

Sermon 1/19

Resolving to be more patient was a common theme in the New Year's resolutions that were submitted. That was not so surprising to me, as we don't exactly live in a world that promotes patience. After a professional athlete's first game is a disaster, we already have people on TV the next day telling us how it was a mistake to draft him, his career will be a flop. Before candidates have even declared for an election, we also have people telling us exactly how the election will turn out. Our society seems obsessed with instant reaction and analysis, just as we seem overly obsessed with instant gratification at the expense of waiting patiently to achieve financial goals, and just as we seem to grow easily frustrated when what we are trying to learn can't be instantly googled on our phone. So, I'm not surprised that resolving to be more patient was a common response.

I'm also not surprised because patience is something I struggle with myself. At least, it is something I struggle with when I'm driving. As Jess can tell you, I get really angry when someone is driving like 40 in a 55. I'm talking about a summer's day here. Usually in the winter I'm the one that everyone is getting angry at because I'm going so slow. What really makes me angry though are those times I am stuck going absolutely nowhere on an interstate because a lane is closed, or something along those lines. You know, those time you are going about 2 mph. My impatience in those situations gets me really angry, something in me just hates the idea that if I was walking to Buffalo right now I'd be making better time. However, the thing is impatience and anger are useless at best, actually detrimental to me making it there quicker at worst. Because in anger and impatience sometimes I miss a turn or exit while driving, or I change lanes out of impatience and can't get back over when I need to, and the result is that the trip of course becomes even longer.

There are times when the proverb “whoever is patient has great understanding, but one who is quick-tempered displays folly” certainly applies to me. Anger indeed clouds our judgement, leads us to do foolish things, or in the fog of anger we miss things we should be paying attention to, like highway exits. As the ancient Christian, Gregory the Great, observes; anger and impatience does more though than throw us into confusion by casting off wisdom, it also leads us to lose the mildness and gentleness that is part of the image of God which we bear. One effect of this is taught to us in Proverbs 15:18, which reads “a hot-tempered person stirs up conflict, but the one who is patient calms a quarrel.”

When we lose our patience, mildness and gentleness, and instead become angry with one another, it so often leads to long-standing conflict. A few words said out of impatience and anger can cause years of strife between people. And so often, as our reading from Ecclesiastes puts it, when we give in to anger it just ends up residing right back in our own laps and we look like fools. When we give in to anger, so often we continue to think and think and think about all the ways our anger is justified. It stews within us, and we end up looking foolish because the consequences really do fall mostly into our own lap as we make ourselves more miserable, not the person we are angry at.

Now I am not preaching today to make you feel bad about every angry thought and feeling you have had. As the early Christian Ambrose observes, anger is a natural part of being human, but what Scripture calls us to do is discipline our own anger with our reason, and I would add with the help of the Holy Spirit as well. This is what Proverbs is getting at when we read, “better a patient person than a warrior, one with self-control than one who takes a city.” This passage not only gets at the idea that seeking to be patient and to exercise self-control is a

battle that all of us face, but it also indicates that when we win that battle (and are indeed patient) we will win a major victory.

This is true for many reasons, but one reason that self-control and patience can lead to great victory is that they are fundamental to teaching and to learning. In fact, many scholars see it as no coincidence that Paul's statements in Galatians to not become weary in doing good, and to wait patiently for the harvest to come from what was sown, come right after a discussion of students and teachers. After all, for real learning to happen, learning that goes beyond what you can read on Wikipedia, learning that really molds and shapes someone's understanding and is focused on someone becoming a better thinker, writer, person, scientist whatever it might be, for that to happen it requires patient investment in the process on both the part of the student and the teacher.

And as our other reading from Paul (from his First Letter to the Corinthians) points out, the triumph of patience and self-control is also important because it not only allows us to learn, but also to love. For Paul famously writes that "love is patient." Indeed, to be in any loving relationship requires patience. For instance, Jess is patiently bearing with me right now as I learn to put my boots in the closet rather than right by the door where people can trip over them. See, I touched on both learning and loving relationships in the same example! But in all seriousness, in any loving relationship, be it between husband and wife, parent and young child, adult child and aging parent, or friends supporting one another in the midst of one another's quirks, it is unimaginable that such relationships could exist without patience.

Patience is also important because as our reading from Ecclesiastes puts it, so often "the end of a matter is better than its beginning." In other words, what starts out seeming like it might be inconsequential,

unremarkable or a downright failure can become something very different at the end of the matter.

