

Holy One, Your word is a lamp to our feet. May the truth of your word be both spoken and heard in this place so that our path may lead to a closer walk with you and a clearer vision of your reign. Amen

A few years ago, I read an item in the Christian Century magazine about a minister who, concerned about the number of times he found himself complaining in the course of a day, decided to undertake a quit-complaining program. Whenever he caught himself complaining about something or someone, he would stop and make a note of it. Then at the end of the day, he would count the number of recorded complaints and the next day attempt to reduce the number. His goal was to get down to zero complaints in a day. When and if he got down to zero incidents of complaining, he would endeavour to maintain the no-complaining behaviour for as many days as possible. It sounded a bit like a quit-smoking procedure.

This regimen made such a positive difference in the minister's life – he felt better about himself and others - he decided to involve the congregation. So he invited church members to try this discipline for themselves in their individual lives and in their interactions as a congregation. A significant number agreed to commit to the process and, according to the article, after a number of months on the no-complaints wagon, so to speak, congregational life had taken on a noticeably more constructive and energetic tone.

I don't know how long this experiment lasted or how it ended – it was still a work in progress when the article was written. I must say I found it hard at the time, and still find it hard, to imagine congregational life or other settings in and beyond the church where people never, or at least rarely, complain. I think many of us, in a perverse way, enjoy complaining at least occasionally. Recently, though, I have found myself complaining a lot - about the church, specifically the United Church. And I don't find myself alone in this behaviour, in part because I hang around with a lot of United Church people. Perhaps we grumblers should undertake a behaviour modification program like the aforementioned minister, but it seems to me that when we find ourselves in a pattern of chronic complaining, it's also helpful to try and understand the underlying reasons for the complaints and the griping.

The lectionary lesson from Exodus read earlier in the service indicates that grumbling and complaining about life in community is not restricted to current or recent times. Whatever else this ancient Exodus story is about, it exemplifies both the life-giving and the shadow side of the human condition. The complaining in this particular phase of the Israelites' wilderness journey was about lack of food, but it wasn't the first nor the last time that the people grumbled and complained to Moses and other leaders about their situation. It seems that, on their way to the Promise Land, the Israelites were also on their way to becoming chronic complainers. As I reflected on the text, I found that examining what was going on for them helped to cast some light on my own complaining.

One reason the Israelites complained is that they were grieving for what they had lost, for the way things used to be. Yes, they had been slaves in the land of Egypt with all the misery that must have involved, but they always had had shelter and enough to eat and drink. Moreover, according to an entry earlier in Exodus, the Israelites had been in Egypt for well over 400 years. They had known no other life for generations and there likely were certainties and even pleasures in their daily lives in Egypt that they missed as they endured the transience and harshness of their wilderness existence.

I think many in the United Church and other mainline churches, especially those of us who are a bit long in the tooth and whose memories go back to earlier decades, are grieving the loss, the diminishment of what we used to be – we have fewer members; fewer congregations; insufficient funding for resources, programs and staff to support congregational and missional life; aging, high-maintenance buildings; a more fragile theological education network, a public voice for justice that is but a whisper of its former strength and so on.

This sense of grief and loss overtook me this summer on the day of Jack Layton's memorial service. My spouse, Harry Oussoren, and I were invited to a reception after the service at an "events venue", to use hospitality industry jargon, on Queen St. East called the Berkeley Church. It's a lovely old brick church building which housed the congregation of Berkeley St. Methodist and then United Church for over 75 years until the congregation amalgamated with

Regent Park United Church in 1956. The church building then became the home of Berkeley Studio, the UCC media centre, where over a number of decades an amazing range of audiovisual resources for the church's faith development, global awareness and public witness work were produced and where the award-winning TV program Spirit Connection was produced. After moving to the General Council office building in 1995, Berkeley Studio was disbanded in 2007 in a round of cost-cutting at the national level.

Admittedly, I was already weepy that August Saturday, but as I looked around the Berkeley Church venue at the physical reminders of what the building used to be – the remaining stained glass windows and the curved rail of the typical Methodist balcony architecture, I found myself close to tears and I felt very much haunted that day by the good ghost of United Church past, much as Scrooge was haunted by the good ghost of Christmas past.

Now, without question, there are bad ghosts as well as good ghosts in our history. The United Church has had its own enslavement – to the arrogance of thinking ourselves Canada's national church, to the comfortable pew of suburbia, to the racist ideology of Canada as a nation for white immigrants only, to the confusion of Gospel and culture that underlay the Indian residential schools - to mention a few of the chains that have bound us. But, in the wide spectrum of churches that make up the Christian world, this little blip called the United Church of Canada has also punched above its weight in many faithful ways and I for one would like us to be able to continue to do so in the future.

And what about the future? If we go back to the desert with the Israelites for a moment, we see that interwoven with their yearning for the past and what had been, was fearful uncertainty about the future they faced. Where were they going, how long would it take to get there, how would they live in the meantime? Did Moses and the other leaders really know what they were doing? Yes, Yhwh had come through for them with food and water for now, but would this continue? How could they organize themselves to cope with this new unknown environment? No wonder they grizzled and complained.

