

Today I am continuing my sermon series based on the book, *The Slow Church*. You will remember from last month that the idea of Slow Church comes from the slow food movement that seeks to create locally sourced sustainable food grown and prepared by identifiable growers and chefs in contrast with the sameness of fast food.

Today I am reflecting on both Stability and Patience.

We are familiar with the idea of stability from the Rule of St Benedict. Benedictine monks take a vow of stability, which means that they're not going anywhere, even when the going gets rough. They stay where they are and continue to worship and serve God and God's people in that place.

Stability talks of the church whose worship and service is rooted in its community. On Friday, Esta, Karin and I were at the Chamber of Commerce Business Expo talking to our neighbors about the Abundance Shop and the church and about their lives and their businesses. One woman said to me "The thing I like about your church is you do ministry to all sectors, to everybody." What a compliment that was!

Now we have been in Los Osos for thirty years, and now we have a building that everyone sees and recognizes and now that the Abundance Shop is so much a part of many people's lives, we can finally say that we have stability in the community. Many people know who we are and ask about concerts and talks even if they're not ready to talk about God or church.

More recently, they are seeing us actively involved in working to make Los Osos a truly compassionate community. Last week I asked for some of you to go to the Traffic and Circulation subcommittee of LOCAC to argue against the proposed ordinance against people sleeping in their cars. Three of the thirteen people at the meeting were from St Benedict's and the committee took no action on the proposal. This was wonderful work on our part, and I thank those who represented us.

In addition, Esta represents us on the Los Osos Community Coalition, and we co-sponsored the recent Community Meeting on Homelessness. As a result of that meeting, Trinity United Methodist has offered their facility for a regular Community Dinner on Monday nights. I hope that we will participate by providing dinner on a monthly or bi-monthly basis just as we do for the Prado Day Center. Please let me know if you can help with that.

These are all the actions of a stable church which is beginning to transform its neighborhood.

In this morning's gospel reading, the Samaritan woman exemplifies some of the important qualities of stability. She engaged in conversation with Jesus, forming an important relationship with a stranger who was in her neighborhood. And then she told others about him and together they offered him and his disciples generous hospitality. Hospitality and generosity are important practices of stability. The shadow side of being around for a long time is that we can feel superior, thinking that we know how things should be done; and that we can use our embeddedness to accumulate wealth and power which we use for our own ends. Hospitality and generosity guard against these shadow tendencies. As we welcome others and as we share what we have, we are changed by the relationship.

The people of Sychar were changed by Jesus' visit. We too will be changed by those who come whether they are neighbors who never set foot in the church, or new members. Although we have always had a concern and a heart for homeless persons, and a few members actively engaged in seeking solutions, it is only as the homeless have become more visible in Los Osos and as we have welcomed unhoused people as part of our faith community that we have found ways to connect on a more profound level and new ways to help.

As the Body of Christ in this place, we are called to act as Jesus did; talking to strangers and making new relationships, embodying the

freeing and healing good news of Jesus together. We each have different gifts that we bring to this work, but together we can be the ones who bring the living waters of God's love to this community – becoming a channel for God's healing love to be poured out in Los Osos.

This doesn't happen overnight. We have had the Abundance Shop for about 25 years. It is a fixture in Los Osos. And over those 25 years the Shop has changed. At different times we have had different perspectives about how it can best serve God, the church and the community. Today we see it as a place where we can share the love of God not only through providing a center for reusing and recycling stuff, but also as a place where hurting people can be welcomed and given opportunities to receive and to give. It is not a place to give things to those in need – though we do that; it is not a place to raise money for the church – though we do that; it is a place where we can become attentive to our neighbors and discern how we can share the love and peace of Jesus.

Patience is important as we seek to be God with flesh on. Our culture is tuned to instant gratification. I have a question, I google: I want to watch a movie, I instant stream; I want to connect with a friend, I instant message them. But the ways of God are often slower and require that we pay attention for more than the few seconds it takes to google “contemplative prayer”.

Yet our call is to compassion, which is derived from the Latin word which means “to suffer with”. Our society does not find it easy to take the time or to have the presence to enter into the pain of others.

Theologians Phil Kenneson says,

Although I am sure it has never been easy to be present to and with those who are suffering, our culture's three cardinal virtues – productivity, efficiency and speed – powerfully disincline us to placing ourselves among those who weep. Few people seem genuinely willing to slow down and offer real presence to those who otherwise weep alone. As a result so many of us suffer in

deadly silence and isolation, devoid of any real human contact, let alone human presence.

Avoiding suffering reduces our relationships to shallow ones because we take shortcuts that steer us clear of human pain, difficult situations and hurt people. Yet compassion calls us to walk alongside those who are in pain, those who are mentally ill, those who continue to make bad choices, whether or not they seem to appreciate us.

Patience is not passive waiting but patience is the way that compassion is embodied in our lives. It has been said that “patience is the hard but fruitful discipline of the disciple of the compassionate God...” Patience means to enter actively into the thick of life and to fully bear the suffering within and around us.” Bearing the suffering means to be with the pain of ourselves and our neighbors without rushing to find a quick fix.

Many of us get the Neighbors newspaper delivered to our driveways once a week. It’s basically for advertising and usually goes straight to the recycle bin. But this edition caught my eye. The headline was “Happy Number 7” and it told us that in the 2015-16 Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index, San Luis Obispo scored 7th in the nation. But if you read a little further you discovered that we score 89th for social well-being which means having supportive relationships and love in our lives.

Many people are crying out for community and connection. We are blessed to have that community and connection here at St Ben’s. But it doesn’t always come easily. It is not always easy for newcomers to break into the circles of friendship that we have developed and so we need to add patience to our cardinal practices of hospitality and generosity. We extend the love of Jesus to one another and to the stranger when we are willing to take the time to be present to each other’s concerns and when we have the humility to share our own needs and weaknesses.

As we practice stability, staying in relationship with one another, we learn patience by forgiving and being reconciled again and again. There will always be people in the faith community who do things which annoy you. There will always be times when the decisions the Parish Council make don't seem like the best thing, or when your best idea doesn't get picked up by other people, or when someone tells the same story yet again and at great length. But we are called to live patiently together as the Body of Christ with Jesus as the head. It is in this process that we become more and more Christ like.

You don't need me to reflect on the divisive world that we inhabit right now, where people with other ideas can quickly become enemies. The spiritual work of patience calls us to approach those potential enemies in a spirit of compassionate curiosity, looking for places to connect and not allowing ourselves to build barriers by making judgements or basking in ideas of moral superiority.

We are called St Benedict's and we owe much to the monastic path. Monastic communities have long taken seriously the challenge to embody the way of Jesus in their particular places. So these ideas of stability and patience are not new to us. We are called to be the embodiment of Christ in Los Osos, by slowing down and taking Jesus' teachings seriously, living them out not just in our hearts but in our civic and community life as well.

Two questions:

How are we called to embody Jesus in the community? What aspects of Jesus' teaching and ministry are most important?

In what ways do we as a church practice compassion by entering into the suffering of others in the church or in the community?