

The Patient Church
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Texts:

Isaiah 2:2-4 (see also Micah 4:1-4)

2 In days to come
the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.
3 Many peoples shall come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
4 He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

Gal 3:26-28 NRSV

26 for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. 27 As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Over the past few weeks we've been learning about how the early church grew by leaps and bounds because the Greco-Roman world around them was challenged and inspired by the way Christians embodied equality, patience and forbearance – not only with one another but with their pagan neighbors. Christians didn't talk openly about their faith, but they lived it in a way that caused their neighbors to take notice.

The scripture text from Isaiah 2 was a key text for the early church. It paints a vivid picture of the good life that the Lord wants for humanity. It's a positive prophetic vision that is included in Isaiah's writing and is repeated almost word-for-word by Isaiah's contemporary Micah (see Micah 4). It anticipates a day when people the world over will say to each other, "Let's go up to the house of the Lord and learn how to live reconciled, flourishing lives with one another." It reminds us that there the Lord is a good and righteous Judge who will get down into the mess

of our lives and help us sort things out between us. It confirms our hope-against-hope that a life without beyond constant conflict, violence, and all-out war.

Like ancient Israel, Christians memorized this text by heart and made it their own. This became their vision, and they understood that their Lord, Jesus Christ, had come to earth to bring it about. For the early church, this vision might have felt a lot like MLK Jr's "I Have A Dream" speech feels to us now.

Because this was their vision of a better future – not just for themselves but for the whole world – Christians practiced what one early Christian apologist called "Strange patience." Around the year 150, a Christian named Justin wrote an Apology directed toward Emperor Antoninus Pius to explain why Christians are growing in number. According to Justin, patience is central to life of his community in Rome:

Justin uses various sayings of Jesus to illustrate the significance of patience for members of his community: turning the other cheek when someone hits them in the face; giving their tunics to someone who takes their cloak; avoiding the incendiary sin of anger; and, if they are compelled to go one mile, going two miles. When people see Christians behaving like this, Justin comments, people are intrigued; they "wonder" at the God whom the Christians say motivates their behavior. So it is important for Christians not to quarrel like other people, and it is essential that they live their "good works" visibly in the sight of others. Then, when Christians live with integrity and visibility, "by our patience [*hypomonēs*] and meekness [*Christians will*] draw all men from shame and evil desires."¹¹ According to Justin, patience attracts people. (Kreider, 16)

As an example how this patience was expressed, Justin talks about the Christians' business practices. He says to the emperor, "Many who were once on your side . . . have turned from the ways of violence and tyranny, overcome by observing the consistent lives of their [Christian] neighbors, or noting the strange patience [*hypomonen xenon*] of their injured acquaintances, or experiencing the way they did business with them." (Kreider 16)

Justin doesn't describe what the Christians did that looked like "strange patience" to their neighbors, but we can guess. Perhaps they were slower than others to evict renters whose payments had fallen in arrears. Unlike the standard practices of the day, perhaps they were reluctant to force destitute people to repay them for food or clothing? It is likely that that they lent money without interest and even been willing to forgive debts altogether (Kreider 16). They likely told the truth about what they were selling instead of making exaggerated claims – in essence letting their yes be yes and their no be no, because Jesus forbade to make lie or take empty oaths. For Clement of Alexandria, patience meant that when a Christian merchant gave a quote for something he was selling, he quoted only one price and spoke plainly and honestly (Kreider 101).

And since they were closely following Jesus' teachings, they certainly would not have dragging one another into court. Remember how incensed Paul got when he found out Corinthian Christians were doing that?

I need be honest here and say that this is NOT the reputation Christian business people have today. As churchie nerd kid, I distinctly remember by dad telling me that if a sales rep ever came into his office with a business card that had a fish on it, he would throw the card away and never do business with that person. “If I see that Jesus fish, I know they are going to do half and charge double.” The early church understood that one bad example would harm the witness of the whole community. That’s why they invested so much time and care in training people up in the ways of Jesus before baptizing them. Church leaders wanted to make sure that a person didn’t just admire the way Christians lived, but could live it themselves.

The early church set itself apart in two other ways I want to note this morning. The first is in their treatment of those the culture around considered to be of lesser or no value. Women, from the outset, played a prominent role in the church in spite of the patriarchal structures of the culture around it. The widows especially were known – and notorious! – for making regular visits to the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned. Some church leaders (men) were annoyed that the widows not only brought food, comfort and company but also shared faith and theology.

In keeping with the model of Jesus, the church didn’t keep children on the margins until they came of age but instead included them in the life of the community and raised them in the faith from the very beginning. And if this wasn’t remarkable enough, no woman in the church would ever be forced to leave her baby on the side of hill to die of exposure because the baby had an abnormality. Christians protected the weak. This commitment was pushed to the limit during times of plague or epidemic. When disease spread through a city, anyone who had the means would flee to the countryside, even if it meant leaving sick relatives behind to die. The Christians, however, stayed. Their leaders called upon them to not only care for one another, but to care for their pagan neighbors as well – they one who had been abandoned by their families. In his book *The Rise of Christianity*, Rodney Stark suggests that this was a key factor in the growth of the church: Though many died those who survived had God and the church to thank for it. While the pagan priests and philosophers of the day could only shake their heads in the face of such death and devastation, the “little Christians” followed the example of their Lord by giving their very lives for others, certain of the life yet to come. Christians lived patient sacrifice because they had an eternal perspective.

I want to mention one last distinctive of the early church that I think is particularly difficult for many Christians today. The earliest expressions of Christian community were resolute in their practice of non-violence. They took this directly from Jesus. They would not retaliate against someone who did violence to them. They would not take revenge on those who wronged them. They would not take up arms in the killing of other human beings. They not only protected vulnerable life; they refused to take a human life under any circumstances. Yes, there were Christians who served in Rome’s military, but after baptism they would often look to take noncombat roles until their time of service was completed.

So I’ve highlighted three areas in which the early church “lived Jesus” and practiced a form of patience that seemed strange yet compelling to the people around them. They were scrupulous in business, compassionate to the vulnerable, and non-violent toward all. They let there yes be yes and their no be no. They treated others as one in Christ whether they be Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. They turned the other cheek and love their enemies.

My question to you this morning is simply this: Which of these expressions of Christian virtue is easiest for you to believe and embrace? Which is hardest? Could you really just let someone rip you off in a business deal? Could you really give away what you've work hard so hard to earn, even if it put your comfort and security at risk? Could you really refuse to take another life, not matter what?

The early church lived Jesus in ways I think we have largely forgotten. But the days are evil friends. Jesus is calling us to live different from the world around us, not in word but in deed. When we do, then and only then will the church be blessed with growth again.

Amen.