



REVISITING THE VIRTUES OF PATIENCE AND TOLERANCE!

Midrash is an ancient Hebrew way of interpreting biblical stories. It fills in many gaps left in biblical narratives such as events and personalities that are only hinted at. This bit of midrash is about today's first reading as told by Rabbi Marc Gellman in a children's book titled *Does God Have a Big Toe?* When God set out to pick someone to lead the children of Israel to the promised land, the most important quality God was looking for was patience. So God set out to create a patience test. God caused a bush to start burning in the desert where some shepherds were pasturing their flocks. A few shepherds passed; by and didn't even notice that a bush was burning. Bushes on fire are not that special, so nobody took the time to sit long enough to watch the miracle happen until Moses came along. Moses watched and watched and saw that the leaves were burned off and the bush's branches were black, but the bush did not burn up. It continued to burn and the fire never went out. And Moses was the only one who waited long enough to notice. Moses tried to get the other shepherds to watch with him, but they all had better things to do. Moses also had better things to do, and he was about to find out what they were.

Patience and tolerance are the message of today's readings.

Patient people are those who can bear trials and pains with calmness and composure. Like Moses they are able to put up with delays and disgruntled people, bide their time, and wait for the right moment. Patience requires a certain humility and flexibility. Patient people are more flexible with time than impatient people. Impatient people live in only one time frame - their own. They want things done when they want them done, and they expect the rest of the world to comply with their schedule. If they have to wait in line while the person ahead of them is slow to pay their bill or is engaged in conversation, they get upset because their schedule is disrupted.

Patient people are able to flow back and forth between different time frames. They know that waiting in line for a few extra minutes while someone may be slow invites patient people to momentarily set aside their own schedule and enter into the schedule of someone else with needs other than theirs. Today's readings call us to ask ourselves, how patient am I? Am I able to step out of my own time frame and enter, with compassion, the time frame of someone else?

The virtue of tolerance is very much related to the virtue of patience. Tolerance calls us to not jump to conclusions, but rather to be able to live graciously with loose ends, ambiguity, and diversity. Tolerance calls for second chances. Jesus appreciated the ambiguities of life. He often urged his disciples to keep an open mind and not to jump to conclusions, especially in today's Gospel with the parable of the non-productive fig tree. After the tree hasn't produced in three years, the owner orders the gardener to cut down the tree. The gardener, however, pleads with the owner to let him dig around the tree and fertilize it, hoping that the tree might produce the next year. The gardener is asking the owner to give the tree a second chance, to be patient, tolerant and merciful. In this parable, Jesus is saying don't judge too hastily, don't give up too soon, exercise a little tolerance. With a little more care and concern, perhaps even the barren might bear fruit.

The parable of the fig tree has no ending. We don't know what ultimately happened to the tree. The same is true of us and our spiritual journey. God has given us life and sent us into the world with a script to follow (Scripture) and a director to guide us (Jesus). How our individual stories are eventually lived out depends entirely on how we respond to what God has given us. A merciful, patient, and tolerant God has spared us many times. Will we be fruitless or will we give back to God useful and productive lives spent in furthering the work of Christ's mission?

As we prepare to celebrate the Liturgy of the Eucharist let us resolve to live the message of today's readings to be patient and tolerant with ourselves and others.