
Don't Eat the Marshmallow!

A sermon by Canon George Maxwell
Advent 3 – Year A

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It is an iconic picture. I suspect you have all seen it. A small child, staring at a marshmallow. The small child, sitting at the table, looking intently at that marshmallow. The scene, of course, recalls a study conducted at Stanford University back in the 1960s. It was called “The Marshmallow Test.”

Children were brought into the laboratory and given a marshmallow, but told that if they did not eat it right then, if they waited, they could have a second marshmallow. If they could just resist the temptation to satisfy their cravings now, they could have more later.

A remarkably few number of children waited.

But what was interesting about this study is that it really wasn't about willpower or self-control. It was really about strategies. The children who were able to wait were the children who could distract themselves. They would play games with the marshmallow, covering one eye. They would play hide-and-go-seek under the table. They would sing songs from Sesame Street. They distracted themselves. They learned how not to think about the marshmallow.

Now Advent is also a season of waiting. And James has some advice for us about how we are to spend this season: “Be patient,” he says, “for the Lord is coming.” Be patient. Wait.

And James is pretty clear what he thinks is the marshmallow. He spends the verses before what we read today condemning those who slander others, condemning those slick traders who think they can go into the marketplace and secure their future, condemning the rich who manipulate the political and economic systems of the day for their own benefit.

If you look at these examples, there is an underlying assumption that is obvious. In each of these examples there is an assumption that we are what we own. We are what we own. And since we all know that there is a limited amount of stuff, the only way to own more is for someone else to own less. The perverse trap, of course, is that the only way to be more is for someone else to be less.

Theorists call this the logic of envy. I call it the Amazon Prime experience. I know you've had it too. Buy it now; you can have it by five o'clock tomorrow. And by the way, there are only two items left in stock (although more are on the way).

The marshmallow is the Amazon Prime experience.

But don't worry; James has a strategy for us: “Have the heart of a farmer,” he says. “Be able to suffer like a prophet.”

But, what does that mean?

To be patient is not just to distract yourself. It's not a passive experience. It's not just about staying put or enduring or thinking about something else.

Patience, as used in Scripture, is an active, dynamic experience, because Scripture (and particularly the New Testament) assumes that eternity is all around us. The kingdom of God is already here. Jesus has already inaugurated its coming.

Yet what already is is also not yet. We don't have to look around with any great attention to see what is wrong. Things that aren't working. Sorrow, suffering, and sadness are all around us.

We are in that time where the Kingdom is already and not yet.

So what are we to do?

We are, I think, to follow Christ by imagining how God sees the world.

We do believe that God is active in the world. We do believe that God is a power and presence that we can experience in the world.

Our calling as Christians is to imagine the world the way God sees the world, and to be Christ to the extent that we are able, to be Christ to those who need Christ.

We don't just wait as a passive experience. We are patient as a dynamic, active disposition.

When we adopt this posture, when we are Christ to the extent we can be to those who need it, then things begin to change. We realize that there are things in the world—problems, conflict, tensions—that simply cannot be resolved.

Our calling is not just to talk about them, not just to struggle with them, but to live in them, to appreciate what is there. That is the gift of learned patience.

We come to learn that all of those who surround us cannot be what we expect them to be. We come to appreciate what they are, who they are, and how they can be. That is the gift of learned patience.

Finally we come to realize that God has been patient with us, with all of our failings, our shortcomings, our inadequacies. That is the gift of learned patience.

We learn that as we embody this patience, as it becomes who we are, that we free others to be more of themselves as well. Waiting is not a passive activity. Being patient is a dynamic disposition. And that is the gift of learned patience.

So here's what I want you to walk away with today. The key message of James is, "Don't eat the marshmallow!"

Instead, be patient. Have the heart of a farmer. Endure the suffering of a prophet. Enjoy the gift of learned patience, and you will begin to live into the eternal life that surrounds all of us, the already and the not yet.

Have a happy Advent. Amen.