

“DIVINE PATIENCE”

SEMINARY STUDENTS ARE THE MOST BRILLIANT THEOLOGIANS IN THE WORLD.

IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE ME, JUST ASK ONE.

I KNOW THIS IS TRUE BECAUSE I WAS ONCE A SEMINARIAN MYSELF.

I LIVED ON CAMPUS AT THE LOUISVILLE PRESBYTERIAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY.

AT THE TIME, THE DORMITORY OF THE SEMINARY HAD A RATHER INGENIOUS NAME.

IT WAS EMBLAZONED ACROSS THE FRONT OF THE BUILDING - “DORMITORY.”

IT CORRESPONDED TO THE ADMINISTRATION BUILDING THAT WAS NAMED “ADMINISTRATION” & THE LIBRARY THAT WAS – YES, “LIBRARY.”

WE ALSO HAD A STUDENT CENTER THAT WAS – WELL, YOU GET THE POINT.

ALL OF THEM HAD THEIR NAME IN BIG, BOLD, BLOCK LETTERS RIGHT ACROSS THE FRONT OF THE ENTRANCE.

WELL, IN THAT DORMITORY LIVED PERHAPS THE SMARTEST & MOST GIFTED THEOLOGICAL MINDS IN THE HISTORY OF THE PLANET.

WE WERE BRILLIANT!

WE WERE SMARTER THAN THE PROFESSORS & IF WE WERE SMARTER THAN THE PROFESSORS THEN IT STOOD TO REASON THAT WE WOULD BE INFINITELY SMARTER THAN THE PEOPLE IN OUR RESPECTIVE PRESBYTERIES WHO SAT ON WHAT WAS THEN KNOWN AS THE “CANDIDATES COMMITTEE” – SOMETHING WE NOW CALL THE “COMMITTEE ON PREPARATION FOR MINISTRY.”

WE WOULD REGULARLY SHARE TALES OF THE RIDICULOUS EXPECTATIONS PLACED UPON US BY THOSE UNREASONABLE & INSENSITIVE COMMITTEES.

WITH THE DETROIT PRESBYTERY, I EXPERIENCED A PARTICULARLY ARDUOUS JOURNEY WITH MY COMMITTEE AND, LOOKING BACK UPON IT, IT WAS PRIMARILY BECAUSE I WAS A PARTICULARLY DIFFICULT CANDIDATE.

EACH SEMINARY STUDENT HAD A MEMBER OF THE COMMITTEE WHO SERVED AS THEIR LIAISON.

MY LIAISON WAS A WOMAN NAMED EVE KELLY.

EVE MAINTAINED REGULAR COMMUNICATION WITH ME.

SHE SENT ME NOTES OF ENCOURAGEMENT & KEPT IN CONTACT WITH ME BY PHONE TO BE SURE I WAS DOING WELL IN SEMINARY & WAS KEEPING UP WITH THE REQUIREMENTS OF BOTH THE SEMINARY AS WELL AS THE PRESBYTERY.

I, ON THE OTHER HAND, WAS NOT SO RESPONSIBLE IN MY COMMUNICATION WITH EVE.

I DIDN'T RESPOND TO LETTERS & FREQUENTLY DIDN'T RETURN PHONE CALLS.

I MISSED DEADLINES & FAILED TO KEEP SCHEDULED APPOINTMENTS.

THE CANDIDATES COMMITTEE COULD HAVE, ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS, LEGITIMATELY TOLD ME THEY WERE FINISHED WITH ME.

BUT EVE WOULDN'T LET THEM.

SHE PRODDED ME & ENCOURAGED ME & CHALLENGED ME.

FOR THREE YEARS, EVE KELLY DISPLAYED INCREDIBLE PATIENCE IN HER DEALINGS WITH ME & WASN'T GOING TO QUIT UNTIL SHE DID EVERYTHING IN HER POWER TO SEE THAT I WAS APPROVED FOR ORDINATION BY THE DETROIT PRESBYTERY.

WHILE I WAS OBSTINATE, UNCOOPERATIVE & SOMETIMES DOWNRIGHT BELLIGERENT, EVE MAINTAINED HER PATIENCE.

IT WAS, TO ME, A SYMBOL OF "DIVINE PATIENCE" BECAUSE THAT KIND OF PATIENCE COULD HAVE COME FROM NOWHERE BUT THE HAND OF GOD WORKING IN EVE'S LIFE UPON MINE.

"DIVINE PATIENCE" WAS WHAT PAUL EXPERIENCED IN *HIS* LIFE & IT'S THAT DIVINE PATIENCE OF WHICH HE SPEAKS IN THIS SECTION OF HIS FIRST LETTER TO HIS PROTÉGÉ, TIMOTHY.