I think fear about the future also fuels our contemporary complaining. The psychologist Eric Erikson wrote that while fear is a useful human emotion and an important survival mechanism, it is important to fear accurately. It is important to fear accurately - to not waste energy by succumbing to fears that are significantly out of sync with reality while, at the same time not to be in denial about serious problems. So, in the wider context, climate change, world economic instability, global terrorism are all examples of concerns that loom large in our world and it is probably accurate to feel some fear when we think about possible future scenarios related to these phenomena. The challenge, of course, is to know where the boundary is between accurate and unrealistic fears. To identify this boundary, we need self-knowledge, factual information about the world around us and the support of a community that discerns together.

In the sweep of human history, the future of the United Church pales in comparison to these global concerns, but I think the same boundary-challenge applies. It's difficult to deny that, as an institution, the United Church is

shrinking and that the pace of our shrinking is quickening. It is not unreasonable for those of us who identify as United Church Christians to worry about where this trend is leading (and to complain and grumble in the process). But it is important not to fear inaccurately about our future. We need to know who we are as a community of faith, be aware of what's happening in the world around us and to discern together where we see the Spirit at work in our midst and beyond. There is convincing evidence – in local situations, in some educational settings and when the UCC gathers regionally or nationally as it did recently at the Rendezvous event in Toronto - that God hasn't yet given up on the United Church. So why would we.

Which brings me to the critical matter of where God fits into this complaining dynamic. If we look one last time, at least in this sermon, to the Exodus story, you will note that the Israelites were more prone to complaining because they clearly didn't know Yhwh very well nor did they quite trust the relationship between their leaders and Yhwh. They seemed totally unaware that, when they thought they were complaining to Moses and Aaron, they were actually complaining to Yhwh. They were not confident about Divine compassion or about the Holy One's thirst for justice.

When I reflected on this aspect of the Exodus story, I was reminded of two ministers, both doing D Min research but on quite different topics, who found that when they asked United Church people to talk about their understanding of or relationship with God, most of the respondents talked about the church.

No matter how the God-question was framed, folks seemed unable or unwilling to answer directly. Instead, most of them described their local congregational life. Now that is not entirely a bad thing. If God is Holy Mystery and if the church is the body of Christ, then speaking about the church as both experience and expression of the Divine may indicate a thoroughly incarnated theology. It may also indicate that, like the Israelites in the wilderness, we're not as well acquainted with Yhwh in the UCC as we need to be.

This is a time when it is very important not to conflate the church as we know it with God. When I worked at the Vancouver School of Theology, a priest from the Church of England was invited to lead a retreat day with faculty and students. I'm embarrassed to say that, even though I was on the planning team for that event, I have forgotten our guest's name. However one thing he said that day has stuck with me for over decade and it was this "It doesn't matter how high or low your doctrine of the church as long as your doctrine of ministry is higher, and it doesn't matter how high or low your doctrine of ministry is as long as your doctrine of the reign of God is higher still."

The Spirit may be leading the UCC into a future that is hard for us to imagine at this point. We might become a church that looks and feels very different from its current iteration. If we keep our minds and hearts on God and God's reign, then we will better able to cope with a church landscape that may be, at least temporarily, strange and even alienating. In the church that's

emerging, the role of ministry leaders may be different from what it is now, the way we organize ourselves as local faith communities and as larger-church may be significantly changed, our social justice work may take new forms, but we will remain a faithful and life-giving people as long as we point to and participate in God's reign of peace and justice – in the company of others in God's human family who share this vision.

There is debate as to whether the phrase may you live in interesting times was originally intended to be a challenge or a curse. I am going choose the challenge option and say that these are most interesting and challenging times in which to be, or preparing to be, a ministry leader in the United Church and in most other churches as well. The article in the September Observer about the churches on Annette Street demonstrates that the United Church is not alone in the situation it faces.

We need ministry leaders – lay and ordered- who are braver, more imaginative and more persistent than ever, because the status quo of church life is no longer an option. Just as the vineyard owner in the Gospel lesson overturned the assumptions about daily wages, we need to overturn our assumptions about what a UCC congregation is supposed to look like, about how leadership, paid and unpaid is organized, about the relationship of congregations to each other and to other communities of faith and about many other aspects of church life, including how we educate for church leadership. Having a program of Muslim studies at a United Church theological college is one important way of signalling that we are not, we cannot be, about business as usual.

In my own small congregation in West Toronto, maintaining the status quo will likely mean a slow, aimless death. Overturning the status quo may also mean that we will die in the sense of having to die to our current form of congregational life in our current building but with the hope of being resurrected as a new communal creation.

Whatever moments of uncertainty and risk, truth-telling and discernment, lament and relinquishment that lie ahead for the UCC and other faith communities, we can be confident - Scripture assures us - that God hears the cries and complaints of God's people and will give us bread for the journey – enough for our needs, When we acknowledge the limits of our own resources and draw together in community, the first with the last and the last with the first together sharing in God's abundant love, perhaps God's reign will break through in a way that we have never experienced before. May it be so.