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Moses & His People & Their God VIII. In Praise of the Critic

(Exodus 17:1-7 NRSV) From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. 2 The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" 3 But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" 4 So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." 5 The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. 6 I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. 7 He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

Are you getting just a wee bit tired of these folks? I have to say that I am. A now-retired pastor in California used to have a beautifully calligraphied plaque on her office door that said "**No Whining!**" As we continue to move through the story of the Hebrew people's flight from Egypt, I sometimes wonder if maybe Moses should have had his local sign-maker do up a bunch of those plaques. "**No Whining.**" After all, you'll recall from a few weeks earlier that they hadn't even gotten out of Egypt before they started in on Moses: "*Why did you bring us out here to die? Pharaoh's army is coming and he's going to kill us all!*" And yet even though they successfully overcome that crisis and indeed get out of Egypt, it is not very many days before the people are again carping and complaining and mis-remembering: "*We don't have enough to eat – we may have been brutally treated slaves in Egypt, but there we got to eat at least!*" Whine, whine, whine. And then God, patient as ever, gives them manna and quail to eat, every single day, so that they would not starve. And what do they do? They complain: "*We're **bored** with manna and quail. We want barbecue and steaks*" Whine,

whine, whine. And now in today's scripture? Well, here they go again: "The people quarreled with Moses, and said, 'Give us water to drink.' Moses said to them, 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?'" Whine, whine, whine.

Except *this* time, I think there **IS** a difference. *This* time, it seems to me, it's not the *people* who are whining inappropriately, it's **Moses**. *This* time, it's **Moses** who has begun to confuse *legitimate* questioning and *legitimate* criticism with whining. *This* time, it's Moses who has begun to act as if honest questions were a sign of disloyalty and personal attacks. Hear again the way Moses put it in these back-to-back sentences: "Moses said to them, 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?'" Uh-oh. Do you hear the oh-so-crucial turn embodied in this statement? Moses says these two sentences as if they are more or less the same thing – to question Moses is to question God. *But it's not the same thing at all.* As talented, as passionate, as visionary, as gifted as Moses is, *he is not God.* He is subject to the same sorts of mistakes that we all are. He is prone to get tired and frustrated. At his worst, he is prone to believing his own press releases and coming to act as if it was him who got the Hebrews out of Egypt, rather than his being the servant and vessel of God.

And that's a very dangerous move to make, isn't it: to make the assumption that ANY criticism or questioning means that the questioner is "disloyal." We have seen such a slide happen too often on the stage of world history, haven't we, where a country's leader starts out being open and interested in hearing all ideas, even the critical ones, and ends up being a dictator who suppresses any criticism. Or even on just the scale of your life and mine, I know that there I have been times that I have not been able to hear legitimate criticism and questions from someone and instead have written them off and discounted them or assumed that their words were said only out of malice or spite. We all do it, don't we? We all can get defensive and dismissive in the face of those who want to know why we did what we did, or who think that maybe there

is a better way. We sometimes mentally file these folks away as troublemakers who we don't need to listen to; or, worse, we rationalize away even good criticism by saying that the fact that I'm getting criticized means I must therefore be right! One preacher once said, tongue in cheek (at least I hope it was tongue in cheek!), "I guess I must be a prophet, otherwise I wouldn't be getting stoned!"

Here's the point: there is **helpful** criticism that even hard as it is sometimes to hear we nonetheless need to listen to, pay attention to, not discount or simply get defensive about. And there is **unhelpful** criticism that's mean or petty or simply wrong or is evidence of jealousy or a host of other things that are just off the mark. Moses faced **both** kinds of criticism. When the people complained about him and said that at least in Egypt they'd had plenty to eat, that was unhelpful and untrue criticism. The people had in fact been starving in Egypt, no matter what they claimed to remember – and Moses knew it. And so he didn't let such unwarranted and untruthful criticism deter him from the main mission – leading the people away from slavery, following the God who gave them life and freedom. But Moses also faced some of the *other* kind of criticism and questioning – the helpful and true kind that he **should have** paid attention to but was in danger of simply dismissing or getting defensive about. Our story for today is one of those times. For, when all is said and done, what Moses had done in today's story was to lead his band of people to camp for the night in a place that had no water. That was a mistake. Whether he didn't pay attention to the scouts he'd sent out, or whether he was tired, or whether he had mis-remembered where the water was from his days as a shepherd in these parts, the point is: *he messed up*. And the people are criticizing him for that. Now maybe they didn't do it in the most helpful way. Maybe they could have been more respectful in their feedback to Moses. Maybe their criticism and questioning could have had less of a finger-pointing quality to them (for Lord

knows, I don't do my best work when someone is wagging a finger at me!).