Take for instance one Albert Einstein, whose very name is now synonymous with genius. There is some evidence that Einstein did not even start talking until late in his childhood. After graduating from college, he could not find a job in the field of physics and mathematics, and instead he took a job as a patent clerk. Even after deducing his groundbreaking equation $E=mc^2$ he could not find a position at a college teaching physics. Heck, he was even rejected from jobs he applied to as a high school math teacher. During this same time his doctoral dissertation was rejected by the University of Bern. This was a tough time for Einstein, a time when he kept experiencing rejection and it seemed like others thought very little of his abilities. Of course, the end was indeed better than the beginning for Einstein, as he came to be recognized as one of the greatest minds in human history, a figure who revolutionized our thinking about gravity, time and space. However, early in his life he was judged to be someone who did not amount to much, not worthy of any position teaching physics and math. Only the patient passage of time showed him to be something very different.

Or take the case of Abraham Lincoln and Edwin Stanton, who were engaged in a very bitter fight for the Republican nomination in 1860. It was so bitter that Stanton referred to Lincoln as a “low and cunning clown” and the “original gorilla.” Lincoln of course beat out Stanton, and then was elected as our nation’s 16th President. In a remarkable display of reconciliation, Lincoln offered Stanton the job of Secretary of War. The two became friends and helped win the Civil War together. Upon Lincoln’s death, Stanton’s comments about Lincoln had changed quite a lot in 5 years, as he remarked that “there lies the greatest ruler of men the world has ever seen.” A story of enemies ended as a story of friends; a story of animosity ended in a story of admiration.

The fact that enemies can become friends, that sinners can become saints, that the lost can be found, and that the hopeless can find hope is why Paul encourages us to remain patient and to “not grow weary in

doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.” He uses the metaphor of a farmer waiting for the crop planted to be ready to harvest, a process that takes time, that requires patience, to remind us that when we do what is right as God gives us to see the right we may not see what good we are accomplishing right away, but we can be confident that when we follow God and labor in his field that the harvest will come. Maybe it will take a long time to see the impact you made in that young life you taught in Sunday school, or maybe it will take a while to see how your act of restraint, kindness, forgiveness or reconciliation changed the course of a relationship, or how your act of charity changed the trajectory of someone’s life, or how your witness to Jesus opened a door for the Holy Spirit’s work. Maybe the harvest will not be seen by us, because the person we impacted has moved away for instance, or maybe it will come after our own time on earth is over, but it will come. For we know that if we take every opportunity that God presents us with to sow seeds of righteous, if we continue to do so throughout our lives, that there will be a harvest with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes it is hard to believe this, as the cruelty, dishonesty, tragedy and callousness of the world seem to stifle the harvest we hope to see. However, we can be confident and patient knowing that the harvest will come, because we know that the end of our labor will indeed be better than the beginning, for it is not we alone who labor. Almighty God labors alongside of us to work all things for good, to reconcile all things back to himself, and to cause a harvest to grow through his grace from the seeds that we plant. If we are patient and persistent in following God, we will indeed see that the end will be better than the beginning, if not in this world than in the world to come, when through the love of our Savior whose return we wait for patiently all will be made new and every wrong made right. May that love of our Savior who is ever patient and kind with us, even when we sin, further inspire patience in us.

Let us resolve to be patient, knowing that patience contains the negative effects of anger, that patience is fundamental to learning and

loving relationships, and knowing that when we patiently follow God and sow seeds of righteousness, we will see a harvest in due time. And the good thing about resolving to be more patient is that there are ample opportunities to hone the skill of patience. As the great preacher John Chrysostom observed in the time of the Byzantine Empire, athletes in his day went out of their way to fill heavy bags with sand to carry, so they could train themselves for their contests. However, we need not go out of our way like them to create burdens to train ourselves in patience, rather life presents plenty of times for us to learn patience in the face of the burdens of waiting, of anger or of disappointed hopes. May we never grow weary of doing good even in the face of burdens like these, knowing that with God's help and our patient endurance the end will still be better than the beginning and the harvest will still come. And knowing this to be true, let us turn to the Lord of the Harvest in a word of prayer. Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we pray that you would help us be more patient people. Help us to check our anger and help us to labor in diligence and hope, knowing that through your power and grace the seeds we plant in righteousness will produce a harvest beyond what we can imagine or think. We thank you Lord that you always bear with us, with a love that is patient and kind, even when we sin and turn our back on you and on others. And we pray for all this in the name of him whose love causes hope to sprout within us, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen.