

“Immediately! That’s Right, Immediately!”

Some of the first lessons we learn in life are concerned with having patience. As a child, if had been up me, dessert would have been served first. But not in my parents’ home, my sisters and I had to wait until the main meal was over. One time I saw an advertisement for an awesome super snow slider and I wanted it right away because of all the snow on the ground, but my mother told me that I would need to save up my allowance over the course of several months. “But I want it now, in three months the snow will be gone!”, I complained. “You’ll have to be patient”, she responded.

I think that this teaching about patience has been a strong part of my religious upbringing, too. Faith is strong on promises, but weak on delivery. It doesn’t mean that our faith doesn’t lead to the results, only that along with faith we also seem to need a lot of patience, because there may be a long time before we see those results.

Our friend Dale Baldwin loves his birthday, but he does not enjoy waiting for it. If you say the word “birthday” he’ll think it’s today! It’s very hard for him to be patient all the way to September.

And, of course, it seems to take forever to reach Christmas if you’re a child. When you’re five years old you have to wait for one fifth of your life to pass by before Christmas happens again, but when you’re 53, like me, Christmas comes around so fast it’s like the revolving door at an office building. But that 5 year old, it seems to take forever. Patience again.

If the fruit of religious faith is a heavenly reward, then you have to wait your whole life, until after you die, to experience it - another part of faith that seems to take forever for the promise to be delivered. Patience again.

Now what I find intriguing about the scripture story today is one key word. The story is about the day that Jesus went to the Jordan River to be baptized. John led Jesus into the water of the river and poured water over his head, and Jesus was soaked from head to toe. Now here’s the key word. After he was baptized, Jesus went up immediately from the water, and behold the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and a voice from heaven. The key word is “immediately”.

Immediately. Notice that there is nothing about this story that says Jesus or anyone else will need to be patient. John doesn’t say it to Jesus, “Sorry, Jesus, there’s a long line of people waiting to be baptized; why don’t you come back tomorrow?” God doesn’t say, “Jesus, someday you will be my beloved son, but not today. Go back to Nazareth and wait”. In fact, this story is filled with promise, it is overflowing with promise, and the results begin immediately.

By the way, for those of you wishing to become Biblical scholars, Matthew mentions the word “immediately” in this reading, but take a look at Mark’s Gospel sometime. The word “immediately” jumps off the page over and over again. Mark emphasizes that when it comes to Jesus there is no need for patience, because it’s happening right now. In fact, in Mark’s Gospel, the very first words that Jesus speaks in chapter one are: “The right time has come”, and soon after the fishermen immediately follow him.

Can we be a church that helps deliver on the promise of Jesus Christ immediately? It’s quite a challenge because we’ve trained ourselves to preach patience to ourselves and others. I’d like us to try impatience today, an eagerness to embrace what Jesus is ready to do right now. Jesus didn’t start off encouraging patience. He focused on immediate results: get baptized, look

for helpers, feed the hungry, heal the sick, help the victims, get down to Jerusalem.

Immediately ... OK, I don't mean that we shouldn't plan and make long-term goals, but there needs to be a strong element of immediacy in what we do.

Many years ago I attended a church service in Rochester where Jay Leshner, a Presbyterian preacher in Rochester, asked anyone without sin to raise their hands. Let me try it, too. Anyone here who is not a sinner, raise your hand. Just like here, everyone at Jay's church got the point right away and they kept their hands down. There was even some laughter about it. The preacher was about to go on, planning to emphasize how we are all indeed sinners in need of God's love and forgiveness, when he and everyone else realized that there was a hand raised high all the way in the back row. It was Carmen, a ten year old girl with Downes Syndrome ... Jay's own daughter. Her hand, both hands actually, were held high in the air, waving back and forth as she jumped up and down with a big smile. Jay was absolutely stunned, and it took all of the thunder out of his sermon. It turned out that Carmen knew something about the immediate results of following Jesus.

In that church everyone sat with their hands down, because they knew that they were sinners. Looking back on it all these years later I realize that we had become way too comfortable with our sin. But there was Carmen with both hands waving in the back row, and everyone saw how complacent we had become. We had cultivated patient faith, but had lost that spark that is so prominent in today's reading. And then there was Carmen, out there in the water with Jesus, waving her hands as if to say, "Come on into the water, everyone, the water is wonderful!"

Matthew and Mark got it right from the start. Yes, we are sinners, but Jesus set out to do something about it immediately. Sometimes, we get too comfortable saying, "Yeah, I'm a sinner just like everyone else," but we don't look at the other side of the coin. Carmen's hands waving reminded us that simply recognizing the sin in ourselves is only the beginning of faith, not the ending. Realization of sin shouldn't keep us from seeking the salvation of Christ with all of our power and might. Yes, we're all sinners before God, but if that is so, we should all be waving our hands to seek the hand of God which is always reaching out to us for immediate help.