But be all of that as it may, it is nonetheless true that the criticism and questioning that Moses received there concerning his choice of campground was valid, it was in fact appropriate and even helpful criticism. Moreover, their criticism and questions point out that Moses was dangerously sliding into a place where he was acting as if he were always right **simply because it was him**. It is on such occasions that Moses – or you and I – most desperately need good and helpful critics and questioners, because we are in danger of losing our perspective and believing our way to be the **only** way. Former Methodist Bishop Jim Armstrong says this about the role of critics and questioners in your life and mine:

The critic plays an indispensable role in helping us become who we are. Don't misunderstand. I'm not exalting the whining parent, the carping husband, the nagging wife, the overbearing supervisor. I'm talking about supportive loved ones, experienced friends, seasoned mentors. E. Stanley Jones once called his critics, "the unpaid guardians of my soul."¹

But, of course, all of this begs the question: how **do** you **know** which kind of criticism and questioning is which? What **distinguishes** unhelpful and even destructive criticism and questioning, from the helpful and thoughtful and, as St. Paul might put it, the "up-building"? Because surely we do need to distinguish between the two. In fact, we raise our children that way, don't we? We want our children to be strong in their own thoughts and opinions, not determined by what everyone else thinks, self-assured enough to be able to be able to think for themselves. That phrase that it is in every parent's toolkit – "Well, what if everyone were jumping off the cliff, would you jump too?"

¹Bishop James Armstrong, "Here's To Critics!", www.csec.org/csec/sermon/armstrong_3702.htm | I am indebted to Rev. Armstrong for the "big idea" of this sermon.

– is right on. The best way to be an unhappy person, or to raise an unhappy child who turns into an unhappy adult, is to think that **every** criticism or question that comes your way is always valid and you need to adjust your behavior in the face of **every** criticism. Modern psychology has a word for it, co-dependency, and it makes for a frustrating life, a life that will all-too-often feel like being a dog at a whistlers' convention.

At the same time, though, when we are at our best, we want for ourselves and our children a way to be able to truly acknowledge and listen to those who have thoughtful questions and even criticisms of us. How do we do that? For both the person who acts as if **EVERY** criticism and question is valid, **AND** the one who thinks he or she can ignore **all** criticisms and questions will lead to an unhappy, and maybe even dangerous, life. *How, then, do we truly know which is which?* Bishop Armstrong again has some thoughtful advice for us; listen to what he has to say:

So often when the critic's voice is heard we grow defensive. We wear blinders and ear-plugs. We withdraw into shells of denials. But if we are to grow we must deal with reality. There's an old Hungarian proverb that says, "If one person calls you a horse— laugh at him. If a second person calls you a horse— think about it. If a third person calls you a horse— buy a saddle."²

To use that proverb's metaphor, that is exactly how God responds to Moses in today's story: God buys him a saddle. That is, God in essence says to him: *"You're tired, you're making mistakes, you're getting overly defensive, you're even beginning to confuse yourself with Me!"* Here's how the scripture put it: "The LORD said to Moses, Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you...." In other words, *"Moses, you need some folks – those elders who are wise and thoughtful – to help you think about what you need to do, and to help you think about*

²www.csec.org/csec/sermon/armstrong_3702.htm

what criticisms and questions of you are valid and worthy of being paid attention to, and which ones are not. Take those folks and keep them close by. They'll be your saddle when you're being unreasonable and defensive, and they'll be your shield when it is your critics who are being petty and nasty. You need some folks who can help you tell the difference!"

Back when I was a Regional Minister for the Disciples, I used to train and orient a lot of congregational Pastoral Relations Committees. And one of the things that I used to say to them is that the most important job that they could do for their pastor was to help him or her put things in perspective. Because sometimes a pastor would experience a question or criticism as a mountain but it was actually a molehill -- and the pastor needed the committee to give that perspective. But sometimes the questions and criticisms were legitimate, and then the job of the PRC was to help the pastor re-frame his or her thinking, to overcome defensiveness, to listen well. Now, you don't have to be a pastor, and you don't have to be Moses, to hope that there are indeed similar folks in your life: folks who can help you think through which criticisms are valid and which are not, folks who can help you gently cut through your defensiveness, folks who can re-frame a situation so that you can now see it from a different perspective, one that lets you move forward, one that leads to a better life.

My friends, my hope for you this morning is that you indeed have folks like that in your lives: folks who can help you navigate your way through a complex world by helping you know when you're truly messing up -- when you should buy a saddle! -- and when you're not despite what people may be saying. My hope for you is that you have people who will help you re-frame things, look at things differently, help you keep perspective, help you find new perspective when life or your own tendencies threaten to

make your life less than what God wants it to be. For Moses, as for us all, the first One who does that – if we will but listen – is God. But God always works through the good people that He places in our lives. For Moses, it was those elders who could help him re-think and re-frame when he was tired, when he was defensive. It was the greatest gift that they could give him – the gift of both loving him and honestly offering their questions and perspectives and even their criticism, the gift of being, indeed, the “guardians of his soul.”

So: who are those folks for you? If there aren't enough of them in your life, if you are feeling like that dog at the whistlers' convention trying to please too many people too much of the time, or if you worry that you should be MORE attentive to what people think but find it hard to not get defensive – then pray to God this week to send you some of those folks. Pray to God that you will pay attention to the ones that God indeed may have already sent you. For as that old but wonderful saying goes: “God loves you just as you are – but God loves you too much to leave you where you are!” For those in our lives who love us as we are but move us to be even more than we are – thanks be to God. Amen.