

“Embracing the Empty Space”

A homily for the people of St. Nicholas with the Holy Innocents by Ethan Jewett

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The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Jeremiah 1:4-10 + Psalm 71 + 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 + Luke 4:21-30

Patience is a virtue, it just isn't one of my virtues, as my partner, Mike, will readily attest. It has never come easily to me, and so I had some misgivings about selecting it as the subject of my reflections this morning. After all, today's reading from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians is one of the most well-known and fecund passages from the Epistles, and I could have commented on any of the many ways he describes love. But for some reason, the words, "love is patient," wouldn't leave me alone, and I kept coming back to them. "OK," I thought, "God evidently is pushing me hard to preach on this topic, despite the fact that I am perhaps a less-than-ideal messenger." So, here goes nothing.

The truth is that patience is something I actively try to practice, because I've been so bad at it for most of my life. I have gotten much better in the last couple of years, but I continue to work on it every day. Sitting in traffic, waiting in line at the grocery store, and listening to some coworker drone on and on during a meeting all try my patience. I get restless and exasperated, and sometimes it takes a great deal of self-control not to let everyone know exactly what I'm thinking. I want immediate gratification. I want it now, Now, NOW! Yes, sometimes I have the patience of a toddler.

I'm pleased to say, however, that my temper tantrums are confined largely to the childish and mean-spirited thoughts that run through my mind during moments of extreme stress, so there's rarely a need to give me a time-out. All kidding aside, I'm exposing my own occasional childishness, because today's readings explore numerous facets of the natural progression from childhood to adulthood, from infancy to maturity. Jeremiah cries to the Lord, "Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." The psalmist tells the Lord "upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb." Paul notes the difference between the ways we think, speak and act as children, and how we think, speak and act as adults.

The great lesson here is that the spirit must mature, just as the body does, and the ongoing catalyst of this growth is love. In Biblical times, there were several concepts of love, each captured by a particular word. The love in question here is *agape*, which is essentially the selfless love of another, such as God's selfless love for her creation. But why is it *patient*? What an interesting way to describe it. If we define patience, say, as a person's willingness to wait for fulfillment or gratification, then patience is the act of temporarily setting aside one's own needs and wants to make space for someone else's needs and wants. This act also states a person's willingness for things to unfold in God's time, rather than according to their own timetable. As Paul says, "[love] does not insist on its own way," like the toddler I was comparing myself to.

As we grow in *agape*, and as we trust in God's timetable rather than our own, we understand better, as if the pieces of the puzzle snap into place, and we can see what's truly there. Paul describes our narcissistic and self-involved point-of-view as a mirror. We see only what we reflect back at ourselves. But when we make space for the other, we see each other face-to-face, from the perspective of I and you, and collectively, we. We see the whole picture that God has chosen to reveal to us. That is what it means to be that potent Greek word, *koinonia*, communion: the common life and fellowship of love shared by Christians with Christ and with each other in Christ.

For us here today, becoming *koinonia* requires us to refrain from insisting on our own way. It is human nature to want things to be the way we like them, to satisfy our comfort level, and to seek gratification of our individual needs. Loving each other as God loves us means allowing us as a community to live into our new life together, to allow the partial (or the individual) to come to an end, and to mature into the complete being God intends us to become.

[1-2 minutes of silence]

That was pretty uncomfortable, wasn't it? You weren't expecting me to stop there. Didn't you want something to fill that silence? How programmed we are to seek fulfillment of our expectations. We're impatient to impose on our world the form we think it should have. We can't just linger in the unfinished, to embrace the empty space. But that it is what we must do.

That space, that silence, is the pregnant holding-back that we must get used to to allow God to create something new in this church. It's the fertile, fallow ground that permits us to grow in worship, mission, fellowship, and knowledge. We are programmed to want to bring things to closure, to have things settled, to know exactly where we stand. That's normal, but we have to resist this temptation to be impatient. Our love must be patient and create a silent, empty space that will allow us to listen to God. In this space, the noisy gongs and clanging cymbals are silenced, and in the stillness, we will feel God's presence, we will offer up our prayers for guidance, and we will listen to what God has to tell us. As Rev Gretchen Rehberg says of centering prayer, "it is one method of listening to God; it is the practice of surrender, of silence, of letting go, of opening up to the presence of God in ways that bring healing, peace, and inner awakening."

God does not expect any human being to exit from the womb fully formed; She is patient with us, allowing us to grow according to the timeline She has set for us as individuals. So, too, must we grow as a community, patiently passing through all the stages of our development, according to the natural progress of life, from vulnerable infancy through awkward adolescence to self-confident maturity. Only then can we benefit from the lessons we have learned throughout our journey to adulthood, through pain and celebration, worship and service, learning and love in *koinonia*.