

When will we get there?

Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector, at the eleven o'clock service, June 5, 2011, The Seventh Sunday of Easter The Sunday after the Ascension. Based on Acts 1:6-14

We are an impatient species. Some of that quality may be genetic in our very DNA. Some of it is obviously learned. More often, perhaps it's a product of circumstance—a combination of nature and nurture, built into the way we live.

I remember as a kid growing up in the 50's, that my parents' favorite mode of vacation was driving. A destination was set and I was parked in the back seat where my constant refrain was, "When will we get there?" And I think I've confessed more than once that I'm one of those impatient subway riders who leans dangerously out over the platform to see if the train is coming. They have clocks in all the better stations now to tell you when the next train will arrive, but it's a hard habit to break.

In his book, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Luke recalls the scene where apostles came together and asked Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom?" *When will we get there?* To their impatience he replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority." Jesus then paints a picture of how they will not need to be anxious about time—how, when the Holy Spirit comes upon them, they'll receive the power they need to do the work they have been called to do. We learn that no good comes of setting times that never seem to happen.

In the late 60's, a group of four-year-olds at a pre-school at Stanford became part of a classic psychological experiment, led by Professor Walter Mischel. Mischel, a kindly man who was himself the father of little girls who had attended that school, would sit with a child in a small room off the classroom and put a marshmallow on the table. He'd tell the child that he or she could have the marshmallow. "But even better," he'd say, "you can have two marshmallows if you can wait until I get back." And then he left the room with the marshmallow on the table, staying away for twenty minutes.

He and his researchers found, interestingly, that somewhere around 30% of the children could wait and get the two marshmallows. He became so interested in what transpired, why some could wait and others could not wait, that he devised a much larger experiment over a number of years. The children were followed into adolescence. Those with the ability to wait were better adjusted and more dependable, based on the surveys of parents and teachers using carefully drawn criteria. They also scored significantly higher on standard aptitude tests.

Jonah Lehrer profiled Professor Mischel in *The New Yorker* and learned that some broad conclusions are still being drawn from this experiment. It was clear, for example, that every child wanted the marshmallow. What determined the degree of self-control, the ability to delay gratification and hold out for the second marshmallow—based on hundreds and hundreds of hours of observation—was the crucial skill he called "strategic allocation of attention."

The kids who couldn't wait, many of whom ate the marshmallow instantly when offered, were the ones who fixed their stare and attention on the marshmallow. The kids who could wait devised all kinds of tricks—looking around the room, gazing at the ceiling, girls playing with their pigtails, boys tending to shuffle their feet under the table. Anything but look at the marshmallow. They distracted themselves. They practiced small episodes of mental discipline. It wasn't that they defeated their desire. They just were able to forget it for twenty minutes. The key, researchers said, was in their thinking.

Then, Professor Mischel and his colleagues began teaching children a simple set of mental tricks, the things they had learned from the first participants in the study. The percentage of children who could delay the gratification went way up.

Now let's look again at the impatience of the apostles, those who had been with Jesus—chosen by him, deputized by him, sent out by him to do the early work of ministry. Remember that we are reading accounts of their impatience that were first published and became available at least two generations after the original events.

By then, impatience had set in. There's plenty of evidence in the letters of Paul and other documents that these earliest Christians expected the world would end in their lifetimes. When time began to extend, when the trip got longer, when the temptation was to ask "When will we get there?"—a different quality descended on the Christian family. And that quality was figuring out what to do here on earth while we wait.

In that question we come close to the core of the promise of human maturity for which we're created and the essence of Christian ministry to which I believe we continue to be called: just what do we do with our lives and time?

What those early followers honestly revealed about themselves in these texts, as in the one we've read today from Acts 1:6 ff., was that they really struggled to figure out a way to practice their new-found faith. It's the struggle, and their honest impatience, that we inherit. Our honest struggle can give us guidance about how to live, and now to practice this faith.

Theirs was a world, of course, that was very different from our own, at least on the surface. A non-technological world—world where few people traveled far from their home or knew much about people different from themselves. Still, like ours it was a world in which human nature was impatient. Where being unable to see oneself doing what one does—that degree of useful self-consciousness, that struggle with temptations and possibilities was, as it is now, a key to maturity—to a fulfilled human spirit.

Broadly speaking, the life and faith that they came up with reached back to the life and faith and ministry of Jesus. As they began to act out that life, they were positively distracted from their impatience. What did they discover? That Jesus lived a life of giving before taking. That he modeled the certainty that one will get what one needs in this world, eventually. Christian life is a life of delayed gratification.

And these impatient followers also displayed and recorded for us to read two thousand years later that ours is a religion of practice before it is a religion of doctrine. Practice means doing things with regularity and thoroughness, and the practice of sharing is something that's hard to do if you're so anxious that you believe you'll never get your share.

This Acts passage also shows Jesus' impatience with impatience: "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority." [1.7] Then, showing a touch of his own very human impatience: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" [1.11]

Of course, that follows the word picture of how "he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." [1.10] The more lurid Victorian portrayals of this "ascension" show the pale little toes of Jesus just about to be obscured by the clouds.

This is a homiletical problem. This is a public relations problem for Christianity if you take it literally. But to read it more broadly, you have to *work* at the texts—which is, I think, another form of delayed gratification.

If you do that, what's the message? It's not the means or the fact of propulsion into heaven. It's that Jesus, who was once there to be relied on, is now not there. It's that Jesus trusts us to grow into a maturity where we can minister in his name without his literal presence.

If we can hold out long enough to see that reality we will learn a great deal about life and faith.

The Ascension Day stories are not problems. They're word pictures meant to shock us and to make us realize that we're on our own. That we cope with daily real-life dilemmas and learn that a sense of patience, a sense of consciousness, a sense of the context that we're in is the sense of faith.

That sense, not childish impatience, will get us ultimately to where we are going.

Heaven stands, then, for the reality that we won't get everything done in our time or place, that there's more to see, that there's more embracing reality that will take eons to achieve. The ultimate delayed gratification.

One of the best expressions of this truth—and it's put in an ethical frame—came from Reinhold Niebuhr:

"Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith.

"Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness."

It's in this grand and long view that we can see Jesus as a personal Savior. Not as someone obsessed with our sins. Not as someone toting up doctrinal points. But as a personal force, an example who won't let go of your heart, and won't stop trying to influence your mind until they are bent toward a full-grown vision of life in which, by the way, you get the second marshmallow.

©2011 St. Bartholomew's Church in The City of New York.

For information about St. Bartholomew's and its life of faith and mission at an important American crossroads, write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212/378-0222, or visit stbarts.org.

325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022