

Epiphany 5 (2025)

From time to time, I drop in on the women's knitting group which meets Mondays here at the church.

What amazes me is the incredible patience shown by members of this group as they go about their art.

I think it was last week that Ruth Johnson got some stitches wrong and had to start all over. Thankfully, she had just begun the piece.

Patience is not an easy virtue to acquire or to maintain. Yet it is a necessary one if one is to accomplish anything meaningful in life.

What I have just highlighted – the patience of Ruth – is what we might call 'practical patience'. But the patience I want to speak to you about this morning might better be called **cosmic patience** or even **spiritual patience**.

As we look around our world, we see so much that is wrong . . . people doing horrible things, situations which seem out of control. Two recent examples would include: the New Year's Day truck attack in New Orleans and just this past week a school shooting in Sweden.

“Why doesn't God *do* something?”

This is perhaps the most frequent question Christian leaders and teachers get asked after each new atrocity hits the airwaves.

We want God to blow evil out of the water and do it now!

This is no new impulse. Many of Jesus' fellow countrymen felt same way.

Where was the Kingdom of God promised in the scriptures?

Why did God not come and save them from their pagan oppressors?

Some grew impatient and attempted to take matters into their own hands . . . tried, as it were, to force God's hand . . . to bring in the Kingdom of God on their own terms.

They did so by staging military uprisings and revolts against Rome, the world superpower of the day. None of these succeeded. Rather, in A.D. 70, destruction fell on the very city they cherished – Jerusalem.

Perhaps Jesus had these in mind when He spoke in the parable recorded in today's Gospels of those servants who wanted to jump in and pluck up the bogus wheat plants ahead of the final harvest.

If this interpretation is correct, the parable of the wheat and the tares was directed at the

zealots of Jesus' own day, some of whom were likely among His larger group of followers.

To them He was saying: learn patience . . . get on God's timetable rather than trying to force your timetable on God. Of course, we need to learn this lesson as well.

That may have been Jesus' message to those who first heard this parable. Even so, we find here a picture which illustrates the mixed-bag nature of individuals, of society and even of the church in every age.

Yes, even the visible church is not a pure body. Daniel Defoe, the 18th century English novelist, pamphleteer and journalist, picks up on this thought when he says:

*Wherever God erects a house of prayer,
The Devil always builds a chapel there;
And, 'twill be found, upon examination,
The latter has the largest congregation!*

Commentator H. W. Dobson expands on this thought when he writes:

“Evil is there amongst us through the action of an enemy – whether this be a personal Devil or our perversion of a God-given liberty.”

He continues: **“God puts up with it patiently, but this is only for a time; the final separation and destruction of evil is certain.”**

The familiar Thanksgiving hymn – “Come, ye thankful people come” – gives us the same assessment and vision of the future:

**For the Lord our God shall come,
and shall take his harvest home;
from his field shall in that day
all offenses purge away,
Give his angels charge at last
in the fire the tares to cast;
but the fruitful ears to store
in his garner evermore.**

Putting together what we know from scripture, we can say: A decisive victory was won on the cross. Sin, Satan and death were defeated. The conflict of the ages was won.

Nevertheless, there remains some cleaning up to do. The Kingdom inaugurated at Calvary must be implemented and received.

If evil were to be blown out of the water in one fell swoop, there would be a lot of collateral damage.

Right now, it is as if the lifeboat is going round making stops. All and sundry are being called to get on board.

Bypass this step and many would be lost.

The delay in God doing the next bit is in fact an act of kindness, as we are told in 2 Peter 3:

“Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts. And saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation.”

The answer Peter gives to these scoffers is:

“The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”

God Himself in His own good time will separate the wheat from the weeds, but patience is required in the interim.

BUT patience must not be equated with inactivity. Christian people are not to pack their suitcases, go down to the station and wait for Jesus' train to come in.

No, we have meaningful kingdom work to do in the present.

First and foremost, we are to announce Jesus. In the words of the Great Commission, we are to go make disciples of all nations.

But secondly, as we have the opportunity, we are to work for a more just and humane society.

This task is at least implied in the second part of the Great Commission, the bit that says: **“Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded.”**

We have seen this happen in history. Because of the Gospel, because of Christian influence and teaching, gladiator fights have ended, unwanted female and deformed children are no longer abandoned in garbage dumps, hospitals have been built, debtor prisons closed;

slave trade, for the most part, is a thing of the past.

No, we don't build the kingdom of God with our own hands, but – to quote Tom Wright – we do build bricks that will be used in that edifice.

Paul says as much in 1 Corinthians 15. In this chapter, he explores the blessings that will follow Jesus' final appearing at the end of the age, including the abolition of death.

But he does not conclude this chapter as we might expect. He doesn't say: go sit under a tree and reflect on how wonderful that day will be?

Rather he urges his readers to get on with whatever kingdom work God has laid in their path. He says:

“Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know

**that your labour is not in vain in the Lord”
(15:58).**

My point: Patience does not equal laziness or inactivity. We leave the big stuff to God . . . we don't pluck up the weeds prematurely . . . but we do do the work God assigns us in the present age, and there is plenty of it.

But there is another aspect of the patience we can learn from this passage. That concerns how we respond to imperfections in our own local congregations.

I have known people – not Episcopalians or Anglicans mind you! – who are perennial **church hoppers**.

I will be talking to them and say: “You and your family go to First XYZ Church, don't you?”

They will respond, “Well, we *used* to go there, but the preacher left and there was a lot going on we didn’t like, so we moved to TBC.

Maybe a year or so later I will meet up with the same ones. By this time, they will have moved on to still a third church for the same reason.

Well, from today’s parable and from experience itself, it should be obvious that no perfect churches exist.

Allow me to conclude with a rhyme which speaks to the imperfect nature of human institutions:

I think that I shall never see
A church that’s all it ought to be;
A church that has no empty pews,
Whose preacher never has the blues;
A church whose deacons always “deke”,
And none is proud but all are meek;
Where gossips never peddle lies

Or make complaints or criticize;
Where all are always sweet and kind
And all to other's faults are blind.
Such perfect churches there may be,
But none of them are known to me.

And here is the author's conclusion:

**But still we'll work, and pray and plan
To make our church the best we can!**

Harvest is coming, but not yet. So, we do the best we can in the muddle in the middle.

Patience is more than a concept in the head; it is a decision and action. Be a Ruth and keep knitting!