ourselves, we will find ourselves despising others. If I do not really like myself and am critical and hostile and dissatisfied with the very first part of creation that I experience, then it follows that I am going to perceive all others through these same lenses and will proceed to relate to them as I relate to myself.

I think that must have been at the root of the complaining that Martha was doing when Jesus was a guest in her home. She complained because her sister Mary was not helping her, but was rather sitting and talking and listening. Thus, Jesus said to her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion which shall not be taken away from her.”

Maybe Martha had gotten into the habit of being a complainer, but she was also a dissatisfied person because she was dissatisfied with herself.

3. A third cause of one becoming a complaining person is that one is afraid of change. Have you not known people who wage a life-long war against the process of change, who never come to terms with this thing that happens to our bodies, our institutions, our relationships — indeed, to everything? We desperately want to freeze or even reverse the flow of time, but what can be more futile or ultimately more self-destructive than this?

Coming to terms with change means coming to terms with loss, because there is always a dimension of loss involved with change — sometimes so overwhelming that you do not think you can stand it. But if you run from this aspect of it — that is, try to avoid or evade the pain — you wind up missing the other aspect of change, namely, the gain that is always inherent in it. “There is no gain without pain.”

John Claypool, a minister I have come to know through his writing, tells about his difficulty in accepting the untimely death of his young daughter. His daughter died on a Saturday night after a short and tragic illness. He said there were some people who wanted him to jump right back into the pulpit the next day and preach the sermon so as to give the effect that it was not really so bad after all. It was their fears and desires not to have to struggle that called for this sort of response. But he did not choose to do it that way. He did not show up the next morning to preach as if nothing had happened. His heart was broken. He was not able to preach for six weeks. He dared to feel all there was to feel in that moment of loss, and it was hell. But, he said, in experiencing the loss, he learned for the first time what a gift life really is.

He wrote, “I think I had taken things pretty much for granted before this experience of loss, but suddenly I saw how blessed I had been for ten years to touch life with such an undeserved gift. I also learned that God can be counted on in the worst and most terrible of times.”

And he said, “I also learned there are always options on the other side of the trauma. They may not be what you most want or would have chosen, but as long as you find yourself breathing, that means God still has a future for you — there are things that can be done with what is left, and this I might never have known.

“I remember vividly sitting in a restaurant some six weeks after Laura Lue died, with my wife and son. I looked at the empty chair at the table and thought my heart would break. She was

not — would never be there again, and for a moment there did not seem anything left to live for. And then I looked at my son and said to myself, 'But wait. There he is, representative of all that is left. To give up would be to say to him, "Laura Lue was all that mattered," and that is not true.'"

What, then, can we do about our own dissatisfaction, about our complaining?

1. First, realize that some dissatisfaction is a part of life. It is normal. Things do not always go right. Bad things do happen to good people. Life is at times unfair. But life also goes on. And much of the complaining we do only makes mattes worse. And listen to yourself and to your conversations. Do not get into the habit of being a complainer or faultfinder.

2. Learn to deal with change. A certain amount of change is inevitable. We grow older, whether we like it or not, and that brings changes. As Jesus said of Mary, "Choose the good portion." Remember, too, there is no gain without pain.

Some years ago, Richard Neuberger, then the junior senator from Oregon, wrote or spoke these words. It was discovered that he had cancer from which he later died.

"A change came over me which I believe is irreversible. Questions of prestige, of political success, of financial status became all at once unimportant. In those first hours when I realized I had cancer, I never thought of my seat in the senate, of my bank account, or of the destiny of the free world... My wife and I have not had a quarrel since my illness was diagnosed. I used to scold her about squeezing the toothpaste from the top instead of the bottom, about not catering sufficiently to my fuzzy appetite, about making up guest lists without consulting me, about spending too much on clothes. Now I am either unaware of such matters or they seem irrelevant...

"In their stead has come a new appreciation of things I once took for granted... eating lunch with a friend, scratching Muffet's ears and listening for his purrs, the company of my wife, reading a book or magazine in the quiet cone of my bed lamp at night, raiding the refrigerator for a glass of orange juice or a slice of coffee cake. For the first time I think I am actually savoring life. I realize, finally, that I am not immortal. I shudder when I remember all the occasions that I spoiled for myself — even when I was in the best of health — by my false pride, synthetic values, and fancied slights."

3. Thirdly, learn to trust in the goodness and love of God. When Jesus met someone, he immediately saw the spirit of God, the goodness in that individual. Often when we make contact with an individual, we are already grumbling and complaining, "You just can't trust people these days." In so doing, we may actually draw the worst our of an individual, rather than the best. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

On the other hand, if we precondition the relationship with the idea that each person we meet has God's goodness, God's spirit, then we will find ourselves expressing more love, understanding, patience, and trust. And that person will respond in a different way.

Above all, we cannot let the world around us turn on the lights in us. Rather, have to take the initiative and turn our light onto the world. We are not to let other people determine how we are going to act or react. Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. So let your light shine."

This morning, go from this place of worship in joy and with the resolve that you are no longer going to be a habitually complaining, dissatisfied individual. Rather, you are going to trust more in God's love and power and savor more of the beauty of life. Amen.