Peculiar Patience

GALATIANS 5:22-23 (NRSVUE) ***"...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, [23]gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things."***

* * *

II TIMOTHY 4:1-5 (NRSVUE) ***"In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: [2]proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage with the utmost patience in teaching. [3]For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound teaching, but, having their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires [4]and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. [5]As for you, be sober in everything, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully."***

I'm about to launch into a subject about which I am poorly qualified to address. Bethany talks about how patient I am; however, she's never been inside a vehicle I was driving—in heavy traffic. She's never sat beside me in front of a TV watching a Dallas Cowboys football game.

I'm not patient; I'm just old and tired. I don't watch podcasts or news videos because I'm too impatient. I can read five times faster than those talking heads can talk, and without having to deal with their on-camera egos. I've just grown impatient with a culture that has become too lazy to write or to read—except on Twitter on cell phones. [I've got to hand it to today's youth: there are few things in this universe faster than a teenager's thumbs on Twitter!]

And I grow impatient with a subculture that grows increasingly proud of its inhumanity—a subculture that makes rudeness and cruelty sacred and makes kindness and compassion weak and unchristian. Last week, it was horrifying watching some manifestations of that subculture shipping exhausted migrants to other areas of the country in brazen acts, not only of political posturing and vengeance, but also of outright cruelty. And one of their number appeared on television boasting, that's just the beginning.

I agree with a recent blog by John Pavlovitz, in that, beyond the acts themselves, I've grown impatient with, as he puts it, "…the theological and mental gymnastics so many professing Christians have engaged while trying to justify traumatizing already traumatized people." And the shameless disregard for humanity is increasing, both in frequency and in severity, and so is my impatience.

I identify with Paul's analysis of Timothy's setting. Listen again to verses 3 & 4: ***For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound teaching, but, having their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires [4]and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.***

I remember the joke that circulated a few years ago: "The good news is that God is coming to earth in person. The bad news is that she's really ticked off!" And I have to consider the possibility: what if I'm the one who's wrong.

Do I read something wrong when Moses says, twice (Exodus 22 & 23): ***"You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt."***

Do I miss something when I read twice in the same chapter of Leviticus: "***The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the native-born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God."***

Fourteen times in Genesis Abraham is described as "an alien in Canaan—an alien in the land of the Philistines." And as Moses is preparing the Israelites to enter the Promised Land after their Exodus from Egyptian bondage, he instructs them to use as a part of their liturgical life the confession, ***"A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien…"*** **(DEUTERONOMY 26:5 NRSVUE)**

Am I missing something? Am I wrong when I apply that same principle to White, Anglo-Saxons in America? Were we not aliens in 1620?

I wonder where professing Christians in that subculture see Jesus in deceiving and shipping frightened migrants to Blue areas of this country; I wonder how they can celebrate with joyous middle finger defiance using human beings as some sort of prop in political posturing and vengeance.

And yet it's just too easy for me to sink to their level and respond in kind [and there have been times, I'm ashamed to say, when I have done exactly that].

But Paul urges Timothy, who faces similar cognitive dissonance, to be patient in teaching. And here's what he means by that: "***…proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage with the utmost patience in teaching."***

Here's what I think he means: while it's true: human nature looks for scapegoats and ways to cast blame and divert attention from one's own shortcomings; thus, it's human nature to be judgmental and condemning. And yet, it is precisely from those characteristics, in large part, that God's grace saves us. It just comes natural for us to point out those subcultures that live in contradiction to the values and beliefs that sustain us; to point the accusing finger and proclaim the sin of others, especially when those sins seem to us to stand out like flashing neon signs.

But I think Paul's counsel to Timothy calls us to a higher standard—a more difficult standard, to be sure; nevertheless, a higher standard. The patience he urges is almost foreign to us—a "Peculiar Patience," to say the least.

Here's what I think Paul is urging: instead of pointing and accusing and blaming and condemning, take the higher road. Lift up Christ. Lift up the ideals and values his life exemplified: compassion for the poor, empathy with the lonely and downtrodden, hospitality for the homeless, food for the hungry, water for those who were thirsty, grace for those caught in the act of sin.

I saw Jesus in the response of the people in Martha's Vineyard, as people

who were unlike them were recognized for their common humanity and were received with open arms. People in Martha's Vineyard, some claiming faith and some not—understood that empathy is the only redemptive path when people are hurting and abused and treated like pieces in some revolting game.

And the people in Martha's Vineyard challenged me in my growing impatience. And through their example I heard the voice of Paul saying, "Teach this. Just teach this and be patient. Teach this and turn it loose. Teach this, and have patience and faith to believe that the Word will not return to you void. Just teach this:

> ***"I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me..."***