

The Virtue We Share with God
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Matt 5:43-45 NRSV

43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

A few weeks ago I was having coffee with my friend and pastor colleague, Peter. Whenever we meet, he asks me how our transition work is going. That’s when I get to say the same thing to him that I have to say to you... namely, that it is going well and there is progress but it is going very, very slowly. I give a brief explanation about why this is the case; two congregations from different denominations, the clawback clause with our old presbytery, and of course Covid. And whenever I share this story, I of course internally ask myself if I could have, should have done my work as your Transition Pastor differently. I wonder if I’ve done something wrong, even if I’ve sinned in some way. Because I tend to work from the assumption that:

If I was more _____ this wouldn’t be so hard or take so long.

Do you ever experience this, or is it just me? I think our culture builds this belief in us. Our culture values efficiency above everything else. If you aren’t efficient, there must be something wrong with you. If you ain’t efficient you must be deficient!

So as I was telling Peter about our long, slow work he mentioned that he’s been reading this book called *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* by Alan Kreider.

<book cover image>

Peter explained that the book was about how patience was the key to the success for the early church. I thought: If that is true, then God must have big plans for WVPC because if there’s one thing we have had to have over the last several years, it is patience!

So I’ve started reading the book, and here’s what I’ve learned so far:

As Christians were dispersed through the Roman empire, the threat of persecution was very great. As a result, Christians met and worshipped together in secret. Outsiders weren’t allowed and believers would not talk publicly about their faith. During the first three centuries, there was almost no evangelism and no public worship.

And yet, during this same time Christianity went from a tiny fringe movement in Palestine to being established as the state religion under Emperor Constantine. If Christianity was never

publicly practiced or explained, how could this happen?

Kreider gives four reasons, which we will look at over the next five weeks. The first reason is that **Christians placed a high value on the virtue of patience**. Kreider writes:

Christian writers called patience the “highest virtue,” “the greatest of all virtues,” the virtue that was “peculiarly Christian.” The Christians believed that God is patient and that Jesus visibly embodied patience. And they concluded that they, trusting in God, should be patient—not controlling events, not anxious or in a hurry, and never using force to achieve their ends.

Kreider, Alan. *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* (p. 2). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

We all know the saying, “Patience is a virtue.” But the philosophers of the day did not believe that. The Roman world was vertical and top down. Freedom was reserved for people at the top. Patience was what people at the bottom had to have in order to endure. Yet Christians understood patience to be “the virtue we share with God.”

God, after all, ... “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” (Matt 5:45)

And as the apostle Peter says:

The Lord isn’t really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent. (2 Peter 3:9 NLT)

Both Paul and Peter emphasize the important of patience don’t they? Many of us have memorized Paul’s description of love in 1 Cor 13, but even if you haven’t memorized all of it you recall how it starts: **“Love is PATIENT, love is kind...”**

When we learn how to embody patience, we show the world that we are children of our heavenly parent.

I have to be honest. I have never thought of embodied patience as a priority. If I were to make a list of thing Christians need to do share their faith and to be salt and light in the world, practicing patience would probably be pretty far down the list. But the more I read about how the early church emphasized it and how the Roman culture stood up and took notice of it, the more how found myself saying, “How have we missed this!?”

Let’s face it, impatience is our way of life. Covid didn’t cause this, it just revealed it. Think of all the reports and videos over the last few months show showing grown people throwing tantrums in grocery stores or throwing punches on airplanes. We are tired of hearing that we can’t get timely service at the post office or the restaurant because 1/3 of the staff is out. We are fed up with masks, fed up with changing CDC guidelines, fed up with restrictions and fed up with each other. AND we’re fed up with hearing that the stuff we ordered months ago is still

stuck on a boat, in a shipping container, in the middle of the ocean.

When Christians talk about patience, we talk about as something we need God to give us... We say *Lord give me patience!* But then immediately say, *Nevermind Lord I know what will happen if I pray for patience... you'll just put more people in my life that make me crazy!*

If we can't embody "the virtue with share with God" over things that merely *inconvenience* us, how could we ever hope to do so when it is a matter of *life and death*?

Cyprian was the bishop in Carthage, North Africa in the year 250.

<image of Cyprian>

For Cyprian and the church, things couldn't be much worse. There was internal church conflict and hostility from imperial authorities. Worse, an epidemic had spread across the region leaving death and fear in its wake. Some Christians were losing hope. Some wanted revenge against their neighbors who discriminated against them and even violently attacked them.

Amid it all, Cyprian, as bishop, wanted to keep the Christians true to their tradition. This, at its heart, meant embodying the Christian good news, bearing it in their bodies and actions, living the message visibly and faithfully so that outsiders would see what the Christians were about and, ideally, would be attracted to join them. So in 256 Cyprian wrote a treatise of encouragement for his people. "Beloved brethren," he wrote, "[we] are philosophers not in words but in deeds; we exhibit our wisdom not by our dress, but by truth; we know virtues by their practice rather than through boasting of them; we do not speak great things but we live them."

Kreider, Alan. *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* (pp. 13-14). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

We do not speak great things but we live them.

Could we Christians do that again? Could we, in the 21st Century, rediscover how to live greatly as Christians in the first century did?

Yes, the cultural context we live in is very different. But living a radically patient life would be as counter-cultural today as it was then.

In the few weeks we will hear more about how the early church let their acts of forbearance proclaim the truth about Jesus Christ in ways no amount of talk ever could. For now, I want to ask you to simply *pay attention*:

**Notice when you are impatient.
Choose a different response, if you can.**

This week: Pay attention to your impatience, and to how you respond. Consciously choose a different response, just once. If someone cuts in line at the supermarket, let them. Say nothing.

When being provoked into an argument say, "I don't see it that way, but I recognize that you do." And if you can go a step further you could even say, "You and our relationship are more important to me than whatever this disagreement is about."

At things stand right now, we may be just as impatient as our non-Christian neighbors. We may not look any different from the world around us. At least not yet. But we have God's Word to form us. We have God's Spirit to empower us. We have God's Son to show us the way.

Let us pray.