

Date: September 28, 2003

SUNDAY: Ordinary 26

SERMON: Patience! Patience!

Text(s): James 4:13-17; 5:7-11

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The pastor at the church that Carol and I attended while I was in seminary used to say that there were two kinds of people in the world—those who are ten minutes early and those who are ten minutes late— and they’re always married to each other. His analysis has certainly proved true in our case. What he didn’t say, but could have, is a corollary to that analysis: that there are two kinds of people, in the world, patient and impatient, and they’re always married to each other as well. In fact, the person who’s always early is usually also the one who is impatient, and the one who is always late is almost always the more patient of the two. Since you don’t know Carol and me all that well yet, I’ll leave it to your imagination to decide which of us is which. All I’ll say is that if Carol suggests that I’m not the most patient person in the world, don’t believe a word of it.

We know how this contrast between patience and impatience plays out in our families, in our relationships with colleagues or employees, and in other aspects of our everyday life. We know even, or at least suspect on the strength of the evidence, that there is probably a correlation between patience and health. Type A personalities, which is the name we give to impatient people, appear to have a greater risk of heart attacks than people who are more patient.

But the author of the Epistle of James puts a larger frame around this business of patience. He uses it to encompass not only the aspects of personal temperament and daily life; he also paints the bigger picture and uses this notion of patience to describe how we as the Christian community are to live in this world. The truly surprising thing is that he frames this matter of patience and impatience in economic terms.

He begins by identifying the consequences of living impatiently. *“Come, now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there doing business and making money.’ Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. . . Instead, you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.’ As it is, you boast in your arrogance;*

all such boasting is evil.”

Arrogance about the future, which is another word for impatience, is normal behavior, at least for the developed nations of the world. That sort of arrogant future-grabbing is so deeply rooted in our culture that we aren’t even aware of it most of the time. A few years ago, a member of my congregation in Paris, lost his job as a senior executive in a large, healthy, and profitable corporation, after working for that company for more than thirty years. He didn’t lose it because of a downturn in the business cycle or because the company’s competitors gained marketshare, or any other business-related reason. Rather, the company got a new CEO, who was impatient, and whose arrogance and greed were of world-class proportions. He deliberately sabotaged his own company by making decisions that drove down the stock price from about \$65 a share, where it had been steady for several years, to about \$30 a share, so that the company would become a target for a takeover. Sure enough, it did, and as part of the takeover deal, he cashed in his stock options, which of course had been locked in at the higher value, and took early retirement, making himself the tidy sum of \$159 million in the process. That hundreds of other employees lost their jobs in the process, or that the company ceased to be profitable mattered not a hair to him. He had grabbed what he considered his fair share of the future. And the sad thing is, that in the wake of similar scandals involving greedy CEO’s and corporate gluttony that have hit the headlines since, that sort of behavior has come to seem like business as usual instead of the arrogant, greedy, impatient behavior that it is.

I suspect that there is a much closer connection than we might like to think between that sort of impatience and the impatience of the terrorists who have attacked us, and are still attacking us. Terrorism is also a kind of future-grabbing impatience, isn’t it? Detonating a car bomb in front of a crowded nightclub or on a crowded bus is an impatient act, often born out of rage and despair or an ideological agenda that will not wait. It is not an act of patient hope that a better future can be achieved through negotiation or the political process.

While none of us here is one of those future-grabbing corporate pirates or a bomb-throwing terrorist, we cannot escape living in a

world or in a culture which is so pervaded by impatience. It's in the very air that we breathe. A sign of that impatience is the conspicuous consumption that is part of the very foundation on which all of our lives are built and on which our whole economy rests. Jeremy Rifkin discusses this phenomena in his book, *The End of Work* (New York: G.P. Putnam & Sons, 1995, p. 19), "Today the Average American is consuming twice as much as he or she did at the end of World War II. The metamorphosis of consumption from vice to virtue is one of the most important yet least examined phenomena of the twenty-first century." One of the architects of that metamorphosis was Charles Kettering, an executive of General Motors, and inventor of the electrical starter for automobile engines. Kettering stated in 1929, "The key to economic prosperity, is the organized creation of dissatisfaction." (See Rifkin's book noted above.) Sounds like a definition of impatience to me. The Ad Hoc Committee on Environmental Stewardship (www.environment.emory.edu) based at Emory University reports that while Americans constitute 5% of the world's population, we consume 43% of the world's gasoline and 26% of the world's total energy. If we cannot connect the dots between that one fact and the impatience of terrorists who hate us because of it, then I think we've got a serious case of "ostrich-itis."

I suspect that most of us here are only too well-aware of those connections and are deeply concerned about them. If we weren't, we probably wouldn't even be here. Yet even if we are willing to confess that we are caught up in such systemic impatience, that we know we consume far more than our fair share of the earth's resources, it's knowing how to deal with the impatience that is all around us and inside of us that's the problem. We've all got enough guilt. Another rant decrying the chasm between the haves and the have-nots isn't what we need. What we need are some ways to bridge that chasm, or at least some starting points.

Fortunately, James doesn't leave us to drown in guilt over our participation in the impatient grabbing of the future which characterizes so much of our world. After a severe warning to the rich who impatiently grab the future from the poor, he doesn't simply condemn the rich and consign them to hell; he

also offers both the rich and the poor a way to begin to dig their way out of the dilemma .