HERE HE ACKNOWLEDGES WHO HE WAS IN THE MOST BRUTALLY HONEST FASHION.

HE DOESN'T EXCUSE HIS BEHAVIOR.

HE DOESN'T DIMINISH THE WICKEDNESS OF HIS ACTIONS.

IN HIS FORMER LIFE AS A PERSECUTOR OF CHRISTIANS, PAUL WAS COCKSURE OF HIMSELF & THE CORRECTNESS OF HIS ACTIONS.

HE WAS SURE HE WAS DOING THE RIGHT THING.

HE WAS SURE ENOUGH TO STAND BY & CONSENT TO STEPHEN'S STONING.

HE WAS SURE ENOUGH TO HUNT CHRISTIANS DOWN & DRAG THEM AWAY FROM THEIR HOMES & THEIR FAMILIES TO BE PUNISHED FOR THEIR COMMITMENT TO JESUS CHRIST.

YES, PAUL WAS SURE THAT HE WAS RIGHT.

REMEMBER THAT LAST WEEK WE TALKED ABOUT GOD CHANGING HIS MIND & WE TALKED ABOUT THE ORIGIN OF THE WORD USED FOR "CHANGE."

IT ALSO MEANS "TO REPENT" OR "TO TURN."

THAT'S WHAT PAUL DID.

HE "CHANGED" – HE "REPENTED" – HE "TURNED."

I THINK IT'S HARD FOR US TO UNDERSTAND WHAT THIS KIND OF CHANGING, REPENTING & TURNING MEANT.

IT'S HARD TO UNDERSTAND WHAT IT MEANT FOR PAUL & IT'S HARD TO UNDERSTAND WHAT IT MEANT TO THE CHRISTIANS HE HAD PREVIOUSLY ATTACKED & PERSECUTED.

IT WOULD BE LIKE SARAH PALIN ANNOUNCING THAT SHE WAS BECOMING A DEMOCRAT OR NANCY PELOSI HOLDING A PRESS CONFERENCE TO SAY SHE WAS NOW A REPUBLICAN!

WE'D BE SHOCKED!

WE'D BE STUNNED!

AND WE WOULD ALSO BE SKEPTICAL.

MEMBERS OF THE PARTY TO WHICH THEY'D CONVERTED WOULD SAY, "*WE DON'T WANT YOU – AND WHAT'S MORE, WE DON'T TRUST YOU!*"

BUT WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT IT, EVEN *THAT* ISN'T A VERY GOOD ANALOGY BECAUSE WHEN IT COMES RIGHT DOWN TO IT, SARAH PALIN & NANCY PELOSI ARE BOTH AMERICANS DOING & STANDING FOR WHAT THEY THINK IS BEST FOR THIS NATION.

NO MATTER HOW MUCH THEY MAY DISAGREE POLITICALLY & IDEOLOGICALLY, THEY'RE STILL AMERICANS WHO LOVE THIS COUNTRY.

NO, A BETTER ANALOGY TO HELP US UNDERSTAND HOW CHRISTIANS OF THE TIME WOULD HAVE VIEWED PAUL'S CONVERSION IS TO CONSIDER AN ANNOUNCEMENT FROM OSAMA BIN LADEN THAT HE'D HAD A VISION FROM GOD & HE WAS CONVERTING TO CHRISTIANITY.

HE WAS REPENTING, TURNING & CHANGING FROM THE EVIL HE HAD DONE & WOULD NOW COMMIT HIS LIFE TO CHRIST & THE CAUSE OF WORLD PEACE.

EVEN IF HE WERE CONVERTING FROM TERRORISM TO AUTHENTIC MUSLIM BELIEFS WOULD BE A STUNNING ANNOUNCEMENT.

LIKEWISE, PAUL'S CONVERSION WAS STUNNING & IT WAS UNDERSTANDABLY TREATED WITH A HIGH DEGREE OF SKEPTICISM & MISTRUST.

I THINK THIS RAISES A QUESTION OF WHAT OUR ROLE SHOULD BE WITH SOMEONE WHO HAS MADE A MESS OUT OF THEIR LIFE.

LOOK AT PAUL.

THE WORK OF CHRIST IN PAUL'S HEART WAS HELPED AND SUPPORTED BY THE FAITH & THE LOVE HE FOUND IN THE MEMBERS OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY.

THE GRACE OF CHRIST CAME ALIVE FOR HIM IN THE UNDERSTANDING, THE GRACE & THE PATIENCE OF THOSE LIKE ANANIAS WHO OPENED PAUL'S EYES & CALLED HIM "BROTHER;" BY THOSE LIKE BARNABAS WHO STOOD BY HIM WHEN THE REST OF THE CHURCH LOOKED UPON HIM WITH SUSPICION.

