

A Long Obedience in the Same Direction  
 Hebrews 10:19-25, 32-39; Matthew 10:5-22  
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*I will say it again: what seems to be essential 'in heaven and on earth' is that there be obedience in one direction for a long time. In the long term, this always brings and has brought about something that makes life on earth worth living.*

-Friedrich Nietzsche,  
*Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, p.78

Eugene Peterson, long-time pastor of a small church in Maryland and translator of *The Message*, said a quality that he prized in church members was tenacity. Quoting Luke 8:15, “hold the word fast in an honest and good heart,” Peterson suggested that a tenacious determination that holds onto the gospel and puts one foot in front of the other down the long path of obedience is what it takes to be the church, to be Christian in today’s world.

Friedrich Nietzsche said, “I will say it again: what seems to be essential ‘in heaven and on earth’ is that there be obedience in one direction for a long time. In the long term, this always brings and has brought about something that makes life on earth worth living” (*Beyond Good and Evil*, p.78).

Peterson, inspired by Nietzsche’s quote, said that the mindset of most of the American church is that of a tourist. “Religion is understood as a visit to an attractive site to be made when we have adequate leisure. For some it is a weekly jaunt to church. For others, occasional visits to special services. Some, with a bent

for religious entertainment and sacred diversion, plan their lives around special events like retreats, rallies, and conferences. We go to see a new personality; to hear a new truth, to get a new experience ... The religious life is defined as the latest and newest ... We'll try anything – until something else comes along” (*A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, p.16).

Instead of being tourists, Peterson called us back to some older terms: disciple and pilgrim. “Disciples ... says we are people who spend our lives apprenticed to our master, Jesus Christ. We are in a growing-learning relationship, always.” Pilgrim, on the other hand, reminds us that “we are people who spend our lives going someplace, going to God, and whose path for getting there is the Way, Jesus Christ” (p.17).

Disciples, pilgrims on a long obedience in the same direction. Hence, a tenacious determination, spiritual endurance for the long journey. It is who we are called to be, and what we are called to do.

A couple of years ago, I read an interview with a Ukrainian pastor, Ivan Rusyn, who was on the front lines of battle with Ukrainian troops. He said:

*We have been serving communion for our soldiers in the open air. We say, “Thank you for your service.” They say, “No, thank you for your service.” The church is present; we haven’t fled to somewhere else. And I think after this war; many Christians, as well as secular people, will ask, “Where were you when we were being killed?” And Christian leaders will be able to say, “I was with you. I was here. I was in Kyiv.” And it will be very powerful.”*

What Rusyn was saying, is that there are times when the witness of the church, is in our suffering alongside those who suffer. It is in our ability to persevere and endure in a hurting world. Rusyn went on to say:

*“We are not of this world but we are in this world for the sake of this world ... We have to be engaged if we want to a true church. For me it was very important that I remain here with my people. If I evacuate before everybody else, what kind of pastor am I?”*

With a terrible war going on, cruel and brutal violence, and so much death, the interviewer asked Rusyn if he still believed in God. He answered, “I may have had some thoughts before the war. But now I have no doubts” (*Plough*, May 6, 2022).

Rusyn reminds me of the words of Andre Trocme teaching his Le Chambon congregation, what he called, *morale de combat*, an ethic of combat. Trocme was emphatic that this was not about violence. It was about engagement, an active way of living in the world. For the church to be the church, it must be willing to jump into the fray, lean into it and engage it as disciples of Jesus Christ, which means the church will suffer – a lot. The church will be alongside those who suffer as well as being real about our own suffering. It must be willing to endure over the long haul.

That’s a pretty tall order.

The writer of Hebrews is writing to such a church. They know about serving and loving and giving, but they also are a small church overwhelmed in their suffering and the suffering world around them. The Emperor Claudius is giving them hell and the surrounding culture is hostile to them. Furthermore, they have

been standing on tiptoes expecting and looking for Christ's return any day, every day, but they are tired of standing on tiptoes. Christ still has not returned. To use the expression of my grandmother, they are "give out." They are exhausted and near despair.

The writer tells them and tells us: "Let's hold on to our faith without wavering. Christ Jesus has promised to be faithful and will not quit, so let's not quit, either. Let us provoke one another to love and serve. And don't neglect meeting together because that's where we encourage one another. If you don't meet together, you'll become even more discouraged. God encourages us when we're together" (Hebrews 10:23-25).

What the writer of Hebrews is reminding the small congregation, is that it is essential for the endurance on the long journey, to practice drawing in for worship, fellowship, and prayer, before the going out in service. New Testament scholar Tom Long uses the analogy of a heart. A healthy heart for the long haul must do two things well: good diastolic pressure is when the blood is drawn in and the heart is most relaxed, and systolic pressure pumps the blood out. There is a drawing in and a sending out. A good church does the same thing. Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit draws us to him, creating a new community where we grow and learn, and where we are encouraged. And where we get organized, trained, and prepare ourselves. And the same Holy Spirit sends us out in mission and service. To endure for the long haul takes both (Thomas G. Long, *Proclaiming the Parables*, p.261).

Matthew tells us this morning of Jesus drawing in the twelve and then sending them out to serve in his name. This is the first place they are called "apostles" (v. 2) which means "sent out." Matthew gives us a list, beginning with

the familiar Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John and ending with Judas Iscariot, “the one who betrayed him.”

