

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, May 20th 2016

Transitioning out of the Easter Season into Ordinary Time this week has been challenging – and no more so than today when we hear an uncompromising call to patient perseverance in loving commitment. Few Biblical texts are seen to be as practical and even hard-headed as the Letter of James in the New Testament (all about the practice of faith) and the Gospel of Mark (all about Jesus' practical work of salvation).

The text of the First Reading from James is more easily remembered from its setting in the Third Sunday of Advent in the A Cycle. The two verses at the front end of the text in that liturgy that are missing in this ordinary time pericope are:

“Be patient, brothers and sisters, until the coming of the Lord.

See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth,

being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains.

You too must be patient”

So in Advent it is patience that we are counseled to persevere with. The lectionary of Ordinary Time, however, omits these two verses and instead selects an additional verse to end the reading today that is not included in the Advent setting. That line admonishes the reader not to swear by anything (since we have no control over anything but ourselves) but only to say and to mean, yes or no.

So today's message seems to emphasize perseverance through fidelity to what we commit ourselves to – namely seeking the relationship with God.

The Gospel passage then picks up the theme of fidelity and counsels spouses to remain faithful to their marriage commitment. There are few texts in the New Testament that have caused more concern and challenge for the Christian communities than this uncompromising text about divorce. It was the centerpiece of the deliberations and even debates at the two recent Synods of Bishops. But perhaps the James text, that it is partnered with in today's liturgy, gives us an entrance into the compassionate character of the text.

James' letter challenges us to patient perseverance in our essential commitments. It requires each of us to take our own voice, and our behavior enacting that voice, very seriously indeed. Further it requires us to see that the foundation of marriage is faithful self-donation on the part of each of the spouses to an irrevocable spoken “yes” to relationship that flows from, and participates in, God's work of salvation through perfectly irrevocable mercy.

Just as the prophets of old are examples of endurance in the face of great hardships, so the partners of marriages who are happy together after many years are also examples of such patient endurance.

Couples I have been privileged to know, who have been married for many years, say again and again

that they don't know how they could have stayed together without prayer, patience, love for the partner, a willingness to forgive, and the sense that each partner had made the promise and knew s/he had to stick by it. No one knows for certain what marriage will require tomorrow or next week – but if we take our sacramental faith seriously, we have to believe that it requires nothing less than confidence in God's fidelity, death to our own selfishness, donation of that which we didn't even know we have, and choosing each other first through “good times and bad.”

Ordinary time is neither feast nor fast, but the long stretches of workday time. . . this is spiritual marathon time, not a time of short sprints. But endurance needs an occasional boost, a “heart-leap” that signals an injection of God's Grace. My heart leapt this evening with my husband's delighted grin when I thanked him for the delicious meal he prepared for us (and then cleaned up after when he saw how tired I was!). It reminded me of the old “instruction” from the marriage rite that said something like “only love makes married life possible and perfect love makes it a joy.”

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