

Advent Midweek 2
The Incarnation and Patience, Kindness, Goodness
Romans 12:9-21
1 Timothy 1:12-17

Tonight we are going into deep waters. Let's start simply. Jesus said that He is the vine and we are the branches. The branch derives its life from the vine. The vine feeds the branch and makes the branch fruitful. "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). It is not a generic Christ who is the vine. This Savior led a very concrete life, within Him is a very identifiable set of virtues. The Son of God lived a tangible life with identifiable obstacles, identifiable episodes. We celebrate His death which was a real event, not a storybook dreamscape or a stiff narrative but an event which God has made accessible to you. We celebrate His resurrection, which is a happening, a time and space occurrence that defines both Christianity and the lives of Christians.

Patience, kindness, and goodness are virtues. Patience, kindness, and goodness are fruit of the Spirit. Patience, kindness, and goodness flow from Christ to you, the believer. These virtues come out of the kiln of suffering. Patience is, by definition, endurance in difficulty. The old joke goes that one shouldn't pray for patience because He will give you a painful situation as a precursor to learning patience. I'm liking that bit of whimsy less and less as I get older. St. Paul speaks for the better part of me: "We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Romans 5:3-5). Suffering, Christ's life, and the fruit of the Spirit; like me, I expect that you want to be fruitful branch. Patience, kindness, and goodness; they come from suffering.

Here's the deep part. The book of Hebrews says that Jesus "learned obedience through what he suffered" (Hebrews 5:8). Now this is the perfect Son of the perfect Father. Jesus is, in His very nature, true God. How can true God "*learn* obedience?" Jesus Christ is the perfect sacrifice, a Lamb without spot or blemish or defect. How does a perfect Savior "*learn* obedience?" We all know the episode in Jerusalem, when Jesus was a 12-year-old boy. His parents went into a panic because they lost track of their son. They headed home with their caravan and then, when they thought about their son, He wasn't with the tribe. Upon finding Him, the young Jesus was incredulous. "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49). And then St. Luke adds this bit: "And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them" (Luke 2:51).

Again, this is a direct quote from Hebrews: "Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered, and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Hebrews 5:8-9). Is it true? Did Jesus "*learn* obedience?" Wasn't He prewired to be completely obedient from the start? Wasn't it a total snap for Him? The idea is not that Jesus was *disobedient* before He suffered but that in His incarnate state, as true man, He too had to learn the lessons of obedience. Those lessons could only be learned through trial, through pain, through difficulty, hardship, suffering. Isn't that you? Truly, haven't you learned GREAT things through suffering? Haven't you learned things that couldn't possibly be learned any other

way? In this life, you are learning as Christ learned and that is a tremendous thing. The fruit of the Spirit comes by learning as Christ learned. Patience, kindness, and goodness are fruits of suffering. The One who has endured God's loving discipline and sought after God's will and focused on Christ and found God's promises and the treasure of hope – that is the one who has this fruit in abundance. It comes in no other way.

Not many of you want to be Job; I certainly don't. God took great pleasure in Job. Satan attacked that relationship as one built on prosperity. Take away all of your blessings and Job will turn on you as quickly as a rabid cat. God then afforded Satan free reign to assault Job and assault him the devil did. Intuitively, Job realizes that none of his suffering could have happened without God's sanction. Human malice, natural disasters, and health catastrophes all beset Job. Is Job innocent? Are you? Job asks rhetorically, "Shall we receive good from God and not trouble" (Job 2:10). Then Job's miserable comforters make matters worse. Job turns to self-pity and he is a whisker away from charging God with injustice. I am suffering unfairly. Has that ever been you? I know that it has been me, thinking that awful, dead-end thought. Has it ever been you? Does one learn anything down that road, anything beneficial, anything that makes you pleasant to others? Ultimately, God calls Job on the carpet. "Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me. Will you put me in the wrong? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?" (Job 40:7-8).

That kind of rebuke is exactly what Job needed. At that point, priceless words of faith flow from Job's mouth. At that point, Job kneels in confession as though he were a parishioner of Christ the King at the beginning of the Divine Service: "I repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6). Patience, kindness, and goodness; God is the potter and you are the clay. What kind of vessel do you want to be? Are you eager to learn? Do you see God at work in your life to bring about the virtue that He desires, the virtue that the vine feeds the branch to make it fruitful with Christ's character? Patience; does such an attribute make you pleasant to your spouse? Is hope, true Christian hope, the catalyst for patience in difficulty? "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). Was that uttered when the world was at St. Paul's feet or when he was enduring difficulty? One Christian woman said to me recently: "I want, with all my heart and soul, to be precisely the woman that God wants me to be, no matter what comes my way." Another Christian woman said to me recently: "After this experience I learned that I can only trust God and that He wants me to trust Him completely, unreservedly, looking to Him and Him alone." I see Christians learning. Both of these women have been and are under trial.

Fruit of the Spirit; the vine and the branch; Christ's life invading your own. God is using His Word and your everyday experiences to bring about the virtues of patience, kindness, and goodness. Christ's suffering has produced in you precisely what the Father is looking for. Kindness is gently putting others above yourself. Christ's kindness toward you is what animates your faith every day. The cross you wear, the bread you eat at this altar, the absolution you hear; His kindness is the foundation of your life. Goodness; there is only One who is good (Matthew 19:17). But His goodness isn't a static resource. His goodness is a pulsing trait that He deposits in you, a trait that you manifest to others and thereby demonstrate yourself to be His disciple. Patience; you can't have the other two without patience. We learn; we learn of our Lord and we follow Him. God's promises and a living hope and trust that puts God above everything; that is the road to patience.