

Today I'm starting a sermon series called 21 days to a complaint-free life. The AIM of this series is for each of us to take up the challenge to go 21 days without complaining. When we do this we'll participate in a wider movement to diminish the amount of complaining in our world.

I have been looking forward to this series for a long time. Originally I had planned to share it this past fall. However with our move to Roosevelt and then our move here, I was concerned that the series would get lost. God has perfect timing. It seems right to do this the week after the Grand Opening.

This idea comes from a program that Will Bowen started in June 2006. He was the leader of the One Community Spirit Center in Kansas City—a Unity Church. His objective was to encourage folks in his church to think more positively. He came up with a simple idea.

The idea is this. Go 21 consecutive days without complaining. To help, everyone is given a wrist band. If we complaint, then we have to put the band on the other wrist. And we start all over. So if we're on day 11 and we complain we have to go back to day one.

Scientists believe that it takes 21 consecutive days to adopt a new behavior. If we can make it for 21 day we have an excellent opportunity of living a complaint free life. ve adopted a new behavior.

I think this initiative to go 21 days without complaining is an excellent spiritual practice for Lent which is starting this Wednesday.

The Unity Church identifies themselves as a worldwide Christian organization which teaches a positive approach to life. They seek to accept the good in all people and in all events. Presbyterians and people in the Unity Church would agree on views about God, Jesus, the Bible. We probably would disagree with folks in the Unity Church on the nature and role of sin in our

life. Some folks might wonder about taking a message from the Unity Church and looking at it in our setting. I think we can adapt this message.

That's what I've tried to do in this brochure that is in the bulletin. I've written a devotion for you that helps us go deeper on living a complaint free life. I encourage you to use them this week. I hope you'll be blessed by using it. In the middle of this brochure is a place to take notes. I believe God might say something to you that you'll want to remember.

I need to be clear up front that the intention of this series is not to silence anyone. If you're like me, sometime in our life as a parent we've told our kids, "stop complaining." We do it because we just want them to be quiet—to be silent. This idea of silencing might be appropriate with our kids. But it doesn't work when we see things that are wrong in the world. If we something wrong like teenagers who are homeless, then we are called to speak up. Some people might say aren't you complaining. Silencing has been used by people in power to keep the status quo. There's even a blatantly sexist tradition in the church that women aren't supposed to speak—that they have to be silent. As Presbyterians—really as followers of Jesus Christ—we believe that if we see something wrong in the world we're called to speak the truth. The Bible has a deep tradition of prophets speaking truth to power. 21 days to a complaint free life is not meant to silence us. I almost scrapped this sermon series because we're not called to be silent.

Next week Jason Blair has the privilege of addressing this issue. I'm jealous—and I don't mean that as a complaint. He is going to look at how Jesus responded when he was frustrated and angry. He'll go deeper into these issues of silencing. Next week will be the most provocative sermon in the series.

The other piece in terms of introduction is we are going to have a “Community conversation” time at the end of each sermon. If you have a question or a comment, let’s talk about it as a community.

When Will Bowen started this sermon series in 2006 he didn’t realize the phenomenon that would develop.

He distributed 250 bracelets. The idea caught on so much that people wanted to share bracelets at their work sites. Word spread out about the idea and people started asking the church for bracelets. Within a few months they had mailed 9,000 bracelets.

The media got a hold of the idea and the whole bracelet concept went viral. The church started a web site and a separate team from their church to distribute bracelets. The whole idea took off. 21 days to a complaint free life has been featured in over 100 newspapers, the Today Show and the Oprah Winfrey show. Will Bowen has written two books about it and has a Facebook page. When he wrote this book, he had received requests for six million bracelets from 80 countries.

The farthest I’ve made it is day four. Will Bowen wrote that the average person takes four to eight months to make it successfully. The farthest I’ve made it is to day four. I’m going to make it. I want every person at Chain of Lakes to make it.

What is a complaint?

SLIDE        An expression of grief, pain, or discontent that is negative

It’s when our words share in a negative way the grief, pain, or discontent that is in our hearts.

What is the difference between a complaint and a statement of fact?

Yesterday the temperature only made it to five degrees. If we had gone outside and said, it's cold outside. Is that a complaint? No. That is the truth. It's cold outside. If we said something like, "it's been cold outside for at least a week and I'm so tired of the weather. I hate Minnesota winters." Is that a complaint? Yes.

What makes a complaint is the energy or emotion behind a statement.

It's cold outside—not a complaint

It's cold outside—a complaint

In reality the complaining is not about our words, it's about the energy behind our words that is negative or not helpful. The energy behind our words reveals the condition of our hearts.

Jesus knew this connection between our words & actions and the condition of our heart.

Jesus was teaching about whether eating with defiled hands was a sin. He said:

It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles ... Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. Matthew 15: 11, 17-18

Complaining is not about our words—it's the energy behind our words.

