

Ya know, we frequently say that the Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways, that we often don't understand until much later in the process. Well, as it turns out, she was working overtime last Tuesday while we were on vacation, it was almost as if she was like, oh, you have a sermon to write for Sunday, let's mess with things a bit and see what happens from there. So, here's what was supposed to happen on Tuesday. We had changed plans up a little bit once we realized that the 8 hour train ride to Mount Olympus wasn't exactly doable in a day. Instead, we found a tour that went out areas associated with the Trojan War, we would get to see some things that I had read about in the book I brought on vacation, all seemed like a perfect fit. So Tuesday morning, we get up at 6:30...uh huh happy vacation ugh...to be at our pickup spot by 7:10. We get there, knowing we should be picked up by 7:25. 7:25 rolls around, no bus. Ok, fine, a little late. 7:45 rolls around, no bus. Umm, ok, maybe time to message the company. 8:00, it's appearing something has gone totally wrong. 8:15, the company says they allegedly came to pick us up and we weren't there. Which really wasn't true, but the result was the same, we had no plans.

We went back to the hotel and ended up deciding to do a half day food tour of the city. We needed something, we love food, and it seemed like a fun way to maybe explore parts of Athens we hadn't seen yet. Cue the Holy Spirit cracking her knuckles like, yes, here we go, because that tour introduced us to Kostas. He was our tour guide, he was sweet, funny, super personable, and clearly had no problem talking to strangers about his life, because as we sat down at our second stop, we mentioned having made the trek up the Delphi ruins to the ancient stadium, and he got this look on his face...he proceeded to tell us that that's a hard place for him, because in 2015, his dad and his cousin made that same trek and his dad had a heart attack at the top and passed away unexpectedly. Suddenly, at 25, Kostas was the guy for his family and he didn't have his dad anymore. It came up a couple of other times, but as we sat down for the dinner portion of our tour, that revelation steered our conversation into an extremely deep realm.

There we sat, a Lutheran, a Catholic, an Episcopalian, and 4 Greek Orthodox, and we started talking about faith. They knew I was a pastor and Kostas started asking questions and sharing more of his story. As he talked he revealed that while he still believes in God, in a creator, his faith was entirely shaken and nearly destroyed by his dad's death because people tried to make him feel better by telling him that he was in a better place, he wasn't in pain, this is what people wait for. And Kostas was just like ok yeah, but that's my dad...and if life is all about just getting to the end point, well then, he wasn't really interested in being a part of a faith like that. We went back to the hotel and I pulled out the lessons for today, and I just chuckled, well done, Holy Spirit...ya kinda got me. That conversation with Kostas about his grief, his loss, and his struggles with faith was ringing in my

ears as I got to the end of our text from Romans, as Paul talks about hope, about what we have not seen, and about waiting...and ultimately about how we wait.

Paul is trying to introduce a whole new concept of faith to the Romans, to people he has never met, who live in a deeply pagan world, and somehow he is driven to draw them to Christ. So he starts talking about adoption, about how by being in Christ, they become inheritors of the promise Christ brought into the world, grace, redemption, salvation. He says that by entering into this new community of faith, their whole perspective on life could change, because they aren't living in vain anymore, but striving towards something greater, a place with Christ, a promise of forgiveness, a life of hope. He tells them that these are the things which help him get through the struggles of this world, when things are hard, he knows they will be nothing in comparison to the promises to come. He says this is what everyone, creation itself is longing for, Christ's return which will redeem everything. Christ has brought the promise that we can live in the hope of salvation. It all sounds very future thinking, kind of like what Kostas experienced as people tried to help him process his dad's death, until we get to the end...

Paul says we haven't seen what we're hoping for, that's kind of the point of hope, we hope that what we believe in will come to fruition, but then he dares to wonder, what do we do in the meantime? How to we anticipate this hope? How do we live until it happens, and he says, we wait for it, we wait for it with patience. Now, as a deeply impatient person at times, I'm like great, thanks Paul, yes, we shall all wait patiently while the world goes nuts and just hope that at some point Jesus is gonna show up and make it better. But then I thought about Kostas...

What is the point of waiting patiently in hope if all we're doing is just that... *waiting*? Paul isn't trying to tell the Romans to just sit tight and hold on because Jesus will be there soon, he's trying to tell them that we wait with patience so that we can *live* in the midst of it. If you're waiting with impatience, you're distracted, you're wholly focused on yourself and on what you want, but if you're waiting with patience, with hope, with faith, you're saying, ya know what, God's got this and it'll happen when it happens, and while I'm waiting patiently, I can actually *do* something with this faith I have been given.

I think sometimes we convince ourselves that our faith is so deeply individualistic, so focused on salvation and the end point, that we miss all of the things that Jesus actually called us to do. We have turned faith into this like divine waiting room, where everyone is hunkered in their own seat, impatiently tapping their feet, because Jesus *said* I was saved and so really I just need to sit around and wait for my eternal glory. And if that's what faith is, just keeping our eye solely focused on what comes at the end, well then we have failed, and are doing spectacularly at missing for the forest for the trees.

All those people who told Kostas to focus on his dad's reward and place in heaven, missed a prime opportunity to care for him in community, to talk about the really hard issues of grief, unexpected loss, and how we cope when something so catastrophic happens we don't know how to process our faith in the midst of it. Instead, they gave him platitudes, and his faith withered. Because that is not what all of this is about. Being here, being the church, being a community, it's not about being able to say, look at all of us happy Christians, we're gonna be a-ok in heaven when the time comes. It's about discovering what we can do, how we can live in the waiting time. It's about figuring out how to actually *do* something with our faith as opposed to just sitting idly by like, whatever, my fate is secure, everyone else can deal with their own life.

All of this, including our own personal faith, is about how we can care for others. I mean Jesus kind of said it himself when he said the second greatest commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself. We live in the assurance that yeah, when the end comes, we'll be taken care of. So what do we do with the time we have? Do we shove people to the side, declaring we got our own life made, or do we actually wait with patience and love and genuine faith, faith that is lived out in word and deed to serve our neighbors?

The truth is, a life of individualistic faith is way easier, way calmer, way less messy. It takes care of it's own, it doesn't call us into places of discomfort, it doesn't demand that we learn more about the world around us and care for all of our siblings. But faith was never meant to be easy. It was meant to be about going out into the world and getting your hands dirty for the sake of the gospel. That's how you wait with patience. You say every day, every person is an opportunity to be God's love in the world, to transform hate into love, to breath grace and not judgment into society, to be Christ to someone else, not just hoard Christ for yourself.

7 people sat around a dinner table in the blistering heat of Athens, 4 denominations, a lot of questions, a lot of struggles, a lot of curiosity about Eastern religion and what it all means, but across those 7 people and all those differences, we came to one solid conclusion...the end will take care of itself, in the meantime, we should use our waiting time to actually care for one another. May we all be Christ to the Kostas in our life...may we heed the push of the Holy Spirit, and let the kingdom come with our help. **AMEN!!!**