

PATIENCE AND DEFIANCE

James 5: 1-11

There's a lot of injustice in the world. And sometimes, there's injustice in our personal lives too. Why should I or someone I care about get really sick so that life becomes highly limited if not terminal? Why should I have to struggle so much financially even though I'm a good person and work hard? Why should I be treated badly even though I try so hard to be a good person with integrity? Why should I suffer mistreatment or the cold shoulder because of who I am as a person because of the colour of my skin, my race, my religion, my gender, how I dress, or my sexuality? Why? It's not fair.

And even though sometimes people tell us we're so much better off than others in the world, it is also true that others in the world who are not as kind, considerate, caring or honest get away with murder, so to speak. They get rich, they have their comforts and their health, and things just go their way. How is that fair?

Well, sometimes perspective helps. And sometimes, hope helps, if we can believe in it. Sometimes resistance and protest helps and sometimes we need to find the peace of accepting what is, fair or not. So how do we find any of that? Do we need more patience in our lives and more tolerance? Or do we need greater defiance? What can help us live better, more liberated, more fulfilled and empowered?

There is a family in the Palestinian West Bank, near the ancient town of Bethlehem where Jesus was born. This family are Palestinian and they are Christian. They own a farm where they grow olives and this farm has been in their family for well over 100 years. The family's name is Nassar. But here's something else about this family that makes them special. They call their farm: "The Tent of Nations", and they promote programs that believe in the idea that Jews and Arabs can live together in peace. They hold summer camps for children where they promote non-violence as the basis of learning how to work for peace in the world. The three siblings who run the farm: Daoud, Amal and Daher quote Martin Luther King Jr. "It's very important for us to show that nonviolent resistance is the key to change... With violence, people will only achieve more violence, more hatred, more bitterness and they will only become greater enemies."

Even though it's extremists on both sides that are making the headlines, and even though news reports highlight all the bombings, shootings and killings happening on a daily basis, the Nassars represent a lesser known group of people on both sides who believe violence can never win peace.

But how are the Nassars and others not discouraged? Jewish settlers have attacked them and encroached on their farmland to build housing. Even though the authorities have blocked such encroachment, the Nassars have also been prevented from farming their crops “for safety reasons” they’ve been told. This past summer they had to cancel their summer camp for safety reasons. Their access to electricity to run their farm has been sabotaged. They’ve have to work around this by setting up solar panels to get their power and rainwater cisterns to pipe in their water. With every setback they just grit their teeth and stick to their values. It’s part of their Christian faith. They identify with the biblical Job whom they view as defiant before God in his praying, and defiant against any who would tell him to be quiet and accept all that happens as God’s will.

Wow! OK, the reference to Job is fascinating. And before I go on with more of the Nassars’ story, let’s dig into this perspective on Job. Maybe it will entice you to consider our fall bible study on Job. The character of Job and the story of Job have a long history in the western world. People have been fascinated by this ancient figure of a man who had it all and lost it all despite being good, generous and hard working. Job represents unjust suffering, the unfairness in the world and the truth that, God or no God, this world can be as terrible as it can be wonderful. As much as we’d like to think we’re safe in our little corner of the world and that we have things under control, we also know that it would only take a few things to go wrong for us before our world is turned upside down. We may be far away from what happens to Job and what the Nassars are struggling with, but how many circumstances need to change before we’re falling apart?

But here’s the thing about Job. There are many ways to read him. Job appears in many books, in songs, plays and art throughout western history. But how he has been interpreted is not the same at all. And even though there is one biblical book of Job, by the time James is writing his letter to the church in our New Testament, there are other stories about Job also circulating.

So then, let me dig into at least two opposite interpretations of Job we have been given. First, there is the “patience” of Job. When I was starting ministry I remember visiting an elderly woman of the congregation. She had a wonderfully gracious spirit about her. Even though she had suffered multiple losses and had a chronic health condition for years, she told me how she had been taught by her mother about the need to cultivate the kind of patience the biblical Job exemplified in the face of his suffering.

Have you ever heard that phrase: “The Patience of Job”? It is a well-known phrase, especially in older English, and it is derived from an older translation of our scripture reading. But what do we understand by such a phrase? Is it that we put up with suffering and just accept it? There is something courageous about patience, and even resilient about it. How do you just cultivate patience in a situation you can’t change or a relationship that you just can’t give up on? Patience requires courage, commitment and tenacity. It’s also about acceptance. We must learn how to

accept what we cannot change, to find some measure of peace in it being what it is, and then the strength day by day to live it.

