
Letters to a Young Episcopalian (A Response): Patience

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

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Dear Uncle Ames,

I've been thinking about the idea of "living the questions."

You talked about living into the kinds of questions that I was asking in one of your first letters to me. I googled the phrase and came up with a reference to Rainer Maria Rilke. As I'm sure you know, he wrote a series of "Letters to a Young Poet" more than one hundred years ago.

Apparently, the younger poet asked Rilke to look at some of his poetry. Rilke thought it would be more helpful to help the poet think about life than to help him think about his writing. So, he ignored the questions about technique and began to explore things like love, and truth, and meaning.

In the fourth letter, Rilke encourages the younger poet to be patient toward all that is unresolved in his heart. Love the questions, he says. The answers wouldn't make sense to you anyway, but by living into the questions, you might one day find yourself living out the answers.

I gather the point is that, like faith, asking questions is a way of life. We grow by asking and, over time, come to understand things that we couldn't have understood before. Or, as I have heard you say, "When it comes to making meaning, it's all about relationships."

I'm finding myself increasingly impatient with this need for patience, though!

Remember the story about Abraham negotiating with God over how many righteous people had to be in Sodom and Gomorrah to save the cities? Abraham gets God to agree to fifty, and then keeps going until God agrees to ten. I googled it yesterday, and was surprised by how the story ends.

Three angels visit Abraham and Sarah. Two of them go on to Sodom to visit Abraham's nephew, Lot. Lot takes care of them, of course, but the rest of the city tries to take advantage of them – it's pretty ugly, actually.

In the end, Abraham's negotiation doesn't change the outcome. Both cities are destroyed. There weren't even ten righteous people there!

I used to think that Abraham had changed God's mind. But, now I realize that the negotiation couldn't have been about God. It must have been about Abraham.

I'm wondering if God lured Abraham into the negotiation in order to teach him that living right means looking out for other people, even if it's not clear that they deserve it.

And, if that's so, then I wonder if "living into the questions" is too passive. It seems to imply an acceptance of the way things are. I think I remember you saying, "when we pray, we should move our feet."

Don't we have a responsibility to make things better that requires more than just living into the questions?

Your devoted niece,
Anna

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