

A Sermon for Sexagesima, February 19, 2006

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“That on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience.” In the parable, seed that fell on three kinds of unfavorable soil never grew long enough to bear fruit or yield a crop. But the seed that landed on good soil brought forth fruit with patience.

Jesus explained the parable. The seed is the word of God. The various soils with their obstacles to growth represent the way the word of God is received in various human hearts. There is the hardened heart, where the Word takes no root at all. There is the heart that is initially receptive, but whose faith does not endure through trial. There is the heart in which the cares of the world compete with faith and, so, faith remains small and unfruitful. Then there is the “honest and good heart, in which the Word brings forth fruit with patience.

True faith is distinguished from temporary or false faith by bearing fruit. As Jesus said, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit...By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples” (John 15:1-2,8).

What is “fruit”? Perhaps the most descriptive New Testament passage is Galatians 5, which says, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance [self-control].” The fruit that the word of God brings forth in an honest and good heart are virtues and characteristics that pertain to holiness.

Such fruit bearing is evidence of the change that Jesus causes in us. Each fruit of the Spirit comes in the place of some natural tendency to the contrary. The word of God and The Spirit of God teach us to love, to seek the good of the other, where once we were motivated by selfish ends. The word of God and the Spirit of God fill us with a sense of inner joy and peace where once we knew only discontent and inner turmoil. The Word and the Spirit teach us to trust and believe where once we were led by doubt and unbelief.

This fruit is brought forth with patience. That is to say, it does not happen overnight. Seed planted in the ground grows slowly. The daily dose of sunlight and water produces slow but sure growth. After maybe a month or two, one can see something in the ground. After a few more months, one can see significant growth. And only after several more months is the crop ready for harvest.

Virtue grows in us only as we persist in the life of prayer and grace. We do not, in one day’s time, get rid of all malice and learn to love. We do not vanquish doubt and find perfect faith over the weekend. Rather, virtue develops as we are willing to continue to engage the struggle over the long run; as we continue to seek grace and return to Christ with renewed repentance and faith until, finally, we see some sprout of growth that resembles virtue.

Patience endures through times of trial and testing. St. James writes, “Count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience” (1:2). Trials produce patience because they teach us to continue to do the good and faithful things because they are right,

not just because we feel like it, not just because there is some immediate reward.

The question that is continually being asked of us in the Christian life is, Will we continue to follow Christ? We've persevered for a few years and then we face a new challenge: some new offer from the world; some new or renewed temptation of the flesh; some new subtle angle of attack from the Evil One. Will we persevere; will we bring forth fruit with patience?

The seasons of pre-Lent and Lent teach us patience as we prepare for Easter. Easter is now 57 days away. In pre-Lent, we begin the task of self-examination. We examine ourselves to identify what should be the proper focus of Lent. In Lent we take on certain disciplines of prayer, fasting and almsgiving and persevere in them for the season.

Lent is a time when many Christians first learn about the power of spiritual disciplines. Many, for the first time, practice fasting; they go without things they enjoy or they turn off the TV and find room for silence, or they commit to habitual prayer. As they do these things for an extended 40-day season, they experience spiritual growth; they bring forth fruit with patience. Lent is just long enough to cause change in our lives if we commit to things and stick with them.

The penitential seasons are a short course in the Christian life. They teach us to be patiently devoted to the disciplines of the spiritual life as we look forward to the future rewards that God has promised us. The short course of preparation for the annual celebration of Easter teaches us that life is really just a patient preparation for the Resurrection on the Last Day.

Easter is a bit distant right now, but it is in sight. Let us begin to prepare for a patient observance of the fast that we may bear fruit. As Hebrews says, "For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise" (10:36).