

Spinning the Complaints Into Rejoicing

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“Good morning!”

“What’s good about it?”

And so began my conversation a few weeks ago with one of the residents of Wesley Village. Sitting at the table with three women she considers friends, eating a breakfast that might be served at a five-star restaurant, having no significant health issues other than the all too predictable arthritis and various aches common in the older adults, having family and friends who visit her often, she still said, “What’s good about it?”

Her reply did not stun me. She has often been a complainer. Seemingly nothing is ever what she wants it to be. Her family has learned to live with her negative attitudes, saying, “She was not always this way. She got that way as she aged.” They have accepted her negative attitudes and comments as part and parcel of the aging process. So it came as a surprise to her when I responded with the unexpected. Knowing her and her tablemates well, I took a chance and said in response, “This is the day the Lord has made.” The woman looked perplexed, and then looked at her friends who replied in unison, “Let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

She finally said to her friends, “What did you say?” With more emphasis this time, they repeated, “This the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.” I could not have been more pleased! It was almost as if I had planted their response. I did not. The result? She stopped by my office after breakfast and asked to talk. We did and she left saying, “I don’t mean to be so negative. I have so much going for me. It is just that I miss my old way of life. But I’m going to try to concentrate on what I have now, rather than what I do not have.” Surely God must have smiled at that moment.

Our morning ritual now when I visit her table is not “Good morning!” Rather it is “This is the day the Lord has made.” And the four of them say in unison, “Let us be glad and rejoice in it.” A small thing perhaps, but that daily reminder is making a difference. She smiles more, has fewer complaints, and feels better.

She is a constant reminder to all of us engaged in ministry with older adults. The church is called to witness to good news no matter where or what the circumstance. The church has good news for everyone, including older adults, who often forget the many gifts and blessings still available to them, not the least of which is the gift of life with all its limitations and frailties. Our task is to listen to the complaints as it were, and then to open the opportunity for the complainer to move beyond the negatives and begin seeing and enjoying the positives.

