

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Third Sunday of Advent/December 11, 2016

The Reverend E. Clifford Cutler

The Letter of James in the passage for today mentions patience four times. I think the author wants us to pay attention to being patient. "Do not grumble against one another." Be patient. Now I don't know whether James knew anything about road rage, when a horse and cart might cut off a chariot. But in the 1980s the term began to be used to describe flaring tempers and aggressive driving on the highways. This month Joe McKnight who had played for the New York Jets football team was shot to death in an incident of road rage. At a time when society is so reactive; when we live with a kind of perpetual anxiety; when we are divided and isolated and fearful of others; we need to learn patience.

When our way is blocked not just on the highway but in life we need to practice patience. When we just can't seem to get the job we want; when we just can't seem to make another understand; when we just can't seem to get to where we want to go; it is a time for patience.

When our way forward is blocked we need patience. People who explore caves for recreation sometimes find themselves in what is called a squeeze, a tight place where they cannot move either forward or back. Immobilized in the dark, it doesn't help to become frantic and push one way or the other. Instead, the better course is to be patient. Study the place. Be curious. Being in a squeeze imparts a certain sense of urgency when what is really needed is to be patient.

In the Book of Acts, Paul and Timothy are blocked from going to Asia where they wanted, where they really felt called, to tell people of Jesus. They attempted to go into Bithynia, "but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them." Their desires were frustrated, they needed patience. Finally, they journeyed

down to Troas where in a dream Paul is instructed to offer help to the people of Macedonia. Sometimes our own will that we're so sure of is blocked so that God's will, that we're not sure of at all, may be done. When we pray, "Stir up your power," as we did in the collect this morning, we are invoking the invading power of God's love that may not allow us to go where we think we need to be. If we ask God to "stir up your power" we best be ready to be patient. God may interfere with our own will in order to open up another path that leads us in a curious direction.

Patience is needed in adversity. When in our struggle we lack patience we get angry. We murmur against God, we grumble about our neighbor. Under pressure we are often quick to judge. Instead, the Letter of James advises, be patient with ourselves and with God. It may be that in the crucible of hardship we will be made strong. We need to be patient with this process. The Psalms often cry out, "How long, O Lord," and the answer is always, "Just a little while longer." It takes time to develop character. Remember how Paul said, "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint..." (Rom. 5: 3-5).

Paul goes on to say that hope requires patience. Hope is for a transformation that we cannot quite see. We have to wait for it with patience (Rom. 8: 25). Isaiah offers a vision of hope – "the desert shall blossom... the eyes of the blind shall be opened..." When John the Baptist asks if Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus like Isaiah gives him a vision of hope – "the blind receive their sight..." Transformation is happening. What is required is patience.

Patience is one of the marks of Jesus' holiness. Jesus recognizes that time is needed for our transformation. Seldom does growth happen immediately. The gospels including the Acts of the Apostles are the story of the disciples' transformation. We all know how slow they are to understand. They get caught up in the pettiness of who would sit at Jesus' right hand or left in his kingdom. They want to call down fire on those who would stand in their way. They need to be shown the Father. At this, Jesus reproaches Philip, "Have I been with you all this time, and you still do not know me?" Jesus knows that transformation takes time, and Jesus will bear it with patience. He gives us the space to grow, and continually turn to God.

Transformation takes time. The harvest can seem long in coming. The farmer cannot will the precious crop from the hard scrabble land of Palestine. He must wait through the autumn and spring rains. In the same way the Lord's coming may seem slow, but as someone said, "It is always right on time." The prophets who announce the transformation that will take place are also an example of patience. The prophet Habakkuk declares "there is still a vision for the appointed time." Eugene Peterson paraphrases, "If it seems slow in coming, wait. It's on its way. It will come right on time." Jesus was delayed in getting to Jairus' daughter who in the mean time had apparently died. Nevertheless, he took her by the hand and said, "Little girl, arise," and she got up. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is four days late getting to Lazarus. Martha and Mary both say, "Jesus, if you had been here, our brother would not have died." But Jesus comes on time to announce, "I am the resurrection and the life." And Lazarus is brought back to life. We need to be patient with God's timing. The transformation that God brings about and that the prophets announce comes in God's time, not our own, and we wait for it with patience.

And when the final transformation is announced, of a new heaven and a new earth, we must wait for that with patience. Patience is not passiveness. We wait yearning for the justice of that new age. We ache for its compassion. We act in the present with that future goal in mind. It is what we aim for. We, as they say, keep our eyes on the prize of justice and mercy. It will come at the appointed time, right on time. Meanwhile we act in the present world by the values of the new earth, the mended creation, the age to come.

So this is a season of patience. It comes at an anxious and fearful moment. We want road rage to transform to Isaiah's highway that "shall be called the Holy Way." But this can only happen through patience. When in life our way is blocked, the going slow, and adversity hard, we are called to respond with an active patience. We will endure. God has a future for each one of us. Though the wait be long, God's promise will come right on time. Don't give up. Patience waits for that transformation we cannot yet see – peace on earth. We can only hope for it. And we do so with patience.

Amen.