Matthew knows and we know what happened to Jesus. For Matthew the dramatic tension is not, what will happen to Jesus. The dramatic question is what will happen to the disciples? Will they stay faithful? Will they endure and stick with it? Or will they quit? Will they do what Jesus said do? Or will they betray him. What will we do?

Jesus sends the disciples, the apostles, out into Jewish towns and villages. The Gentile and Samaritan towns will have to wait until after Jesus’ resurrection; for now, his base, his foundational constituency is to be tended to, so the apostles go to the villages proclaiming that the good news that God’s Way, the kingdom of God, is right there among them. And he tells them to do what he does: heal and make whole, teach, serve, love, forgive, and speak and embody the Way of Shalom, peace. Go and show them what grace and mercy looks like.

He also tells them two other things: be prepared for rejection and travel light. If you are welcomed into a house, if they receive you with hospitality, then the peace, the shalom of God is present and you say so. But get ready, for there will be some places where you will not be welcomed and if that happens, simply shake the dust from your feet as you leave. They are pronouncing their own judgement upon themselves.

Matthew reminds us that the standard of judgement is not by how well we are received or rejected, and it is not if we are large or small. Are we doing what Jesus said do? Are we embodying grace or not? Faithfulness is our standard, not success or failure. Our calling is to point to Christ Jesus. If we have the door slammed in our face let it be because of Christ. If people choose not to come to

church here, let it because they reject the Way of Jesus, not because we were not attentive or warm and loving. Not because we didn't care, or we were too busy, or we didn't show up.

Jesus says not only must you prepared for rejection, but you also need to travel light. You must be ready to improvise, be quick on your feet. If the door opens, go through it and practice my Way. If the door is slammed, be quick, and go another direction. Improvise grace.

Years ago, before my time here, back in the early 1980's, Austin Heights hosted Mary Cosby for a church-wide retreat. Mary and her husband Gordon were from Church of the Savior in Washington D.C., a remarkable, legendary small congregation to this day. She said that Gordon liked to say that we need to plan, we need solid thinking about what might emerge in our life together, and about the direction we hope to travel. We're not supposed to be sloppy in our thinking. But he said, "I would hold very loosely to the plan and depend much more on the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the moment" (from *Sojourners*, Aug - Sept. 1991, 27).

Gordon Cosby is telling us what Jesus tells us in Matthew. Look ahead. Update your bylaws, elect new deacons, fill your committees, and prepare your personnel committee for big changes, like your long-time pastor retiring. Get your act together. And then, be ready to improvise. The grace of God enables us to improvise.

Improvisation is possible when we are drawn in and know who we are, we know our script and we practice it so much that it becomes habitual. Then we walk out there, with the help of the Holy Spirit, and we improvise.

Tiffani Harris, the Associate Pastor of Dayspring Baptist Church in Waco, who was here to lead us in a weekend and preach several months ago, probably knows about the migrant ministry and providing a good, safe, way house about as well as anyone. Tiffany has told us that to do ministry like we're learning to do with Casa Peregrina takes two things: perseverance and the ability to improvise.

Perseverance, endurance, while also being quick on our feet, with supple minds and supple hearts.

Parker Palmer, Quaker, peace activist, writer, sociologist, whom I first read in the 1980's, knows about suffering, and knows how to endure over the long haul. Palmer writes, "My faith has been challenged by experiences of failure and experiences of clinical depression; times of deep darkness when I wasn't sure it was worth living anymore. I've been there and done that three major times in my life now. The experience of depression is really an experience of annihilation of self."

Palmer says he has learned this: "Suffering breaks our hearts — but there are two quite different ways for the heart to break. There's the brittle heart, characterized by isolation and fragmentation, that breaks apart into a thousand shards, a heart that retaliates and blames."

Then he said, "There's the supple heart, the one that breaks open, not apart, growing into greater capacity for the many forms of love. Only the supple heart can hold suffering in a way that opens to new life. Healing and transformation can come through suffering.

Palmer asks, "What can I do to make my tight heart more supple, the way a runner stretches to avoid injury? That's a question I ask myself every day. There are many ways to make the heart more supple, but all of them come down to this:

Take it in, take it all in! Be open and receive all of life's little deaths and little joys. It's a kind of exercise that keeps our hearts open and supple and more ready for the big things when they come along."

Palmer concludes, "What I don't understand is how some people are able to come through depression and suffering and find themselves more alive and more whole on the other side. We prepare. Our hearts are open. But when it gets down to it, there is a mystery of tenacity, a mystery of persevering through it all. I genuinely don't know. Grace is the only word I can fall back on" (from an interview, *On Being*).

Austin Heights, I've been walking alongside of you for a long time. 35 years, no less. And the journey in front looks treacherous and even longer. I'm preparing you and getting you ready for whatever is next. So, to paraphrase Hebrews, take each other's hands and hold on and not waver. Christ Jesus has promised to be faithful and will not quit, so let's not quit, either. Provoke one another to love and serve. And don't neglect meeting together because that's how we encourage one another. It is where God shows up.

And when it gets right down to it, I don't know how we will make it any more than I know how we've made it thus far – except by grace.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.