

## “A Choir for the Complaining”

2 Corinthians 6:1-13 – June 21, 2009

INTRO: It is believed that both 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians are letters which Paul wrote to the people of Corinth, as he related to them over a period of a number of years. We find Paul appealing to the people there, to respect his ministry and to reestablish a relationship with him, because the relationship they’ve had with him hadn’t been going too well.

Our Annual Conference sessions were held this past Sunday through Wednesday. This is the yearly meeting where we report on ministries, share new ideas, approve budgets. After 10 years of meeting in Middleton, we met in Appleton, at the Paper Valley Hotel. For the past couple of months, I kept encountering lots of pastors and lay reps who had complaints about this change in locale. The Paper Valley couldn’t accommodate 900 people sitting at our usual tables, so we would have to sit in long rows of chairs, stowing our belongings—papers, books, etc—under our chairs. We couldn’t all stay at that hotel, so we were at other hotels in the area, some of them 5-10 miles out of town. One whole afternoon was devoted to mission projects—to having the representatives working on a variety of mission projects in the Appleton community. I must admit I had my own list of complaints, number one being that I was very spoiled to have lived in Monona for 10 years, with an easy drive to the west side of Madison for our Annual Conference setting. I slept in my own comfortable bed each night. So why couldn’t they have moved the conference to Milwaukee this year?

Once we got to Appleton, the complaint about not having tables, took a back seat to a growing complaint about how cold it was in the main meeting room. Other complaints went by the wayside too, particularly the one about doing the mission projects. Some of us found out that the mission project was a great way to get acquainted with each other and for United Methodist people to become known in a community that in Wisconsin is highly Lutheran and Roman Catholic. If people asked us who we were, as we were picking up garbage along the street, or planting flowers in a nursing home garden, we could tell them. Two clergy colleagues on their volunteer project, talked about running into people who didn’t have much money, and heading off to a restaurant to get them a meal. And I pulled the old Mark Twain trick with Tyler, who missed out on the assignment of projects downtown, and found me on Main Street, picking up trash and cigarette butts with another clergyperson. Tyler had paired up with a fellow from Wisconsin Dells, and since they didn’t have an assignment, we generously gave them half of ours—they picked up trash on the other side of the street, so we didn’t have to work as long, and could enjoy a cold drink together.

In just about any setting, people can find something to complain about. A couple of creative people in Helsinki, Finland, four years ago, got an idea to do something creative with all their complaints. Maybe it was the coldness of the winter day which gave them the idea that the huge energy people put into complaining could be transformed into something else. The idea of a complaints choir was born. “You invite people to list the things that irritate them, hire a local musician to convert those complaints into lyrics and set them to music, and then a group of people sings them.” (*Homiletics*, 06/09)

In Birmingham, England, their choir sings:

“Why does my computer take so very long, Why can’t the bus driver talk to anyone?

I want my money back, My job’s like a cul-de-sac,

And the bus is too infrequent at 6:30.” [complaintschoir.org/](http://complaintschoir.org/)

Complaints choirs can be found in our country, Australia, Germany, Korea. And of course, the grumbling and complaining may not make the problems go away, but in the singing, the people’s perspective may be changed as they let off some steam and grin at the craziness of these choirs

Paul had listened to complaints from the people of Corinth and he had some complaints of his own. It wasn’t always smooth going as Paul tried to help the new believers learn about Christ. People questioned his authority and his leadership. They wondered if he was the one they should be listening to. They questioned whether he was a legitimate apostle or not and he had rivals in Corinth, as others are trying to lead the same group of people.

Paul’s own complaints are outlined in today’s reading, the hardships and difficulties and trials he has dealt with, as he has tried to bring the gospel to the world. “In hard times, tough times, bad times; when we’re beaten up, jailed, and mobbed; working hard, working late, working without eating.” (The MESSAGE)

Regardless of all that Paul went through, “he really had only one concern—to show himself a sincere minister of Christ.” (W. Barclay)

His life’s purpose was to bring others to God. In listing his complaints, Paul is saying, “Look at all these things that could derail us, would have derailed us had not God been with us.” (*Homiletics*, 06/09)

He didn’t lose sight of what’s really important. The complaints he came up with didn’t get in the way of the work he was committed to doing. And he asks the people of Corinth to not get mired in all their complaints either, to “not throw a question mark over everything they are doing.” (*The MESSAGE*) He requests they put their hard feelings aside, reconnect with Paul, and grow in their love of God.

Paul’s complaints and the people’s complaints may help us to think about the list of things we complain about, and get a different perspective on whether these complaints are really that important in our lives. Sydney Harris says: “When I hear somebody sigh, ‘life is hard’, I am always tempted to ask, ‘Compared to what?’”

John Bontrager is an Amish man who until recently, worked at a factory in Middlebury, IN, building FEMA trailers. He was one of a large number of Amish men in northern Indiana, who had factory jobs. But when the RV industry collapsed last year, he and many others lost the work that supported their families. He has decided to return to the traditional Amish livelihood: farming. In January he ordered a greenhouse made of plastic that his family and neighbors helped him put up. In late winter he planted it with 7000 strawberry plants, stuck into plastic pots stacked six high. He hopes for a good harvest a month before local field strawberries are ready.

Now, these Amish men could complain that the good wages they earned in the factory are a thing of the past, and the wages that allowed them to buy some land and build a home are gone now. But those factory jobs also brought unease. Amish men rubbed shoulders with non-Amish who swore and engaged in other un-Amish behavior. The money encouraged them to spend too much on frivolous things. And worse still, those factory jobs kept fathers away from their children. (*The Christian Science Monitor*, 5/24/09)

Consequently, many see that this change in their livelihood, may be a good thing for their families and communities. That puts things into perspective on this Father’s Day, when it comes to determining what is really important in our lives.

We find complaints in our personal lives, and, obviously, the church has always been a fertile ground for complaints. It is said: If you want to know about the troubles the church is having, ask someone who hasn’t been there in months. Somebody who hasn’t been around for awhile, seems to know lots of things to complain about. Complaints can be divisive. They can drag us down, they can become excuses for inactivity, but they can also move us to try and fix problem situations

Our congregation has been around a long time, and most of us aren’t getting any younger. Not only have some of us had trouble hearing during worship services, but others of us have hoped we could include more drama presentations in worship and have capabilities to play and record CD’s. The comments we’ve heard about our aging sound system that can’t do all we need it to do in 2009, have moved us to investigate a newer system, with more capabilities. And through a generous donation, in a few weeks, that sound system will be installed. We may complain about change and about the removal of some of our pews, but the other side of that situation is that we will be sitting closer together, which may help with the complaint that people don’t have enough chances to get to know each other.

The apostle Paul advises us to not “throw a question mark over everything” and to “live life in a spacious way,” rather than being small minded. I don’t think he’s saying, never complain--he certainly did his share of it. But the complaints didn’t take over his life. They didn’t become the main event. In the midst of them, he was able to make clear what good things God was doing. Maybe he knew what the authors of *Don’t Sweat the Small Stuff* know, which is: “Become 25 % less critical. With each lessening of criticism, you’ll experience a corresponding increase in your own level of satisfaction.”

And, even though we will still have some complaints here and there, they don’t need to become our usual way of working together, and I certainly hope we won’t have need for a choir to sing of them.

--Sue Burwell