

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

PLAYING THE HAND YOU ARE DEALT Philippians 4:4-7

Waiting is never fun.

Ask any mother – that last month of pregnancy is the longest.

Ask any coach whose team is one point ahead with one minute left, but the other team has the ball.

Ask any traveler whose flight has been delayed yet again.

Ask any prisoner counting the days of his sentence as he waits for his release.

Waiting is never fun, even if it does build anticipation.

In Advent we are reminded that we are waiting for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ and through him the consummation of the promises of God to his people. The question of Advent is “How do we deal with the waiting?”

We know that doing something while waiting makes it both productive and tolerable. An age-old way of passing time while waiting is to play cards. During college I was on the swimming team. As we waited for our event or while we were on those interminable bus rides, there were always various card games going on: poker for the daring; hearts for the lighthearted; and bridge for the intellectuals. Purposeful waiting is the best kind of waiting.

Twenty-one hundred years ago, Jesus was born as a baby in Bethlehem and during his life on earth he promised that he would return. Every Christmas since then has been a celebration of his Incarnation and has served as a hash-mark on the wall counting the years until his return. For the faithful, the question of this life is not whether Jesus will return, but what we are to do while we are waiting for Jesus. After all, we cannot do anything about the fact that we were born to live at this time, nor do we have any say in when Jesus will return. If we look at this life as the hand we have been dealt, then our only choice is how to play it.

This is not determinism, or at its extreme, fatalism. Like a hand of bridge, we are dealt the cards, but it is up to us how we play them. A good bridge player takes into consideration bidding conventions, the rules of the game, lessons learned from masters and personal experience. In addition, the hand is played in community with his neighbors in the game. The cards are important, but winning and losing ultimately come down to the choices as to which card is played when and for what purpose.

As we look to the masters of the faith, we can receive instruction on how to play the hand as a Christian in the game of life. One of those masters is St. Paul who gives us a solid lesson in just four verses (Philippians 4:4-7). In our waiting we are to:

1. Always rejoice in the Lord;
2. Demonstrate gentleness;
3. Be content in all things; and

4. Communicate our needs and desires to the Lord.

Then we will receive what we need to sustain us as we wait: the peace of God.

1. Always rejoice in the Lord.

If we live our lives in faith by depending upon God's promises, then we can rejoice in knowing that God is sovereign and faithful. As St. Paul wrote to the church in Rome:

²⁸*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.*

^{31b}*If God is for us, who is against us?*

³⁸*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:28,31b,38)*

Our faith in God should be made manifest by our underlying understanding that no matter our circumstances God is ultimately in charge and his will for our good will prevail. Again in the eighth chapter of Romans we read:

¹⁸*I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. (Romans 8:18)*

Essentially, we are to so value Jesus in this life that other than his approval nothing else matters. He is the source and compass of our joy.

2. Demonstrate gentleness

As we wait we are not only to focus on Jesus as our hope, but also as our role model. St. Paul here urges his readers to imitate Jesus in our behavior. The call to all Christians is "Come, follow me." God's perfect will was revealed through the life of Jesus, so if we are to live according to God's will our lives must become aligned with that of Jesus.

Again, the focus of our life should be on Jesus. While rejoicing in all circumstances is an internal state of mind, acting with forbearance toward our neighbors is an outward manifestation of our faith. This reputation for "gentleness" is a matter of resisting the natural temptation to return evil for evil in vengeful retaliation. But even further, it is an attitude that resists frustration, anxiety and suspicion as we respond to the world in which we live.

When a church community faithfully follows Jesus it fulfills its call to announce and demonstrate the purpose and direction of God for the world as revealed by Jesus Christ.

3. Be content in all things

While we are called to rejoice in God under all circumstances, we are not commanded to rejoice in the circumstances themselves. Rather, St. Paul encourages us to be content, as in to resist

being anxious. This contentment is not a passive acceptance of things as they exist, but our allowing the sovereign God to be the sovereign God. Our God is the God of redemption. He turned perhaps the cruelest instrument of torture and death into the tool for his saving grace. The God who on Sunday morning made the previous dark Friday good will also transform both my Friday and my Sunday experiences according to his good purpose.

4. Communicate our needs and desires to the Lord

The antidote for all our circumstances is prayer. Supplication acknowledges our utter dependence on God and brings resolution to our anxiety through an act of trust in God. When we ask in a spirit of thanksgiving we live into our faith by thanking God for who he is and what he has promised to do. It is the deliberate acceptance of the circumstances as under his sovereign and gracious control. Such prayers of faith lift our worrying circumstances into God's capable hands and leaves them there. Although ideally this would be a once-for-all action, for most of us our faith situation will result in it being a continuous activity as we await our Lord's return in glory.

Living an Advent life is living a life in which we always rejoice in the Lord, demonstrate his character of gentleness, exhibit contentment in all things and pray continuously. God has promised that such a life will be blessed with what is needed to sustain us as we wait: the peace of God.

It is a peace that, when faced with opposition and rejection, enables us to stand firm in the world rather than retreat or mount a reactionary response. Even as many in the larger church increasingly turn against us, we are called to meet the challenge as Jesus met his rejection by the religious leaders and secular authorities. We are not to reject the world or the church, but seek to find and embrace that which is consistent with the truth of Scripture and reject only that which is not. We are to live in the knowledge that God has already won the victory and as we wait for his return let that inform our God-centered joy, gentleness, contentment and prayers. Then we will have played our winning hand in such a way that we will know the promised peace of God – even now and even here in this life.

Let us pray.

Almighty God and Father, direct our days in your peace, and grant us the gifts of your blessing; keep us in a serious seeking after you and in an affectionate walking with you every day of our lives; deliver us in all our troubles and from our anxieties, and establish our minds in the tranquility of your peace; as we await the return of our Lord, so guide us through things temporal that we finally not lose the things eternal. Amen.

Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Charles D. Alley, Rector of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia on December 13, 2009, the Third Sunday of Advent.