

Wise Words from Brother James: Patience & Prayers
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James 5:7-8, 13-20

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I stood on the shore of Sermon Lake, enjoying the view across the calm, smooth water. I visit this body of water every week and this time it looked particularly inviting. I'd studied the passage from James 5 with its straight talk about the Christian life. By my estimation, I could get across Sermon Lake in three big steps, using words that began with the letter "P". With the first step, I would remind the congregation to be patient, as it says in verse 7: Be patient, beloved; As a farmer patiently waits for the crop to emerge, you too should be patient and wait upon the Lord. Our tomatoes at home are plump and heavy, but they are still too green to be picked. Yet just as I know the sun will turn them bright red very soon, the resurrected Son of God will complete our earthly crop and harvest it in God's good time; and so we are to be patient.

The second step is to remind the congregation to be prayerful. James offers practical advice, stressing the importance of prayer whenever someone is ill or suffering. But prayer is not something we only do in times of need; it should be part of our daily lives and ongoing conversation with our God. Corrie Ten Boom used to ask, "Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tire?" We are to be a prayerful people. And the third step is to be persistent. People sin and stumble in the faith over and over again. If that's true of us, we have to be persistent in getting right with God and one another. And if it's true of our brothers and sisters in Christ, we have to be persistent in seeking them out and bringing them back into the fellowship of faith. As scripture says, such persistence covers a multitude of sins.

Be patient, be prayerful, be persistent – with those three points I'd move across the smooth surface of Sermon Lake and land safely on the other side. With my outline now complete, I took a deep breath and confidently stepped out onto the calm waters, only to sink immediately below the surface and quickly find myself in deep water and forced to swim back to shore. A three-point sermon with words all beginning with the letter "P" looked nice on paper, but it appeared not to be a message grounded in the gospel of Jesus Christ or the wisdom of Brother James.

As I sat in my water-soaked clothes, I stopped to re-examine my three points. Yes, we are instructed to be patient until the coming of the Lord. But in truth, patience is something we think about only when it is in short supply. Kids act up in the car during a long road trip; we shuffle our feet and check our watch while stuck in a slow moving line at the grocery store; our blood pressure rises as traffic comes to a halt on 376 or near one of Pittsburgh's famous tunnels. Telling others to be patient in those situations means risking getting your head snapped off with angry replies or whiny complaints. You can't force someone to be patient or give them patience from your own personal

supply. Patience is something that emerges out of a deeper foundation of personal faith and experience, so something more than just “be patient” needs to be preached.

In the same way, telling people to be prayerful sounds like good advice and we often go so far as to teach people the words to pray, but that’s usually not enough. For most people, prayers happen in two settings – when someone like me asks you to bow your heads and listen to a prayer I say out loud, or when social convention leads you to say a short prayer, such as before a meal. We break the silence of the moment by sending to God a list of things we hope God will help us with. But as Eugene Peterson and others have said, prayer is never the first word, never the primary word breaking the silence between earth and heaven in order to get God’s attention. Prayer is always the second word; it is answering speech, a response to God who alone is primary and who always has the first word. Prayer might feel like we are getting in the first word with God, but with effort and practice, we become aware of the way God’s speech precedes anything and everything that comes out of our mouths.¹ So something more than telling people to be prayerful needs to be preached.

I had initially hoped to skim over the surface of Sermon Lake with a slick sermon about patience, prayer and persistence. But our lives are not simply placid pools of calm water. In our daily lives we deal with wave after wave of turbulence – violence in our streets and war overseas; tragedies like the collapsed bridge in Minneapolis with its lingering questions: Was it a freak accident, a conscious act of destructive violence, a result of misplaced priorities and misspent tax dollars? Are we safe driving over the bridges here in Pittsburgh? And within this very congregation, there are lives being pounded by turbulent waves – cancer diagnoses, divorce proceedings, diseases of mental illness and depression, grief over recent deaths. The church James addressed had all the same traits as us; why else would he close his letter speaking about suffering, sickness, and prayers to bring rescue from death? So if some superficial words won’t get us across these waters of life, what else do we need in addition to patience, prayer and persistence to reach the distant shore?

Let me pause and interject at this point a brief comment about the two long-awaited cultural events of the summer – the final “Harry Potter” book and the third “Pirates of the Caribbean” film. A *Christian Century* article spoke about the value of the Harry Potter books, because they remind us about the fundamental difference between virtue and evil. “The virtuous life is necessarily social; [while] evil has only accomplices, not community.”² If you have worked your way through the Harry Potter books, including the recent climactic one, it is clear that goodness is grounded upon community, while evil only links people as fearful accomplices. For me, that is why the three “Pirates of the Caribbean” movies are less satisfying, because those main characters each have different goals and are quite willing to use the others for their own means (Every pirate for him or herself) instead of being a true community united around a single purpose.

Now keep those pop culture remarks in mind as we re-visit James’ closing words one more time. James says, Be patient and wait on the Lord. If you’re suffering, then pray. If you’re cheerful, then rejoice. If you’re persecuted, troubled or sick, seek out the elders

of the church. (By the way, the Greek word used here is “presbuteros” which means elder or leader and is the word from which the Presbyterian Church gets its name.) James says, Seek out others in your faith community, confessing your sins that you might know reconciliation, praying together as a response to the God who knows us and calls us together in the first place. And if anyone wanders off, go after them; bring them home to the community, for by such persistent faith many are strengthened in righteousness.

My earlier three-point sermon would have skimmed over the waters of faith with smooth sounding words about Christian behaviors: Just do this and that, persevere and all will be well. But as in the quote from Stanley Hauerwas I had printed at the top of our worship bulletin, “Christianity is not about beliefs about God plus behavior. We are Christians not because of what we believe, but because we have been called to be disciples of Jesus Christ. To become a disciple is not a matter of a new or changed self-understanding, but rather to become part of a different community with a different set of practices.”³

Goodness thrives in community; evil only has accomplices. We discover who we are when we recognize the foundation upon which we truly stand. We discover who we are when we realize that we’re part of a prior story – a gospel story from God, made real in Jesus Christ and written on our hearts by the Holy Spirit. In this story, we are patient because God’s story precedes ours and moves all of us and all of history toward God’s intended goals. We are prayerful because all our prayers are second words, responding to the prior “Logos”, holy Word of God. And we are persistent, because we are called to belong to a community that cares for one another without partiality, without bias or judgment, humbly aware that the ground upon which we stand before the cross of Jesus Christ is always level ground. There’s neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, rich nor poor, young nor old, but all are made new in Christ and called together to serve Christ.

So how do we get across Sermon Lake? I discovered that answer when I dried off and looked around, noticing a wooden sailboat tied up near the shore. The boat has long been the symbol for the church, the body of Christ. As we sail along, inside it we find scripture like James to remind us how to live together in community. We find bread and wine like this meal to sustain us. And most importantly we travel with a mast shaped like a cross. For what defines us as a community is not our polished words and three-point sermons but rather the distinctive story of the One who calls us by name, who redeemed us by his life and death, and who gives us lasting hope through the resurrection unto eternal life.

AMEN

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¹ Eugene Peterson, Working the Angles, pp. 45-49.

² Catherine Wallace, *The Christian Century*, July 18-25, 2001, p. 19.

³ Stanley Hauerwas, "Discipleship as a Craft, Church as a Disciplined Community," *The Christian Century*, October 1, 1991, pp. 881-884.