

There is an old story about a very strict monastic order where the monks were all required to maintain a vow of silence. They were only permitted to speak two words per year, and those two words had to be spoken to the abbot. One new recruit took on this austere lifestyle, and after one year his time came to say his two words to the abbot. He said, "Bad food." The abbot nodded. Another entire passed and it came time again for this him to say two words. He went to the abbot and said, "Hard beds." The abbot nodded. Yet another year passed with the man in silence. When it came time to see the abbot he said, "I quit." The abbot replied. "I'm not surprised. All you've done is complain since you've gotten here."

A look in the Old Testament at the people of Israel shows you a whole people who complained a lot. In our first Bible reading from Numbers we have the people complaining. You'll remember that they are in the wilderness following Moses being led from Egypt to the Promised Land. This isn't a far distance. It should only take a couple weeks to do, but because of their cowardice and faithlessness God decides the trip will take 40

years. The people aren't happy about this and grumble all the more.

We meet them well into their journey in Numbers 21, and they've had enough. They cry out against God and against Moses and say, "Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Of course that last sentence makes no sense. Didn't they just say they had no food - but they detest what they do have? I don't know. The thing is, God has had enough.

God made a promise to Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation. That was an unconditional promise. We read about it in worship two weeks ago. Indeed Abraham had Isaac. Isaac had Jacob. Jacob had twelve sons and one daughter. There was more than plenty of unhealthy family dynamics going on in each of these families; especially Jacob's where 11 of the sons sell the 12th, Joseph, into slavery. You probably know the story well from the musical Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. Joseph becomes great in the land of Egypt and later he saves his family from starvation. The leadership in Egypt changes and the family of Israelites is enslaved. Centuries

pass in enslavement. Conditions get worse and worse and God finally frees them through Moses.

I mention all this to show that by the time we get to our reading from Numbers 21 God already has a long history with this people. He knows they aren't perfect, but he's committed to them. He has provided for their every need daily.

Now in any healthy relationship this long term commitment would bring about great love and devotion from the recipient. But did it happen? Nope. God has given lavishly, but with little accountability from them. They have become exploiters of God's grace. The more God gives the more they demand. And so God acts.

On the surface it's a horrible thing to do - send poisonous snakes to kill them. That doesn't sound like a loving God. But did God stop loving them? No, not at all. God takes drastic steps that will ultimately enhance their relationship with him. They do not grumble after this. They get closer.

Now it would be great if after the people realize that they've pushed too far that God would take the snakes away. They could go on and live happily ever after. But God does not

take the snakes away. They are still there, and so is the possibility of getting bit. Instead, through God's command the serpent on a pole is created. The people are to look at it and if they do so they will live.

There are two big and important lessons for us to learn from this. First, the hard lesson: God's justice. It is easy to preach about God's love. It is easy to preach about the way God accepts us wherever we are and in whatever shape God finds us. This is true. We see in our gospel reading that famous verse, "For God so loves the world that he gave his only Son so that those who believe in him may not perish but have eternal life." You may remember me preaching before that in John's gospel the word "world" doesn't mean the earth or the universe. The world is all that has turned its back on God - or is at war with God. Yet God loves it so much that he is willing to die for it.

However, God is not mocked. And God is not going to let his lavish love become destructive either. What happens when a parent gives a child everything he or she wants? Look at the character Dudley Dursely in the Harry Potter books. His parents indulge him in everything. He becomes mean. He is nasty. And he gets so fat at one point that the school's outfitters tell

his parents that he must lose weight because they simply don't make clothing big enough to fit him.

If God sees his love is being exploited to your own detriment, God will change plans. God is the judge, not to be mean, but to make relationships healthy and you whole.

That brings about the second big learning. As the people repent of their self-destructive lifestyles the snakes don't disappear. God creates a path of health that more deeply involves God in the healing process. As I said before, God could have said, "Okay, you've learned your lesson. I'll take the snakes away. Just don't do it again." But God does not erase the problem. The problem still exists.

In our gospel reading Jesus shows us just how deeply God will connect to deal with the problem. He says, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up..." Being lifted up means, of course, the cross.

Do you see how God's tough love approach actually more deeply draws God into the relationship. God does not solve your problems for you. God does more than even give you an answer to your problems; like, "Here you go. Here's an answer you didn't

think of.” No, God deeply involves his very own self with you in navigating a path toward wholeness. And at the end of the day, even when God is holding people accountable for their sins, God is still making the greater investment.

People often describe the Bible as life’s instruction book. Just do what it says and all will be well. Or look to it when you can’t find the answers elsewhere. But how about if we understand the Bible as the story of just how deeply God is invested in creating life-giving relationships with human beings - his chosen creatures.

Why isn’t life always easy? Because easy times don’t bring much growth. The greatest growth and the deepest intimacy often come through the greatest of challenges.

Are you going to get easy answers from the Bible? Nope. I doubt it. But you will get real answers to real life in ways that will bring you closer to God. Amen