THERE ARE, SO OFTEN, THOSE WHO FEEL UNWORTHY TO BE PART OF THE CHURCH.

THERE ARE THOSE WHO HAVE *NEVER* TRIED TO BECOME PART OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY BECAUSE THEY HAVE THIS MISTAKEN IDEA THAT CHURCH IS FOR "GOOD" PEOPLE – CHURCH IS FOR THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE IT ALL TOGETHER – CHURCH IS FOR THOSE WHO HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS – CHURCH IS FOR THOSE WHO NEVER MESS UP.

HOW HAVE WE MANAGED TO CONVEY TO THE WORLD SUCH A MISUNDERSTANDING OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A FOLLOWER OF JESUS CHRIST?!

THE CHURCH IS MORE NEARLY THE OPPOSITE OF THAT!

IT'S FOR THOSE OF US WHO *AREN'T* GOOD PEOPLE – IT'S FOR THOSE OF US WHO *DON'T* HAVE IT ALL TOGETHER – IT'S FOR THOSE OF US *DON'T* (UNLIKE SEMINARIANS) HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS – IT'S FOR THOSE OF US WHO, DAY AFTER DAY, MESS UP!

IF YOU *DON'T* FIT INTO ONE OR MORE OF THOSE CATEGORIES, THEN YOU *DON'T* NEED TO BE HERE. THE CHURCH IS AN IMPERFECT PLACE FILLED WITH IMPERFECT PEOPLE WHO ARE TRYING IMPERFECTLY TO FOLLOW A PERFECT SAVIOR.

I'M BEEN GIVING THOUGHT RECENTLY TO OUR NEED FOR A NEW PICTORIAL CHURCH DIRECTORY. I WAS LOOKING AT THE OLAN MILLS CHURCH DIRECTORY WEBSITE.

ONE OF THE STATEMENTS THEY MAKE IS RATHER INTERESTING. IT SAYS, "*OLAN MILLS' TRAINED ARTISTS CAN TOUCH UP YOUR PROFESSIONAL PORTRAITS TO YOUR LIKING. FOR AN ADDITIONAL FEE, BLEMISHES, WRINKLES, AND AGE SPOTS CAN BE SEAMLESSLY ELIMINATED FROM YOUR PORTRAIT.*"

AS MANY OF YOU KNOW FROM YOUR OWN PHOTOSHOPPING EXPERIENCE, YOUR PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGE CAN BE MADE TO LOOK CONSIDERABLY BETTER THAN THE HUMAN REALITY YOU SEE IN THE MIRROR EVERY MORNING!

I'M AFRAID FAR TOO MANY OF US "PHOTOSHOP" OURSELVES WHEN WE COME TO CHURCH! WE DON'T COME AS WE REALLY ARE – FAILED & FRAIL. WE COME AS WE THINK WE THINK WE *OUGHT* TO BE OR AS WE IMAGINE *OTHERS* THINK WE OUGHT TO BE. IN HER BOOK CLOISTER WALK, KATHLEEN NORRIS RECALLS HOW AS A LITTLE GIRL "*GOING TO CHURCH MEANT DRESSING UP, BOTH LITERALLY IN PRETTY CLOTHES & FIGURATIVELY IN SUPERFICIAL CHEERFULNESS.*"

THESE WORDS OF PAUL TO TIMOTHY ARE AN ENCOURAGEMENT TO MOVE BEYOND THE SUPERFICIAL & ACKNOWLEDGE WHO WE ARE – FALLEN SINNERS WHO ARE SAVED BY GRACE.

HE URGES US TO RECOGNIZE THE "DIVINE PATIENCE" OF GOD THAT – LIKE EVE KELLY WITH ME - PRODS US, ENCOURAGES US & CHALLENGES US.

AN EARLY CHURCH LEADER – ST. MAXIMOS THE CONFESSOR – WRITING IN THE 7TH CENTURY, SAID, "*THE PERSON WHO HAS COME TO KNOW THE WEAKNESS OF HUMAN NATURE HAS GAINED EXPERIENCE OF DIVINE POWER. SUCH A PERSON NEVER BELITTLES ANYONE...HE KNOWS THAT GOD IS LIKE A GOOD & LOVING PHYSICIAN WHO HEALS WITH INDIVIDUAL TREATMENT EACH OF THOSE WHO ARE TRYING TO MAKE PROGRESS.*"

"...TRYING TO MAKE PROGRESS."

