

No whining, please.

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, September 25, 2011, The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32 and Matthew 21:23-32.*

Religious people are some of the biggest whiners. The ones I know best are, like me, the American variety of religious people. Our great, cosmic whine for generations has been that things are not like they were in the old days. There's a whole political movement today devoted to whining that our politics has become too secular, that this is a Christian nation, that religion should have some sort of semi-official or even official place in public life.

In the tradition of fables and in the world-view of the Bible, there's a phrase for that: *sour grapes*.

You may recall Aesop's fable of the fox who tries repeatedly to reach a bunch of grapes hanging above his head. Realizing he'll never be able to reach them, he pretends that he never wanted them, saying, "They are probably sour anyway."

Aesop was writing in the 6th century B.C.E. In the same century the Hebrew prophet Ezekiel was addressing the crisis of the Jews in exile in Babylon. Although not everything about their daily lives was bad, they lived with a pervasive sense of loss. They lived by stories of the former grandeur and integrity of Jerusalem, the lost dignity of independent statehood, the bitter absence of the primacy of their own religion.

"We sat down and wept by the rivers of Babylon," goes Psalm 137. But *we sat down and whined and whined by the rivers of Babylon* would be more like it.

In particular, they whined and complained about their ancestors—those who blew it, those who failed to pay attention to the law and the prophets.

Ezekiel would have none of it. "What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'? As I live, says the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel."

In other words, the prophet said, the Lord has a clear message for you: *Stop whining. Stop blaming others. Look to yourselves.*

Scholars often cite the 18th chapter of Ezekiel as the Bible's explicit turning point toward individual responsibility. Perhaps. But let's see how we can use this wisdom. Let's look to the forceful use of such wisdom in the approach of Jesus.

Early in my time at St. Bart's, the leadership and I agreed that the condition of the parish was precarious—not enough people, too much money going out and not enough coming in. We decided to make changes, take risks, and challenge people to come along. We accepted that there were lots of reasons, including very real conflict and huge changes in the world, that were to blame. But if we were to bring St. Bart's back to viability we would have to accept those facts and get on with the work. There was simply no time to look back or complain. I had some buttons made for the staff: a circle with the word "whine" in it and a diagonal slash through it.

No whining.

Jesus was blunt about it.

"To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another,

'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we wailed, and you did not weep.' (Luke 7:31-32)

Did you get that. He compared his peers to children, not "childlike" in a spiritually positive way, but spoiled, not at all mature children.

Whining and blaming are symptoms of immaturity. People who just complain and off-load their complaints and miseries on others are *stuck*. They can't change. But the ability to change is a spiritual gift, a necessity if you're going to grow up. The ability to take responsibility, to change what you can is also the necessary precondition for justice, and for that ultimate good wholeness and peace.

One of my most influential mentors, Rabbi Edwin Friedman, modeled in his professional work something that has helped me a lot, though it hasn't always made me liked in pastoral

situations.

Ed was a congregational rabbi who had spent time in government in the early civil rights days. He gradually became a family therapist, and at the time of his death was a highly sought after speaker and thinker. In his book *A Failure of Nerve*, published after his death, his challenging, Ezekiel-like voice carries on.

In his counseling practice—in fact he gradually started referring to it as teaching and coaching—he decided to stop working with whole families. Yes, you heard that right: a family therapist who wouldn't see the family.

He especially avoided accepting clients who wanted to send him their troubled family member, the so-called identified patient. Instead, after an initial interview with the person who called, and perhaps a single group meeting to see the cast of characters, he determined which family member was the healthiest, the most motivated to change, the most educable.

A group of us asked Ed once, how you determined who that person was. "Easy," he said. "I look for the person who is blaming the least."

Sour grapes is no way to live.

One particular form of spiritual immaturity is whining about the universe. The biblical view, not the view of every verse, of course, but the view of the developed theology and spirituality—the *arc of its narrative*, if you will—is that the human person is a very complicated being, and one with capabilities of dealing with an open universe. That is where the deeper convergence of bible and science can be found.

If you've ever raised a child, or you've learned to be reflective on your own growing up, you know that the expectations of the infant don't completely go away. They're down there deep.

Yes, you hear them in lifelong whining and blaming.

And you hear them in the egocentricity of the infant, who generally assumes three things about life:

- I am in control or ought to be in control of all that has to do with life
- I am at the center of the universe
- Everything and everyone ought to be spinning around me so I can have what I want and life will be the way I want it to be.

In the addiction recovery communities, this pattern might be described in slightly different words, but the accumulated wisdom of those programs is that until you give up these self-delusions, you won't recover inner control or sobriety.

Put another way, you need to be born again.

Put still another way, you need to grow up and learn to take responsibility for what can be changed and work at it, acknowledge what's out of your control, and come to that place of maturity where you can tell the difference between the two. Sound familiar?

Jesus appealed to the potential for growth, not to infantile addiction. He worked with people he picked out of crowds who seem to want to work or change, and he had running arguments with those who insisted solely on asserting and following the rules.

This isn't to say that Jesus, or that the authentic Christian faith tradition that is alive today, is just for the already strong and well-motivated. It is to say that if you want what the gospels call abundant life, if you want to grow to become your real and full self, if you want to be saved, you need at least to stop whining.

You need to take responsibility for yourself, for the world you live in, and work with it. You need not to say, Sorry, my teeth are on edge because of the sour grapes—and you fill in the rest . . . because of my parents, because I can't afford it, because of the economy, because I'm a victim, because life isn't fair, because God isn't there when I need God.

The ancient prophet's message is still true: claiming that you're a victim of your ancestors' mistakes, or the state of the world, or even of your own mess-ups, will get you nowhere. And, as he said, it's never too late to turn, to accept the realities of the world and to get in touch with the joys of living the life you've been given.

The more I try it, the more I think that's what Jesus meant.

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