

"THE HARDEST VIRTUE"

August 13, 1989

TEXT: Psalm 35:22 "Thou hast seen, O Lord; be not silent! O Lord, be not far from me! Bestir thyself, and awake for my right, for my cause, my God and my Lord! Vindicate me, O Lord, according to thy righteousness."

I wonder what went through your mind when you saw the title to this morning's sermon. "The Hardest Virtue." What in the world is that? Well; I suppose it depends a good deal on one's own point of view. But for me, there can be only one choice. As some of you know, last June I had surgery for a torn cartilage in my knee. And, in the weeks that followed, I realized, not for the first time, that for me at least the hardest virtue is patience.

At first things went very quickly. The surgery was at 7:30 in the morning, and by two o'clock that afternoon I was back in my own home. Perhaps I expected that same kind of speed throughout the healing process, I do not know. But, during these past ten weeks I have been anything but patient. My mind tells me not to rush things, but something inside me is like the man who prayed, "O Lord, give me patience. And I want it NOW!"

Nor does it help when I read passages like Romans 5:3-4, in which St. Paul writes, "More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. . . ." I do not want to disillusion you, but I can never remember a time when I rejoiced in suffering. Endured yes, rejoiced, no.

During World War II, Prime Minister Winston Churchill rallied Britain, and indeed the entire free world, with these words: "We shall not falter; we shall not weaken or tire. Neither the sudden shock of battle nor the long-drawn trials of vigilance and exertion will wear us down. Give us the tools, and we shall finish the job." I admire him for that. Admire him more than I can say. But I can not seem to imitate him. Too often I do tire, I do weaken, I do wear down. And I find myself thinking that Ambrose Bierce was right when he defined patience as, "A minor form of despair disguised as a virtue."

That is why this morning's scripture is so very refreshing. Here is one person in the Bible who does not make me feel guilty. I do not know just what sort of trouble he was in, but he certainly did not rejoice in it. He cried out, "How long, O Lord, wilt thou look on? . . . Thou hast seen, O Lord; be not silent! O Lord, be not far from me! Bestir thyself, and awake

for my right. Vindicate me, O Lord, according to thy righteousness." Now that may not sound very pious, but it is certainly quite human. As much as we applaud patience in others, most of us find it pretty hard to come by.

Or do we? Some weeks ago, my wife and I were at Chamonix, in France, looking up at Mont Blanc, the tallest mountain in Europe. And I remembered the story of a young student who was trapped for three days on the perilous "Fool's Needle" nearby. He was holding on to a narrow ledge with frozen hands when the rescue workers found him. And later he recalled, "I just kept repeating over and over to myself, 'I must hold on, I must hold on at any price.'" No rejoicing in suffering for him. No gratitude that he was building character. Just a dogged determination to hang on no matter what.

And, that is precisely what the Bible means by the word we so often translate as "patience." Not "calm and uncomplaining endurance" as patience means in English. But "to bear up; to endure; to continue firm; to hold out." And I do that. And so do you. We all do it --over and over again. I would not be surprised if some of you were doing that this very morning. Holding out, bearing up, hanging on. Do not sell yourself short just because you do not feel calm and uncomplaining. You are more heroic than you know.

Still, it would be nice if we could feel more patient, more uncomplaining. So I would like to share three things that help me --when I remember to do them-- which is not always. Without them, patience would not just be hard. For me, it would be almost impossible.

The first is not to get ahead of yourself. There is a story about a city-dweller who was watching a farmer saw a log with very deliberate, measured strokes. After a while he said, "Here, let me try that." He started slowly, but before long he was sawing faster and faster. And, the faster he sawed, the more crooked the saw went until it finally stopped altogether. "I guess I didn't do so well," the city man said. And the farmer answered, "That's because you let your mind get ahead of the saw."

I suspect that happens a good deal in life. Corrie Ten Boom tells of an old Dutch parable about a clock that had a nervous breakdown. It had just been finished by its maker and was ticking merrily away when, suddenly, it began to think. "Each second takes two ticks," it thought. That means 120 ticks a minute, 7,200 ticks an hour. Why that means 172,800 ticks a day, 1,209,000 ticks a week, and 62,899,200 ticks per year." And, faced with such an overwhelming prospect, the clock stopped ticking altogether.

But an older, more experienced, clock saw what was happening and offered this advice. "Don't get ahead of yourself," it said. "How many ticks do you have to tick at a time?"

"Why, only one, I guess," the new clock answered.

"Well, that's not so hard is it?" asked the old clock. "Here, try it along with me. Tick, tock, tick, tock. See how easy it is? Just one tick at a time."

And the young clock said, "I think I can do that." And he began ticking again.

"One more thing," said the wise old clock. Do not ever think about the next tick until you have your last tick ticked." Take things one at a time. That is the first key to holding on.

And the second is this. Learn to let go of your troubles. Some time ago there was a piece in Reader's Digest by a man in South Carolina who wrote, "The carpenter I hired to help me restore an old farmhouse had just finished up a rough first day on the job. A flat tire had made him lose an hour of work, his electric saw quit, and now his ancient pickup refused to start. While I drove him home, he sat in stony silence. On arriving, he invited me to come in and meet his family. As we walked toward the front door, he paused briefly at a small tree, touching the tips of the branches with both hands. "Then, opening the door, he underwent an amazing transformation. His tanned face was wreathed in smiles, and he hugged his two small children, and gave his wife a kiss.

"Afterward, as he walked me back to the car, my curiosity got the better of me. I asked him about what I had seen him do earlier. 'Oh, that's my trouble tree,' he replied. 'I know I can't help having them on the job, but one thing's for sure -- troubles don't belong in the house with my wife and the children. So I just hang 'em on the tree every night when I come home; then in the morning I pick them up again. 'Funny thing is,' he added with a smile, 'when I come out in the morning to pick them up, there aren't nearly as many as I remember hanging there the night before.'" Most of us would profit from a tree like that.

And the third key is not to do everything yourself. Somewhere I read about a missionary who was trying to translate the Bible for a primitive island tribe. Since their language had no word for belief, he was trying to think of how he could translate "Believe in the Lord and be saved." And, as he worked, the door of his hut burst open and in ran a native messenger who had come at full speed from the other end of the island. Exhausted, the messenger flung himself onto a cot and uttered the word which in his language meant "To lean one's whole weight upon." "That's it," cried the missionary. "Lean your whole weight upon the Lord, and be saved." Most of us know the well-known hymn:

"Oh what peace we often forfeit.

Oh, what needless pain we bear.

All because we do not carry

Everything to God in prayer.

We know it, but we often have trouble living it, even ministers. There is a story about a Bishop Quayle who must have had a very keen sense of humor. "One night," he said, "I sat up

into the wee hours of the morning worrying over all the problems confronting me. "Finally, the Lord came to me and said, 'Quayle, you go to bed. I'll sit up the rest of the night.'"

Jesus never promised a life of ease. Quite the opposite, in fact. He said, "In the world you have tribulation." But remember, he also added, "But be of good cheer. I have overcome the world." Do not be fooled by your feelings. Take life one day at a time. Learn to let go of your troubles. Lean your weight upon the Lord. And, by the Grace of God, you, too, will find that while patience is not easy, it is, nevertheless, very possible.