

Jon Hauerwas – December 11, 2016 – When Our Patience Is Tested
Isaiah 35:1-4c and 5-10 and James 5:7-10

Last week, we spoke about the concept of glory in scripture, particularly given the repetition of that word in each of our lessons. We said that if a word appears over and over again in our sacred texts, then it is of heightened importance and thus, we are wise to pay attention. Next, and in preparation for our worship together this morning, I noticed the repetition of another word. This time – patience.

Just consider again these first two verses from our second scripture this morning. James writes, “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. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts for the coming of the Lord is near.”

I imagine that if it was easy for us to live virtuous lives, then we would have no need for this kind of instruction. In other words, if embodying the virtues came naturally and instinctually to us, as effortlessly as breathing in and breathing out, then these concepts would bear no repeating. We would simply act virtuously all of the time. And yet, we all know that this is not the case, for we all fall short of the glory of God. Thus, we receive these reminders, these instructions, these calls to live better, more healthy lives.

I invite you to think for a moment about the most patient people that you know. These individuals are typically calm and steady. They are the ones who are slow to anger, slow to criticize or judge, and they are abounding in steadfast love. Do you enjoy spending time with those who embody these characteristics? I imagine that you probably do.

Friends, this is no accident. Because people like this have spent a lifetime cultivating the virtue of patience. They do this for their own personal well-being, for the well-being of their families, and for the benefit of the greater community. Those who cultivate the virtue of patience do so in order that relationships might be strengthened and so that others might be valued and appreciated for the inherent gifts that they provide. Patient people remind us that we need not be so hard on ourselves and that we need not be so critical of others.

This is reminiscent of the debate between Jesus and the Pharisees about those foods which are clean and unclean to eat. Jesus said, “It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles it...” for “what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.”

Later, James, perhaps even with this instruction in mind, chides his listeners, saying “Do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged.”

We all know what it’s like for our patience to be tested. I often wonder, for example, why my six-year-old cannot seem to remember that we want him to use an inside voice when his baby brother is sleeping. I grow impatient in long lines and heavy traffic. And I am perpetually frustrated by technology, which has forever served as my arch nemesis in this world. My goal, then, in each of these occasions, is not to act out from a place of frustration, but to take a deep breath and to try to maintain a calm, non-anxious presence.

I also don’t want you to leave today with the wrong impression. After all, these scriptures say nothing about remaining patient in the face of injustice, or poverty, or any number of abuses of power. The point of all of this is not simply to grin and bear it. No. We’re talking about a certain kind of patience. The patience that is required when we don’t get our way. Or when we hoped that progress toward a stated goal would be more swift than it always seems to be. This kind of patience is pleased with incremental changes which are slow, and steady, and sustainable. Because that is what it means to engage with the complexities of the Kingdom of

God in this world. Despite our best efforts, rarely is our world transformed immediately.

And so, we wait. We wait like a farmer who has diligently plowed the field, and sowed the seeds, and watched with anticipation as the sun rises and sets and rains nourish the earth. The farmer does everything that he can, and then he must wait and see what kind of yield will be provided this year.

In this season of Advent, we too are waiting. We are intentional and mindful that we are doing everything that we can to prepare for the birth of Christ. And when the time of our active doing has ended, we are left to wait. To watch and to wait for that very precious yield. The birth of the Savior. The one who reminds us that we are finally incapable of meeting life's challenges on our own.

May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.