



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: August 2, 2009

The Patience of God, Robert B. Culp
Isaiah 40:28-31; Philippians 3:7-16

Over the last month and a half, which combined both a vacation and mini-sabbatical, I had a chance to enjoy some wind-down time with family and friends, as well as to research a topic that's been of some interest to me for a number of years; namely, what is involved in putting together a service that contributes to a "good funeral" and what liturgical resources are available and/or needed.

In terms of my sabbatical topic of study, I have made a good start, and I look forward to continuing such exploration, especially by attending a 2-day conference on this topic in Chicago in late September. Concerning the time for relaxation, Kathy and I were able to enjoy a longer visit in Memphis with Cecily and Mike, taking in the sights, sounds, and tastes of Beale Street and beyond. In addition, we were able to spend some special time with Joanna and her family, which culminated in the Baptism of our grandson Jonah last Sunday. I am very grateful for such time away, and I feel somewhat refreshed and renewed.

During my study time in Maryland, I had the chance to visit with a ministerial colleague named Lawton, recently retired, and we were able to share the experiences and events we have had as ministers in very different locations. Lawton pastored only inner-city churches throughout his entire career, while I have served churches mostly in rural and suburban locations. I have always enjoyed hearing his tales of the inner-city church families, because of the stories' meat and gristle ... and their personal impact. Indeed, I have been profoundly moved on more than one occasion by the grit and determination, the vision and commitment of those in his churches who have served the mission of our Lord and the tender needs of his people in such loving and powerful ways.

(I rather suspect those in our church participating in the Mission Trip to NYC this year will also discover special individuals whose love-in-action and whose stories will be inspiring and humbling, and we look forward to hearing from our Mission Team on August 16.)

At any rate, when I visited with Lawton one afternoon, he told me a story about Thelma which I want to share with you at some length this morning because of what it has to teach us about the discipline of patience along our faith journeys.

Thelma is an 80-year-old widow who is a member in the last church Lawton served in downtown Baltimore. She lives in a retirement center and ventures forth about once a week to buy groceries at a Safeway not too far away. Thelma, according to Lawton, is a very sweet lady these days, but that wasn't always the case. She had told Lawton during one of his pastoral calls that when she was younger she was not a good person and had been involved in some pretty wild things. But God, she remarked, had slowly changed her through the years. Occasionally, God builds the house overnight, but most times God nails up one board at a time. And in Thelma's situation, she confessed, it was a single board, one-day-at-a-time, life-long project.

A few years before Lawton retired, Thelma felt God wanted her to do something for his inner-city church. So she prayed about it, and after a while it was impressed upon her that God wanted her to save all her pennies for the children of the church. Thelma was hoping for something a little more grand and impressive, but she didn't complain. She told Lawton that a person had to start somewhere, so she saved her pennies from her shopping trips and other excursions she was able to make. At Christmas time, she wrapped up her pennies, about 15 dollars worth, and she gave them to the church. She told them it was for the children, and not to spend the money on any pew cushions or paper cups.

One afternoon a lady living down the hall from Thelma came to visit her, and she noticed Thelma's mayonnaise jar full of pennies. She asked her why she was saving pennies, and Thelma told her it was for the kids at church. The lady, whose name was Elizabeth, said, "I don't have a church. Would it be all right if I save up my pennies and give them to the kids at your church?" "Suit yourself. It's okay by me," Thelma said. Well, before long, thirty folks in that retirement center were saving their pennies for the kids!

Every Thursday, they would climb onto the retirement center's bus and head off to the Safeway. They would steer their carts up and down the aisles, getting their needed supplies, and then they would stand in line at the checkout counter. When it was their turn, they put their groceries on the moving belt, watching as each price would pop up on the register display. When it came time to pay, they counted out their bills one by one, and then they would ask for their change only in pennies. They would count that out, too, one penny at a time, with the other shoppers standing behind them rolling their eyes and growling under their breath. As Lawton remarked, these other customers were not aware that "a work of God" was underway!

