

“Patience in an Impatient World”
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee
12/15/13

James 5:7-10

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. 8 You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. 9 Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! 10 As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

AN IMPATIENT WORLD

Patience is virtue, or so they say.

I don't know about you, but I'm not feeling very virtuous this time of year.

I once overheard a conversation between a frustrated shopper and a beleaguered employee at Wal-Mart. The shopper said,

“You sent me back there, and they sent me back here. I think no one really knows what's going on in this place.”

The poor employee let out a long sigh and then said in a really pitiful voice,

“I'm really sorry. I'm not sure where to send you.”

Who wants to talk about patience in a season filled with impatient people? Isn't it unrealistic to ask us to be patient as we stand in a huge line at Wal-Mart?

ADVENT AND PATIENCE

But, of course once again the church wants us to do the hard thing. Today is the third Sunday of Advent. And what is our theme? Patience.

Isn't that just like the church?

Everyone else is singing merry little jingles, and we are stuck with these somber Advent tunes.

Everyone else can't wait until the Christmas holidays, and the church tells us to be patient.

Everyone else is speeding up, and the church tells us to slow down.

The Lord will come, but these things take time.

Be patient. It's only been a few thousand years. That's not much to God.

But, it is a lot to us.

In today's gospel lesson a frustrated John the Baptist asks Jesus from his prison cell, "Are you the one, or should we expect another?"

You see John is no longer so sure about Jesus. When Jesus first came on the scene John led the crowd in the chant, "Yes he can."

But, now he's not so sure. The chant has gone from "yes he can" to "maybe he will."

Jesus has not done what John expected the Messiah to do. And so John is becoming impatient.

John is looking at Jesus through the bars of a prison cell. He doesn't have much time, and he needs to know.

RUNNING OUT OF PATIENCE

Some of us may ask the same question.
Was Jesus really the one? How can we know?

How much time does the Lord need to bring in the kingdom? How many years has it been? When will the Lord come?

How many Advent seasons will we have to sing, "O Come O Come Emmanuel?" How long will we have to wait for God's ransom?

Have you read the morning newspaper? We don't need to wait any longer. We need the Messiah right now! It seems like the time for patience has passed.

GOD'S PATIENCE

But, maybe we're looking at this virtue from the wrong end.

Maybe it's not so much about our patience. Maybe it's first and foremost about God's patience.

The joy and hope of the season is this: God is patient with us.

Consider this. Maybe the delay in the second coming of Christ is an act of grace.

Maybe God is giving us time to repent, to go in a different direction. Each new Advent is an opportunity for salvation.

THE PATIENT FARMER

James gave us an example of what it means to be patient. He talked about the farmer who patiently waits for the rain.

This passage reminded me of a very small, rural church in Virginia that I served many years ago. I would leave very early to preach around 8:30 AM at this church and then I would barely make it back to preach at my second church in the small town in which I lived.

But, despite the inconvenience I always enjoyed preaching at that church.

The farmers who worshipped in that little church were some of the most patient people I had ever met. They were never in a hurry to do or say anything, and yet they worked hard all day long.

When we had our quarterly Session meetings, they always had time to say a prayer of thanks before we had our mandatory (and elaborate) deserts prepared by the lady of the house.

It was a different way of life. They were at peace with God and the world despite the difficulties of day to day living.

As I look back on it I have to say that I learned more about the doctrine of Providence from these farmers than I ever learned in seminary.

You could tell by the way they talked about it. The rain that watered their crops truly was a gift from God.

You could tell by their demeanor that their ultimate hope was in the God who created heaven and earth. In good times and bad, more than most, they had a patience that allowed them to endure and thrive.

PATIENCE IN GOOD SEASONS AND BAD

I guess when you work your heart out day after day and then sometimes have to plough the corn under because of the drought, you learn to appreciate your dependence upon the rain and the rain giver. You learn patience, and you learn to have faith.

These farmers understood that if you look back over the years, there were many more good seasons than bad ones. They took the long view of life, and that enabled them to be patient.

As I look back over my life I see that there have been more good seasons than bad. God has blessed me, certainly more than I have deserved.

And even in the bad seasons the Lord has taught me how to hang on and trust in His grace, even though I did not know what the future might bring.

I have certainly not learned all the lessons that I need to learn. I am still often unfaithful and impatient with God and with those around me.

But, sometimes I get a glimpse of God's grace. I get just an inkling of that eternal hope.

And when that happens, for a while I am patient. I am content to wait for the Lord's coming.

That's what Advent is all about.

PATIENCE AND GRACE

Patience and grace are similar ideas.

Jesus once told a parable about a man who was forgiven a great debt by a king. The man's plea before the king was this, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything."

Now the sum that the man owed was so great that it was improbable that he would ever be able to repay. So, the king, out of grace, canceled the debt that the man owed.

But, the servant who was shown such patience was not as patient toward a fellow slave who owed him money. The fellow slave used the same words that this former debtor used before the king, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything."