"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. . . As an example of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord."

Patience, says James, is the cure for economic injustice, which is the result of impatient grabbing by the rich. It's also the cure for the impatience of the poor who may be tempted to simply foment revolution and gain their fair share by violence.

The key to understanding his argument is in his affirmation that the future is something that is determined by God. It is "the coming of the Lord," for which the Christian community awaits. For the people of God, the future is not a source of uncertainty, dread, and fear as it is for most people. The poet Robert Burns described the way most people conceive of the future:

This is not a counsel to be passive in the face of evil or injustice, however. Jesus' urgent warnings in our Gospel lesson about it being preferable to cut off our own hands or gouge out our own eyes rather than be cavalier about our complicity in evil should alert us to the fact that our actions really do count and that there really is a day of reckoning and accountability coming. Passivity is no more an option than arrogant greed or violent idealism. Our patient waiting for this "coming of the Lord," as James refers to it, is nothing at all like the passive waiting we do while standing in line at the checkout counter at the supermarket. We can't hurry up the people ahead of us, so we either just fret and get ourselves worked up over nothing or we distract ourselves by reading the tabloid magazines that are always located there. No, the patient waiting we do in hope of God's future is like the active waiting of a farmer for the harvest.

I grew up among farms and worked on farms as a kid, and I've watched how farmers wait for the harvest. In the spring, after the seed has been planted in the ground, the farmer doesn't rush out of the house every morning and fret anxiously to see if the seed is sprouting yet. He goes on about his other work, cleaning the barns, repairing the chicken coop, and all the other work a farm demands. And when the seed does sprout, and the corn gets several inches high, the farmer doesn't rush out to the field and pick a few stalks to see if it's still growing. Nor does he run his cornpicker through the field at the first sign of the ears of corn. Instead, he waits patiently. He sees the first sprouting as the sign of things to come. He keeps an eye on the progress of the crop, but he doesn't camp out in the field watching the corn grow. He goes on about his work as usual, doing what's necessary to enable the corn to grow to its full potential. He irrigates if necessary, he fertilizes when appropriate. But mostly he trusts that the corn will ripen in its time— a time that he does not determine and which he cannot hasten. Meanwhile, there's work to be done. He is patient. He has hope that the harvest will be a good one. He's seen the signs and he knows what they point toward. And he lives and makes his plans in view of his trust in the harvest to come.

Such patient waiting in hope is the very essence of trust, the hopeful confidence that God

Guessing and fearing is typical of a world where the future is largely conceived in apocalyptic categories of doom and gloom— the slow burn of global warming, the quicker frying as the ozone layer disappears, the collapse of the world's economic systems, the slow and steady poisoning of the environment with the toxic wastes of our own production processes— these are the visions of the future that drive people to over-consumption or to terrorism. Both reactions are the products of despair and hopelessness. Since this is the future, the impatient person says, I've got to get it all now or there will be nothing left for me. Or, I've got to redress every injustice now or it will be too late, and justice will never come.

The Christian community looks forward to a different vision of the future, however, a future which God has already revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus. We base our hope, not on the things we can grab, but on our trust in God's redeeming purpose for the creation. This hope isn't just wishful thinking; it's based on our faith that God really did raise Jesus from the dead, and if that faith is true, then death itself, in all its manifestations, is doomed to die. All that works for death in this world will be transformed to work for life. All that is in decay is marked for renovation. We are a people who are "saved in hope" as St. Paul puts it, and "if we hope for what we cannot yet see, we wait for it with patience." (Rom. 8:25)

will do what God has promised. Faith that God will bring to full fruition what has been revealed to us in the first-fruits– the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. In that first sprouting is the sign of the full harvest to come. But only faith as trust can foresee that harvest and wait for it with patience and hope. And only faith can enable us to attend to the work that needs to be done in the meantime.

That trust in God's future in God's time is the context for all our action as Christians. We take as our example, James says, the prophets whose vocation was to bear witness to that future and call people around them to live in light of it. And that's our vocation as the people of God as well– to be prophets. We speak up and advocate for the poor, we speak truth to power, we lobby for housing for the homeless, we volunteer at soup kitchens, we organize to oppose casino gambling, we examine our lifestyle to avoid getting trapped in the vicious cycle of conspicuous consumption, we decry the pollution of our environment and call for responsible use of natural resources, not because we are impatient, not because we think we are responsible for creating the future, but rather to give hope to those who are in danger of falling into despair. We work while we wait precisely because we have already glimpsed the future that God is bringing and will bring, and so we become signs of hope for others who are afraid the future will never come.

That's our calling as a community of the people of God– to give evidence of our faith in God's future by our patient attendance on the work that needs doing in the meantime. If the world can look at us and see, not a collection of individuals who associate with each other only as long as it suits our individual goals, nor a group of ideologically-driven idealists, but a people who are bound together by our love for Jesus Christ and our love for one another, committed to the common good, bearing witness to a future we have glimpsed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and living in light of that future, then the world may find a way out of its nihilism and greedy future-grabbing. If the world sees us working for all these things in love and unity, then we will become the signs of hope for the world. We'll be the first sproutings that hold the promise of the full harvest to come.