

Rev. Dr. Gary Shahinian
Sermon
March 23, 2014
Park Congregational Church
Worcester, Massachusetts

“Learning from Criticism”

Scripture Text: Exodus 17:1-7, 18:13-23

Dear people of God, when I say the word, *criticism*, what’s the first thing you think of? Probably someone who’s never satisfied with anyone or anything, who loves to nitpick, and who looks forward with glee for any chance to denounce, disparage, and debunk. Critics often get a bad rap in our society.

But maybe if we think about film critics, we’ll be able to see a positive function of those who engage in criticism. Film critics, after all, are very helpful to us, are they not? They tell us what films to watch and which ones to skip. And with the price of a movie ticket today at \$9.50 or more, they save us both our money and our minutes.

Criticism is essential to human progress. The Protestant Reformation was a critique of the corrupt practices of the Roman Catholic Church of the 16th and 17th centuries. Our Puritan and Pilgrim forbears came to these shores as a protest against religious sloth in

England. We've learned much about the Bible over the past 200 years because of careful scholars who have practiced critical disciplines. Some of these disciplines are textual criticism, form criticism, and higher criticism. These areas of biblical criticism may not mean much to you, for example higher criticism is the scientific study of biblical writings to determine their historical origin, literary genre, purpose, and meaning, but because of them, we know more about the Bible today than any generation of Christians, including the original disciples of Jesus.

We believe that the Bible contains sacred writings, inspired by the Spirit of God, recording one segment of the human family's experience with and understanding of God. But, we're not forced into some superstitious and ignorant mentality in order to have faith. And for that, we must be thankful to the role and function of these various areas of biblical criticism.

You see, faith is not blind. Rather it is profound personal commitment shaped, in part, by the full utilization of our critical faculties. If this is true of religion, as it certainly is, it's true of all of life. The social critic paved the way for the American Revolution, the abolition movement, women's suffrage, and the civil rights movement, which has

now expanded into equal rights for gays and lesbians who wish to marry. The critic pricks our social conscience, informs our cultural tastes, and enables us to think more clearly in a complicated world.

Perhaps many of us have a negative feeling about criticism that goes all the way back to our mother's voice echoing in our heads to pick up our clothes, clean up our room, go to sleep on time, get up on time, take a bath, and so on. This criticism continued as we got older, with our schoolteachers commanding us to stop talking during class, pay attention, finish our homework, study harder for our exams, use our potential to the fullest, and accept responsibility for our actions. Can you still hear some of your teachers' voices inside your heads? I can.

The critic plays an indispensable role in helping us to become who we are. Could it be that the whining mother-in-law, the grouching husband, the nagging wife, and the overbearing boss might have something to say to which we should listen? Don't misunderstand me. Some people, even relatives, like to criticize just to be ornery. But all of us have supportive loved ones, longtime friends, seasoned mentors, and those who can rightly be called the "unpaid guardians of our souls."

Moses, that superhero of early Hebrew history, learned to utilize his

critics. His followers were an impatient, pugnacious, and rebellious lot. His followers owed him everything. He had broken the chains of slavery from their ankles and their souls. Yet with Pharaoh's armies not yet washed upon the shore of the Red Sea, Moses's followers begin to cry out against his leadership. In the wilderness of Shur, they needed water. In the arid land of Zin, they needed food. Again, in the desert wastelands, they needed water. Ungrateful and mean-spirited, some of them actually wanted to return to the security of their bondage in Egypt. Moses's followers were vocal, unthinking critics. Do any of you sometimes want to lapse into ways that enslave you?

But Moses had Jethro, his father-in-law and a leader of the people in his own right. His criticism was more gentle and more to the point. He took Moses aside and said to him, "Mo, you're trying to go it alone. You and your people are wearing yourselves out. Turn to others. Choose some wise and honest persons to work with you. We'll call them judges." Though Moses's first thought may have been to ignore anything his father-in-law tells him, Moses heeds Jethro's advice. A leadership team is developed. A civil society is organized. Every morning those judges set aside a portion of their time to be with the people and to deal with

community problems, like hunger and thirst. Jethro was a well-meaning critic. Moses benefited from his criticism.