But, though the debt was relatively small the ungrateful servant did not have patience with his fellow servant. He would not forgive the debt.

When the king found out about this, his judgment was harsh.

How could this servant be so unforgiving when he had been forgiven so much? How could this servant be so impatient when the king had been so patient toward him?

This is not just a parable that Jesus told long ago. It is a fact of life today. Impatience springs from a sense of self-importance and judgmental attitude.

Patience is an expression of grace.

So, if God has been patient toward us, we need to be patient toward other people. We must forgive the debts of others as God has forgiven our debt. Patience is not a virtue that we cultivate on our own. Patience flows from an understanding of God's grace.

NO GRUMBLING

That's made clear in our lesson for today. James said, "Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors!"

The coming of Christ means that an ungracious lifestyle is judged by God.

There is still quite a bit of grumbling in the church.

We are still impatient with each other. We may think that this is a minor thing, that a little bit of grumbling is not a big deal.

But, James would disagree. An impatient attitude is taken very seriously in the Bible because it poisons the well of faith. Grumbling can bring about judgment.

Jesus gave a similar warning. He said, "For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." (Matthew 7:2)

The early church was in many ways a struggling church. They were persecuted for their faith. And when there is this kind of pressure grumbling is bound to occur.

The same is true today. When life turns up the heat we become impatient. We grumble and complain because we are afraid.

When I was in middle school I memorized a line from Rudyard Kipling's poem, "If." "If you can keep your head, while everyone else is losing their's and blaming it on you ..."

That's my definition of patience. Not only are we to avoid grumbling about others; we keep our heads while others grumble about us.

THE EXAMPLE OF THE PROPHETS

But, how do we do that?

James suggested that we look to the example of the prophets.

The prophets were persecuted. The prophets suffered.

The prophets often stood alone. Their message was unpopular. Their prophecies did not conform to popular opinion.

But, they still preached. They did not lose hope. Why?

God had given them a vision of a greater kingdom. God had given them a vision of a kingdom based upon justice and mercy. God had given them a vision of a Messiah who would come and set things right.

They did not know when the Messiah would come. But, they believed the Messiah was coming.

And that was enough to sustain them. That was enough to give them patience in an impatient world. That was enough to give them the courage to preach God's truth to a world that did not want to hear it.

Patience is born of the conviction that this is God's world and that God still comes to save us. And if we believe this, it can have a profound effect on the life of the church and those around us.

THE POWER OF PATIENCE

Several years ago I read a book entitled "Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue." A rabbi named Edwin Friedman wrote it.

And this rabbi noticed that some of the problems that occur in a family also occur in a church or a synagogue since these organizations tend to be like extended families.

To put it simply, family process theory states that families most often have problems not because one person is troubled but because the whole family system is out of whack.

When a family is not balanced sometimes the emotional strain is seen in one person. But, everyone needs help.

Now the traditional way to treat that problem is to treat the family member who is having problems with psychological or psychiatric care.

But, family process therapists do just the opposite. They identify the family member who is strongest and coach them in more effective ways of dealing with the needs of the family.

Now the analysis that these therapists do is very complex. Not only are we affected by relationships with our immediate family we are also affected by our relationships with the extended family and our friends as well.

If it's hard to analyze a family's relationship pattern, you can only imagine how impossible it would be to analyze a relationship pattern in even a small church.

But, thankfully, according to Friedman, we don't have to completely analyze and understand everything. Positive change can come about in a church or synagogue (or any organization) if the leaders can respond to difficult situations in a less anxious way.

To put it another way if we are simply patient, things can change for the better.

If we who lead in the church can just meet significant challenges with faith and hope, this enables the whole group to be more effective and faithful.

You've heard the saying, "One rotten apple can spoil the barrel." This technique suggests the opposite is true. "A leader who is patient and less anxious about the future can help us all become more patient and hopeful."

LIGHT IN OUR DARKNESS

I think James is telling us something similar in our passage for today. Be patient. Don't grumble. Set your minds and hearts on the coming of the Lord.

James was right. The prophets are good examples of how God's patience works.

The message of the prophets eventually changed the lives of God's people. Their patience in waiting for God's salvation was vindicated by the birth of a Savior.

Jesus was the one. Jesus told the disciples of John. Tell John what's happening. "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."

In other words, Jesus said, "I am the one."

The long awaited light eventually did shine in the darkness. The Messiah did come.

There's an effective commercial that talks about the power of the human eye. According to this ad the human eye can see the light of one candle over a distance of six hundred yards, six football fields!

God has made us to see the light.

The light might be distant. But, still we see. We patiently wait because we have been given great vision.

And so that first coming provides the pattern as we await the second coming.

We wait with great longing but also with great expectation.

We wait with patience...not always knowing what the future holds but always knowing who holds the future.

We see the light shining in the darkness even from a great distance.

Amen.