The next year at Christmas time, the women loaded up their jars, and took their pennies to the church a couple of days before the Christmas party for the kids. The volunteer staff members for the party, as you may suspect, were overwhelmed, and by the time they finished putting

all the pennies in wrappers and counting all the rolls, they determined that the women from the retirement center had brought in more than 40,000 pennies! At the party that year, the children received more than token gifts, and they were happier than ever before.

When the kids found out who was behind the extra presents and gifts of food for their families, they wanted to visit the retirement center and sing Christmas carols. Lawton told me that he gathered all the kids together, along with their parents, and took them in “Big Blue,” the church’s ancient bus. They all assembled in the dining room late in the afternoon.

Lawton said he watched from the back row. In front of him sat one of the retirement center ladies who participated in the collection of pennies. Lawton didn’t know her, had never seen her, and he overheard her explaining to a woman he assumed was her daughter and her two grandchildren what was going on. “These children, you see, they’re from our church, and they’ve come to visit. Aren’t they sweet? We’re awfully close to them ... awfully close.”

The next week, one of the men from the retirement center passed away. Lawton was invited to come and conduct the memorial service right there in the simple parlor of the retirement center, which ... Lawton told me with tongue in cheek ... was fast becoming the “new church annex.”

Now, all of this, please remember, began with Thelma in her apartment praying to the Lord to let her do a mighty work. She admits that she was a little disappointed when the Lord impressed upon her that she should save up her pennies. She was hoping for a more flamboyant and impressive kind of ministry. She didn’t want to start with pennies, for she had something a whole lot larger in mind. But then, she told Lawton, she thought back on her own life, and she reflected how sometimes God builds houses just one board at a time. And if it’s good enough for God, she said, she found no cause to complain!

Now, I haven’t told you this story to inspire you in your giving to the church nor to encourage you in the slow progress of our capital campaign ... though, if by this story you are so inspired and encouraged, so much the better! Rather, this story of Thelma and her pennies teaches us some important truths about the patience of God as God’s love takes root in our lives and as God’s vision for the human family makes its home in our hearts ... and through us, brings forth change in the world.

You see, God is at work in the world through our lives, and God has great expectations and wondrous dreams which involve his love, our lives, our community, and our church. William Coffin puts it this way: “If the Word of God can call forth shoots from dry stumps, a people from dry bones, sons and daughters from the stones at our feet, babes from barren wombs, and new life from the tomb, then this Word, mightier than any power, can call forth from each of us a new creation, and no one of us should rest comfortably with anything less ... no matter how long it takes.”

God's love is stubborn and steadfast as God moves in and through our lives to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. Those changes that are required for us to fulfill God's vision in the world take place over many years, sometimes many generations, with these changes taking place one board at a time, one penny at a time, one day at a time. And such a process takes patience on our part, even the patience of God, which is a profoundly spiritual and deeply personal discipline within our shared and individual faith journeys.

Thinking of our Mission Trip to NYC and our church's larger mission in the world, I remembered this week a prayer penned by Ted Loder that reflects God's patience, as well as the deepest hope we ourselves have for personal change and social transformation. At its heart, this prayer speaks of our spiritual yearning to be at one and in communion with God, our neighbors, and ourselves:

“Sometimes, Lord, it just seems to be too much:
 too much violence, too much fear;
 too much of demands and problems;
 too much of broken dreams and broken lives;
 too much of war and slums and poverty and dying;
too much of greed and selfishness and the sounds of people devouring each other and the earth.
Too much, Lord, too much,
 too bloody, bruising, brain-numbing much.
Or is it too little –
 too little of compassion,
 too little of courage, of daring, of persistence, of sacrifice;
 too little of music and laughter and celebration?
O God,
 make of me some nourishment for these starved times,
 some food for my brothers and sisters
 who are hungry for gladness and hope,
 that, being bread for them,
 I may also be fed
 and be full.”

Let us pray: Lord, thank you for the high calling we share and for the new creation you call us to be as your co-workers, who are called to live our faith in action, blending love and justice, and ever seeking to reflect your life-giving and merciful graces; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.