

The Life of Moses: Bread of Heaven

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson at Oxford Presbyterian Church on September 19, 1999. Scripture lessons: Exodus 16:2-15.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

"The whole congregation complained against Moses." Now there's conflict. The whole congregation complaining, griping, grumbling, whining. Moses found himself in conflict with his congregation because of their complaining. How did he deal with conflict? How do we deal with conflict? Let me say right off that I'm not aware of any conflict in our congregation. So, if you're a visitor and you're thinking, "He's preaching on conflict. The church is sponsoring a seminar on conflict. There must be big-time conflict here." As far as I know, there isn't. We've been getting along real well. In fact, I feel greatly blessed with how supportive the congregation has been of me over the years.

But if we look, we'll find conflict every place, not only in Kosovo and East Timor. It pervades our own land, our families, our schools. We see conflict within the Pentagon, the White House, Congress and local governments. We see conflict on our streets and in our churches. Conflict is inflamed by race and politics, by religious beliefs and secular unbeliefs, by philosophies and theologies, by church organs and church guitars, by both good and bad sermons, and, in some churches, even by the so-called passing of The Peace.

It's always been that way. Conflict entered the gates of Eden at the dawn of the human story dividing men and women. Deadly conflict led Cain to kill his brother Abel. The battles that bloody the stories of the Old Testament are matched by the conflicts in the early Christian Church. Conflict between the disciples of Jesus arguing who was the greatest. After the Resurrection, conflict between competing factions in Corinth. Conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Conflict between the Peter and Paul. Perhaps no one has triggered more profound violent conflict than Jesus?

Conflict has rarely been dealt with positively. Conflict so often ends in violence and bloodshed. A friend gave me a copy of a magazine last week. *Free Inquiry*. Published by the

Council for Secular Humanism. Alan Dershowitz, a professor of Law at Harvard Law School wrote an article in which he says, "as much immorality has been committed in the name of religion as any other cause. The millions murdered by cynical, godless tyrants such as Hitler and Stalin are dwarfed by those killed in the names of Jesus... and Jehovah throughout history." And, sadly, he's absolutely right. If anybody needs to learn better how to deal with conflict, we Christians need to - for the sake of Jesus and his kingdom.

How should we deal with conflict? Sometimes we simply try to stifle conflict. We feel that conflict is bad. Pamela Cooper-White, an Episcopalian priest, worries about the way women, especially, learn to stifle conflict. She writes: My three-year-old and I were frustrated with each other. She called me back into the room I'd just left in irritation and said, "Mommy, I have something to complain about!" I stood in the doorway. "Yes?" "I'm angry with you because you're angry with me!" "I had to laugh," Pamela said. "I rejoiced to know that my daughter was so unafraid of conflict. She wasn't afraid to complain. She had her own voice!"

—Pamela Cooper-White goes on to say: I reflect often in my practice as a pastoral therapist how women so seldom make it out of adolescence with such a strong voice left intact. Women suffer from job discrimination and they don't complain. They suffer from sexual harassment and they don't complain. Society tells women, "Don't complain. Be polite. Be accommodating. Be nurturing." And women who raise their voice and complain about injustice are often punished and ostracized, both by men and by other women. Small wonder, then, that *women nearly always are conflicted about conflict!*

"What can we do?" she asks. Where we've been abused, we must claim the power to say "no!" and leave. And when we're told, in the face of abuse, "Don't complain!" we need to speak out.

Men also have problems dealing with complaints. If women have a tendency to remain silent, men have a tendency to respond to complaints with violence. Mike Chitwood grew up dreaming of becoming a police officer. He fulfilled his dream. Today, even though he's secure

in his career as chief of police in Portland, Maine, he remains deeply troubled by the contradictions that are threatening his spiritual well-being. Too often, he claims, men respond to criticism and complaints with violence. "I see the results of how men respond to criticism -- I see the fights, the domestic abuse, the child abuse suffered when men respond to complaints with violent anger."

Women, too often, are silent in the face of abuse when they should complain. Men, on the other hand, too often respond to complaints with violence. I discovered something in our Scripture lesson which surprised me. I'm surprised by how God responded to the complaining which led to conflict between Moses and the people of Israel. You'd think God would get angry over the complaining. Maybe even send down a few good old fashioned thunderbolts. Zap them for complaining. We sometimes see God doing that in Scripture. But not here.

God doesn't respond to complaining by getting angry. God listens to the complaints. Moses tells the people, "the LORD has heard your complaining." And God hears our complaining. He listens. Read the Psalms. The Psalms are filled with the complaints of God's people - complaints which they turn into prayers. The congregation said, "We're hungry." "We're not being fed." "We're going to die out here in the wilderness without food." And God listened. They had a point. Their complaints were valid. So he sent them bread from heaven.

Maybe we should complain more when we're hungry. Especially if the hunger that gnaws *at* you and *in* you is spiritual hunger. A hunger for God, for God's grace, for meaning, for purpose in life. Maybe we should complain more to God. Maybe you should complain more to me and to the session. "We're spiritually hungry. We need spiritual bread. Give us spiritual bread. We're hungry." And maybe we should listen carefully when our spouse or children or co-workers complain against us. Listen rather than react with destructive anger!

Several years ago Kay and I left Andrew, Philip and Mark at their grandparents in Lewistown, PA for a weekend. Grandpop and grandmom got the boys up on Saturday morning and sent them out to do some yard work and pick apples. Philip complained about not feeling

well. "Get out there and pick apples. You're just trying to get out of work." That night Philip wouldn't eat dinner and complained that he wasn't feeling well. "Eat what's on your plate and stop being so stubborn." The next morning Philip complained that he didn't feel well enough to go to church. "You can't pull that on me," grandpop said. "You're going to church." Sunday afternoon Philip was limping and complaining about a pain in his side. His loving but no-nonsense grandparents told him to straighten up and stop his complaining. When he developed a fever of a 103 degrees they began to listen to his complaints. Fortunately they got him to the hospital before his appendix burst. Sometimes we need to listen to complaining and deal positively with the conflict it creates. God listened to the complaints of his people in the wilderness. He hears our complaints today. Listen carefully when you hear complaining. Listen for what's being said between the lines. Listen, don't get defensive. Listen!

Let us pray: