

December 15, 2013 / Third Sunday of Advent / David L. Edwards

Joy and Patience

Psalm 146 *Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God, who made heaven and earth....*

James 5:7-10 *Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord.*

Today is the Third Sunday of Advent. This morning Lexi lit the pink, or rose, candle on the Advent wreath, which represents joy. Traditionally, Advent is a season of self-examination and penitence. The rose candle marks the turning point in the season, and is a call to embrace the joy of God's love dwelling with us. There is a time for the spiritual work of self-examination, and there is a time to rise up and embrace God's unconditional love. There is a time to grieve for what we feel we lack or have lost, and a time to rise up in joy to embrace and live our lives as they are and life as it is, as gifts from God who loves us and the world eternally.

How do we lose our joy? Psalm 146 provides one answer. It has to do with where we place our trust, our ultimate trust. When we “put our trust in human beings”, we attach our joy, our happiness to someone, or something, outside of ourselves. We give others the power to make us happy or angry, to hurt or disappoint us. We depend on others' approval to be ourselves or to follow the callings in our hearts. The wisdom of scripture is that we belong first and foremost to God alone, not to each other. Trust is something that, in Hebrew scriptures, belongs only to our relationship with God, the source of our life, and, indeed, all of life. When we place that kind of ultimate trust in princes—let's say, political or religious leaders—or in people in general, we place a weight on something that cannot bear it, an expectation on something that cannot fulfill it. The psalmist's words point to our oneness with God.

“Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob.” God is the source of our life, thus our joy. The work of our spiritual life, our inward journey, is to come alive to our connectedness to and rootedness in God. When we work in our inward journey to perceive, understand, and then let go of the ways we have harnessed our happiness, our joy, our sense

of fulfillment to other people, or to outward circumstances, then we begin to come alive to our true selves. We are on the threshold of joy. We begin to understand that our fears, our anger, our unhappiness have arisen from what we thought we needed from other people, which, in fact, is found in our relationship with God. When we are working with this inward liberation, then we find that our joy in life and in other people increases. Thus, our capacity to truly love in non-clinging, non-demanding ways, increases. When this is happening through our faithful and patient spiritual work, then the lovely images of life bursting forth that we find in the Isaiah reading speak of our own lives as we awaken to trust in God and the unshakable joy that comes from it. We open increasingly to the ever-present love that surrounds us and is already in us. In the words of the hymn we sang earlier, we begin to draw with joy from the wells of salvation, of healing and wholeness, that are and have always been within us.

The joy we find in the trust of which the psalmist speaks enables us to cultivate the patience spoken of by the writer of the Letter to James. Patience comes from our awareness that God is working in the depths of life to bring about what Jesus called the kingdom of God, life as it is meant to be. The word the writer uses [*makrothumia*] has a richness of meaning: patience, steadfastness, endurance. It is our willingness to remain steadfast and open even in difficult or painful situations because we know that there is more at work in life than what we can see. For example, says the writer, look at the farmer tilling and planting, but then waiting. The farmer is cooperating with a creative force far greater than his own efforts. Anyone who works with the earth and growing things knows something of this partnership with the power of life. It is a perfect image for what it means to live as people of faith. The first two congregations I served were in Kentucky farming communities. I found there the kind of patience the writer of James is talking about. When farmers heard the scriptures speak in these kinds of agricultural images, they understood completely. They knew from experience that our lives are woven into the vast and intricate fabric of life. Life is not about control or manipulation. It is not about ego and getting our way. Those are human concoctions, and we suffer because of them. Life is about living harmoniously within the creation that surrounds us and of which we are part. This calls for patience, steadfastness, and endurance. And beneath that patient endurance is the joy that comes from trusting the unseen, mysterious power of life we call God.

I want to mention very briefly how this kind of patience relates to three dimensions of

our life: patience with ourselves, with other people in community, and in our callings and missions, the outward journey of our lives.

The inward journey calls for patience with ourselves. It is not about trying to "get somewhere" or achieve something. It is about clearing away the clutter, removing the obstacles, untying the knots, unlearning many things from our culture, including, to a great extent, religion, so that we become increasingly aware of the relationship with God we already have. Spirituality is giving attention to our lives so that the gift of that sacred relationship grows and blossoms through our whole being. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that we ARE the light of the world. Our inward work is to let that light shine forth, removing the bushel baskets that are hiding it.

Patience with ourselves means trusting God's already-given love for us. We work with our own lives non-judgmentally, yet with honesty. As we do this over time, we understand more fully what is going on in us, where it comes from, and how it affects our relationships with others and the way we look at life. With understanding comes healing and letting go. Fears become less fearful. Anger becomes less angry. Guilt becomes less crippling. I like very much what Isaiah says: *Strengthen weak hands and feeble knees and tell the fearful of heart, Do not be afraid!* We can have weakness AND be strong. We can have fears AND still be fearless. We can be aware of our limitations AND be channels of what God is doing for the world. We begin to discover that we can have in us anger, fear, depression, sadness, but at the same time know that we are more than these emotions, these feelings. Therefore, we can live with deep joy, which is qualitatively different from superficial happiness.

Practicing patience with ourselves, we learn to practice patience with others in community. The Church of the Covenant has felt called to be a community of Jesus, rather than an institution to be perpetuated. Being in community is not easy. It means cultivating the patience, steadfastness, and endurance the writer of James is talking about. It means learning to drop our demands, our desires to control and change other people. They do not belong to us, but to God. This takes much work on our part, and a commitment to spiritual growth over time.

Just as with ourselves, patience with others enables us to have understanding and compassion. What is it about this person that drives me crazy? What has triggered aggression,

violence, insecurity in me? What is it about this person's life that has shaped her to be as she is? Each person will teach us something about ourselves and about life, if we are willing to listen and to understand. Fuller understanding makes room for love, true love, not sentimentality or warm and fuzzy feelings.

We also cultivate patience with the work to which God calls us, the things we do out of our love for and desire to serve God. For Isaiah, God's presence and activity are seen in the bringing of life and health to those who are suffering, neglected, or maligned by religion and society. That's where God is working, and that is where we meet God. That's where Jesus calls us to follow him. Notice that in the gospel reading Jesus did not try to prove to John's disciples that he was some kind of special messiah or divine being. He did not point to himself, but to the work he was doing and the work to be done, the same as in Isaiah's words. We are called, not to worship Jesus, but to follow Jesus in the strengthening of weak hands and the making firm of feeble knees, to bear and be good news to those who are suffering. We are each called to some way of being a channel of God's kingdom dawning in the world.

This community began out of the belief that each of us needs to discover what God is calling and gifting us to be and to do with our life. Years ago, in a Festival Center Mission Group meeting, John Withrow—we give thanks for his life and spirit--spoke beautifully about this. I don't remember his exact words, but this is the way I heard it: We do not find peace by withdrawal from life and its difficulties and challenges. We find peace by discovering our place in life and living out of that place that God has uniquely given to us. Discovering and affirming our "place" in life, who we are and what we feel called to do, does not often happen quickly or easily. This, too, asks of us patience as we discern all through our lives what God calls us to be and do for the sake of the world, and thus for the fulfillment and joy of our very being. The disciplines and commitment we work with are part of that patience, that steadfastness, that endurance. As we live in this way, we grow in a sense of deep peace and deep joy.

Placing our trust in God, seeking the deepest fulfillment in life not from other people but from our connectedness, our relationship with God, the sacred source of all life. This is what creates in us joy. Growing in that trust, deepening in that joy, we find ourselves able to live with patience, steadfastness, and endurance, with ourselves, with others, and with the work we do in the love and service of God.