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM, WHICH IS ONE OF THE CREEDS & CONFESSIONS OF OUR DENOMINATION, INCLUDES A LONG EXPOSITION OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS.

IT THEN ASKS WHETHER A CHRISTIAN MIGHT KEEP THESE COMMANDMENTS PERFECTLY.

THE RESPONSE OF THE CATECHISM IS SHOCKING IN ITS CANDOR: "*NO, FOR EVEN THE HOLIEST BELIEVER MAKES ONLY A SMALL BEGINNING IN OBEDIENCE IN THIS LIFE.*"

"...ONLY A SMALL BEGINNING."

THAT'S ALL WE CAN HOPE FOR!

THAT'S WHY WE RELY ON THE "DIVINE PATIENCE" OF GOD.

THAT'S WHY WE RELY ON THE DIVINE PATIENCE OF OUR BROTHERS & SISTERS IN FAITH AS WE GO ABOUT OUR DAILY WALK WITH CHRIST.

WHILE OUR FAMILY WAS ON VACATION A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO, WE FOUND OURSELVES, FORTUITOUSLY, STAYING IN A HOTEL IN A REMOTE REGION OF NORTHERN MICHIGAN WHEN WE LEARNED THERE WAS TO BE A HUGE METEOR SHOWER THAT NIGHT.

WE PACKED THE KIDS IN THE CAR & DROVE TO AN EVEN *MORE* REMOTE AREA.

WE SAT ON THE HOOD OF THE CAR & COUNTED THE SHOOTING STARS – LITERALLY HUNDREDS OF THEM OVER THE COURSE OF AN HOUR OR SO.

HAD WE BEEN ANYWHERE ELSE, WE SURELY WOULD HAVE MISSED MOST OF THEM.

BUT THE REASON WE *DIDN'T* MISS THEM WAS BECAUSE THE DARK WAS SO MUCH DARKER.

THERE WAS NO LIGHT FROM THE CITY TO COMPETE WITH THE STARS.

THE SKY WAS JET BLACK & AGAINST THAT VERY DARK BACKDROP THE LIGHT OF THE STARS SEEMED ESPECIALLY BRILLIANT.

I THINK THAT'S PART OF WHAT PAUL MEANS WHEN HE SAYS, "*BUT FOR THAT VERY REASON I RECEIVED MERCY, SO THAT IN ME, AS THE FOREMOST, JESUS CHRIST MIGHT DISPLAY THE UTMOST PATIENCE, MAKING ME AN EXAMPLE TO THOSE WHO WOULD COME TO BELIEVE IN HIM FOR ETERNAL LIFE.*"

PAUL'S LIFE, AS THE WORST OF SINNERS, WAS LIKE A DARK BACKDROP AGAINST WHICH THE BEAUTY OF GOD'S GRACE ONLY SHOWED MORE BRILLIANTLY.

THAT EXTREME CONTRAST, PAUL SAYS, SERVED AS AN EXAMPLE FOR OTHERS WHO MIGHT BELIEVE.

PEOPLE COULD LOOK AT PAUL'S LIFE & SEE HIS GREAT SIN & SEE GOD'S GREAT GRACE & BE ENCOURAGED TO BELIEVE THAT GOD REALLY CAN & DOES FORGIVE SIN – EVEN GREAT SIN.

THIS IS WHY PAUL'S WORDS ARE SO IMPORTANT.

FOR THOSE WHO FEEL AS THOUGH THEY'VE MESSED UP SO BADLY THAT NOT EVEN GOD COULD FORGIVE THEM, PAUL'S WORDS GIVE HOPE.

FOR THOSE WHO FEEL AS THOUGH THEY'VE TESTED GOD'S PATIENCE ONE TOO MANY TIMES, THE EXAMPLE OF PAUL PROVIDES ENCOURAGEMENT.

FOR THOSE WHO FEEL THE THINGS THEY'VE DONE HAVE LEFT THEM WITHOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF RESTORATION & REDEMPTION, PAUL OFFERS THE ASSURANCE THAT IT'S NEVER TOO LATE TO BE A RECIPIENT OF GRACE, MERCY & UNMERITED FORGIVENESS.

THE "DIVINE PATIENCE" OF GOD WILL NEVER GIVE UP ON YOU.

LET THESE WORDS OF PAUL ASSURE YOU – "*THE SAYING IS SURE & WORTHY OF FULL ACCEPTANCE, THAT CHRIST JESUS CAME INTO THE WORLD TO SAVE SINNERS.*"

**HE CAME TO SAVE YOU – AND IN HIS “DIVINE PATIENCE” HE WILL WALK BY YOUR SIDE UNTIL YOU
BELIEVE IT & ACCEPT IT. AMEN.**

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