Sometimes it makes sense to complain. On our journey some of us might find ourselves in a place where complaining might benefit us. For example, we might be experiencing terrible grief and the only way we can process our grief is through complaining. There's a tradition in the Scriptures of people complaining or lamenting to God. This idea doesn't work in all situations.

If we look at the world we can't help but come to the conclusion that there is a lot of complaining in the world. Each of us in going 21 days without complaining can make an impact.

Thousands of people have gone 21 days without complaining. I know it can work.

Why do we complain? Let me share three reasons.

One is we're conditioned to complain. Some of us grew up in households where complaining happened a lot. Complaining was the norm by which our households functioned. Complaining is our natural default setting. We are almost conditioned to complain because that is the way we've learned how to relate to people. If this happened in our families, when our families get together it's almost a complaint-fest.

A second reason is to get attention. An easy way to get people to listen to us is to complain. In the past 25 years the radio industry has made a mint on talk radio. But a lot of talk radio is really complaint radio. There is a reason that politicians run so many negative or complaint ads. They work. There is some part of us that is drawn to complaints. They get our attention.

A third reason we complain is to control other people. When our buttons are pushed it's much easier to complain about a person's action (looking at the negative) instead of sharing what we would like (focusing on the positive). When we complain we can ignore our role in the situation. It's much easier to complain about another person and the person's actions instead of focusing on how our own buttons are pushed. We complain about the other person with hopes of controlling them which often doesn't work instead of looking at ourselves and changing our response which can work.

Sometimes we get into patterns of complaining that we don't even realize we've fallen into. I don't identify myself as a complainer, but I've only made it to day 4. I've learned a lot about myself in the last three weeks. I've learned that I'll make a statement (often when I'm by myself) that just comes out of me. They are complaints.

One day I was on the freeway—driving in the car by myself—and a car sped up in front of me in a dangerous way. “Really!” I said out loud. Whoops—back to day one. I've found that

I have problems at stop lights. I'm in a hurry and I want to go and the light stays red and I'm waiting, waiting, waiting. I know this sounds silly, but I've yelled at the stop light—let's go.

Oops—back to day one.

Is that a big deal to complain to yourself? Yes. The energy behind this complaint comes from something in my heart. That energy can come out in other situations. It doesn't help me as a person.

Not complaining does not mean we excuse another person's actions. If I had said out loud—"that person just cut in front of me. That was dangerous." That is a statement of fact. I'm not excusing what the other person did. I'm not complaining about it.

I think there is a better way to respond to frustrations and pressure. The Apostle Paul provides us an example. When he wrote this letter that we know of as Philippians he was in prison. Right before he had been imprisoned he had been given a severe flogging. His feet were in stocks. He had been sentenced to death. He was in a situation that we would think would lead to complaining.

Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God, without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.

But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you—and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me. Philippians 2:14-15, 17-18

Paul saw his sufferings as an opportunity to live with joy. He saw his sufferings as an opportunity to bring glory to God. In a way we can almost see him welcoming his sufferings as he could gather attention for God because of what he was experiencing.

This is what I would call Level 5 living. It's living at the highest of our humanity. To think that we would almost welcome suffering with joy because we could bring glory to God is incredible.

I think it's almost impossible to live at this high level without God. I don't think we can go 21 days without complaining unless God is at the center of who we are. Last week in my sermon I shared that home is where our heart is. We find security and refuge and comfort in our heart—where God is. The more we give ourselves over to God, the less possible it is to complain.

Let me share a practical tool. So much of living without complaining is our attitude about life. It's changing our perspective. Will Bowen wrote this:

<u>Instead of ...</u>	<u>Try ...</u>
Problem	Opportunity
Have to	Get to
Setback	Challenge
Enemy	Friend
Tormentor	Teacher
Pain	Signal
I demand	I would appreciate
Complaint	Request
Struggle	Journey
You did this	I created this

#### A Complaint Free World—Page 105

Complaining can lead a group of people in a downward spiral. I'm guessing that we've all been in a group of people where we are almost egged on to complain. One person shares a complaint, and then the next person complains. A downward spiral of negative energy breaks out. This happens in churches. A group gets together and the default setting is complaint. When complaining becomes the norm the spiritual energy of a congregation is completely gone.

One the other hand imagine a church community where people leave their complaints at the door. Imagine if we called this space a complaint-free zone. That we would have a big banner that said Chain of Lakes is a complaint free zone. We're not silenced. We still share the

truth; we still disagree with each other. We do it in a healthy way. When we disagree we listen to each other, we respect each other, we bear with each other, and we always seek to remain in community. We develop this attitude of “we don’t complain here. This is not what we’re about.” I don’t think that we complain much. But I do know that we’re human. Imagine the impact in people’s lives that we could make if we said, “we’re not going to complain here.”

Would you like to be part of a movement that diminishes complaining? Chain of Lakes might be that place.

When each of us can live without complaining we have made an impact. Let’s each of us make that impact.