And then, finally, there was God. Talk about higher criticism! There was a sense in which God held Moses accountable for splintering his people over the food and water issue. Years later in the Book of Numbers, God would remind him of that. Nevertheless God was always available to Moses. Early on, Moses pushed some panic buttons. It wasn't just the food and water. It was his leadership role that was at stake. "What shall I do with this rebellious people?" cried Moses. "They're ready to stone me."

God answered, "Well, get out of there. Get away from that angry mob."

Then, agreeing with Jethro, God said, "Take some trusted leaders with you, some calm, older heads. And one more thing. Take your staff, your rod. It was with you on the banks of the Nile when I stood by your side. It will symbolize my presence. Have no qualms about the water and the food, about the needs of your people being met, I'll be with you. I'll go ahead of you. Your people will be cared for."

Well, it's an old story, but there are still some timely lessons to be learned from it. How did Moses react to all of this? He listened. He

learned. He wasn't immobilized by fear or crisis. He wasn't defensive or temperamental. He knew that God was a part of the process from beginning to end. And so, Moses listened and learned from his critics who wished him well.

So often when the critic's voice is heard, we become overly sensitive. We wear blinders and earplugs. We withdraw into shells of denial. But if we are to grow spiritually, as in all other ways, we must deal with the reality that all of us need instruction in some ways. 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."

Listen to your critics. Listen and learn from them. Moses learned that he couldn't go it alone. He needed to rely on others. One of the basic leadership principles taught in seminars and workshops, whether in the offices of business, government, or the church, is the collegial style of working with others. A one-person show is doomed from the start. The prima donna and the lone ranger are extinct in today's society.

Moses had his judges. Jesus had his disciples. King Arthur had his court. And we, if we are wise, will have a circle of friends and

trustworthy associates to whom we can turn and from whom we can learn. Like Moses, we should listen to them. We should not be immobilized. We must seize initiatives that they open up to us. We must be pro-active, not defensive. But we cannot stop at listening. We must learn from criticism. And the way we do that is by acting upon what is said to us.

Let me tell you a story about Megan. That's not her real name. When she was three weeks old, her mother died. Megan's father was an alcoholic. She grew up with learning disabilities and was told by her schoolteachers that she would never amount to anything. An unresponsive school system kept passing her because they were more concerned with getting their share of the public money than actually educating her, and so, she was able to receive a high school diploma though she was able to read at only a 4th grade level. Growing up, she was regularly sexually assaulted by her father. Hoping to escape that terrible home life, she got married to the first young man who paid any attention to her. He turned out to be an abusive, alcoholic husband. And so, Megan became an alcoholic herself to escape the hell that was her home life.

Finally Megan met a woman minister who paid attention to her

needs, and really cared for her. Though this minister was very pastoral to her, she refused to allow Megan to feel sorry for herself. The minister assured Megan that God was with her through all of the terrible things that happened to her and gave her strength to withstand all of it. Whenever Megan said, “I can’t handle my life anymore,” the minister responded by saying, “Yes, you can.” At one point, Megan was ready to give up on turning her life around. At which point, her minister friend told her, “Megan, if you’re going to be a quitter, then I feel that I’m wasting my time with you. I’m sorry, but I’ve told you what you must do to change your life for the better and I’ve told you how to do it. That’s all I can do for you. If you’re not willing to accept my criticism of how you’re living, then I can’t spend any more time with you. I have a large congregation to take care of.”

At that point, Megan found God in her life and she was able to see that her minister friend was sincerely trying to help her. She finally did turn her life around. Megan was a seminary colleague of mine. Last I heard, she was the Senior Pastor of a fairly large Unitarian Universalist congregation. I remember that she once told me in seminary, “I’m still wounded by my past, but I’m also strengthened. I have dedicated my

wholeness and my brokenness, my pluses and my minuses, to God who has been with me all along.”

How do we handle the critical junctures of life? How do we improve ourselves? One prominent way is by listening to criticism from well-meaning persons. And not just listening, but learning from criticism. If we believe that God is always at the heart and soul of our lives, then criticism will not hurt us or wound us. It will make us better persons, the persons that God desires for us to become. Amen.