On the other hand, patience can also have another side to it. Patience can be more like endurance, persistence, and even a stubborn defiance. We keep at something; we bide our time and we refuse to give up or give in. We may not be able to change something right now as much as we want to, and so we hunker down and keep working at it, chipping away in our resistance and stubborn refusal to capitulate in discouragement or defeat. The defiance of Job is what seems to energize the Nassars. Or is it also patience?

Before I return to the Nassars, let me bring it back to us for a bit. What do we identify with more? What energizes us more? Is it patience or defiance, however we understand such words? Or do we need to re-evaluate situations and relationships in our lives some more to discern what we need more of? Are we enabling a situation or behaviour too much with our patience? Or, on the other hand, is our defiance too much a barrier to a more cooperative way through? Let's dive into our scripture reading in search of some revelatory guidance.

If you read the whole of this letter of James, you will see that James has a real bias against rich people. Why? In his world and our world too, he sees how riches are often gained at the expense of people. By active oppression and by abuse and neglect, by poor wages paid out and by a system set up legally and financially to benefit some over others, a world has been created that allows a few to suck up all the land and its resources at the expense of masses of folk who lack the means, the resources and the selfishness to be so ruthless and calculating for their own advantage. Even as the wealthy amass obscene amounts of treasure on earth, they will be profoundly impoverished eternally when they must account for their life-choices.

But how, then, are those victims of a social system so profoundly cruel and unfair to live? In James' world, hope for change is not realistic. So are people to give up then? Never! One thing James emphasizes throughout the letter is that the community called church is supposed to be a place that honours the poor and makes the rich uncomfortable. But more than this, in our passage in particular, he urges the inculcation of particular qualities of character. James names patience and endurance. Change may not come in the current system, but we pray God's kingdom come and God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. That will happen, maybe in our lifetime and maybe beyond it. But in the meantime, we keep at it patiently and defiantly.

But one more thing. Patience, like endurance and like stubborn defiance can make us angry and bitter and even cruel and hateful. James says this: "You have heard about the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful." If God is compassionate and merciful in God's purposes, we too are called to be so compassionate and merciful. We must endure and even defy what we can in our world of unfairness, but we must do so with compassion and mercy in our hearts. If we lose that we

lose it all. And sadly, that's what happens to many in our world: defeat and despair along with hate and bitterness.

So what about the Nassars? What can they teach us about patience and defiance? Here's their approach: "If they come to uproot one olive tree, I want to plant ten," says Amal Nassar. The Nassars will overcome the violence of guns and bombs by planting trees and cultivating their farm as a refuge of peace for all people no matter their race.

The Nassars also welcome international volunteers, and this is helpful because it shines a light on what is happening and how there is a quiet yet patiently defiant peace movement also active within Israel and the Palestinian territories refusing to give up or give in. "We choose to build a healthier generation, learning to accept each other, to deal with each other as human beings," Amal says. "We want children to grow up without hatred."

Even though Israel's leadership is extremist, even though Hamas is a terrorist organization, and even though the Palestinian authority is corrupt, autocratic and ineffective, efforts of Israelis and Palestinians beneath that tier of leadership are bearing witness everyday that they will not give up or give in. Whether it's crying up to God for justice like Job or demanding a just peace by treating each other as human beings, the Nassars and others will not give in to hate or revenge. "Hate is like a bomb in the heart. It explodes with violence," says one of the brothers. Love, however, enlarges the heart, and makes space for hope in what can yet be.

So, what about you and me? We're a long way away from Israel-Palestine and the generations of violence and death people there have had to contend with. And yet, all of us know something of the unfairness of life in all our vulnerable humanity. Whether it's the system, people or the chance situations, circumstances and accidents of life that turn our lives upside down, we know that too many things can go wrong beyond anything we can control. What qualities of character and practices of prayer may help us? Are they qualities and practices that teach us ever greater patience, trusting that new ways are possible? Are they qualities and practices that liberate and empower us toward resistance and defiance with a stubbornness that refuses to give in? Is it sometimes one and sometimes the other? What do we need more of in our lives?

Like Job and like the Nassars among others, may we be ever more inspired and empowered to enlarge, deepen and enrich our humanity as children of God and followers of Jesus who was crucified for refusing to give up or give in, but who was resurrected, empowering all those who put their trust in him to believe in God's kingdom of justice and love. There will be new life past the crucifying hate and soulless indifference in the world. Love must be patiently defiant to outlast and to rise up beyond all that kills life.

May we believe, may we hope and may we actively love our neighbour as ourselves with our patience and our defiance. Amen.