

“Be Patient: It is a God-Like Quality”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church
for Sunday, February 28, 2016 - Lent 3

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 55:1-9

Luke 13 :1-9

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

There is a trend in society, I think, and certainly a trend in my own approach to religion, that we need to constantly keep current and modern in our thinking, reading, reflecting.

That is not to say that we dismiss the insights of the great leaders over the centuries, or forget about the saints and abbots and nuns and pastors and musicians who have offered insights as to how to express the faith in their own generation, but we assume current thought means recent thought which means modern thought and usually better thought.

So with some trepidation I returned to a book that was seminal in my own faith development and learning back in the 1970’s, only to discover that it actually was written and published in French in 1957, and translated into English in 1959: Mircea Eliade’s work ***The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion***.

The book discusses the intersection of natural life and a religious viewpoint that many individuals bring to the natural phenomenon they experience.

In a chapter entitled “Human Existence and Sanctified Life,” Eliade writes that ancient humans viewed the world as special and holy because it was created by the gods, and so if we are to be a legitimate part of the world, we too must be created by the gods.

And so the attitude we bring to the world is an attitude of seeing creation as holy and special.

That is certainly true of many in our time – how often have you heard someone say that my religious experience is going into the bush, or sitting on the edge of a lake at sunset, or standing at the top of a mountain slope on a sunny day? We see nature and the holy as connected.

That is part of the story of the fig tree today, I think.

A tree fails to bear fruit for three years, and so the view of some is that it should be cut down.

We do not know the context – is this a three year old tree that has yet to bear fruit? Fig trees generally bear fruit by year two, but some trees take up to six years to bear fruit. As one author says – the only thing one can do is water it and be patient.

Other conditions also may stop a fig tree from bearing fruit – if it gets too little, or too much water, then it may not bear fruit. If there is too much nitrogen in the soil, possibly from using a fertilizer with a poor balance, then the fig tree will not bear fruit.

But the lesson in all cases is the same – be attentive to the tree’s needs, look after it, and be patient.

But if a tree truly is part of the holiness of the world, should we be so dismissive to get rid of it?

Patience can be a virtue – when it comes to fruit bearing trees, when it comes to new employees, when it comes to challenging students in a classroom, when it comes to learning any new task.

How often have you heard of someone calling in a repair person, only to learn that they did not turn on the machine?

I have some sympathy - even empathy - for such people. I was given a Kindle by my daughters for Father's Day three years ago, and the first instruction was "Turn on the machine." Nowhere did it tell me where the on button was located, and nothing on the Kindle indicated an on-off switch. I waited until I went to England 16 months later to get instruction on the machine, beginning with: "How do I turn it on?"

I have a theory that if we cannot be patient about those things that do not really impact our day-to-day life (such as a tree in a neighbouring orchard) then we are less able to be patient with situations/people/concerns that are closer to home for us.

So if you, like me, get frustrated with the slowness of government taking action on items we wish to see, or the church responding to a changing culture and society, then maybe it is even harder to be patient with those in our inner circle of friends and family.

One thing I have learned from being a property owner of a large bush lot is that it takes year and years for a tree to move from the seed stage to being knee high. Often we look at a tree as being a year or two old but it may be five or six years old (or more) before it is large enough to be seen.

If we can be patient with a tree's maturation process, maybe we can be patient with the learning cycle of those around us, including our children and grandchildren and those exposed to new experiences.

One of the most prolific preachers of our age – I see him a prolific preacher because his views are expressed, heard, and tested on an

almost daily basis in this country – said the following when speaking to the Empire Club in Toronto for Canada Day, 2003:

“It is no sin to be what most of us are – descent, hard-working, tax-paying Canadians. The sin is in believing that that is enough. That if you look after yourself and your family, you have made your contribution. I don’t think it is enough. We can give more. We owe it to the society that produced us.”

You may not know the author and deliverer of those words as a preacher, but they were spoken by someone who has a public pulpit each week, almost every day: Peter Mansbridge.

To put Mansbridge’s words in a different context, he is saying: “Some people assume if they do what is expected of them, and only do that, then they are fulfilling the best they can be in life. But true living is not getting by with the minimal effort and accomplishment – true living is about doing what we can to make improvements to our social fabric, and create opportunities for people in the world at large.”

Jesus saw the message of a tree as a lesson in practical concern for others. Are we dismissive of others, and give up on them too quickly, or do we see the opportunities that are there for them, and the opportunities that they can offer to us?

Simply put, are we patient enough to allow God to work through us and in us when we have lost the opportunity to take the time to listen for, and to be open to, a new message from God?