

“FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT: PATIENCE”

Galatians 5:22-23; James 5:7-11; Matthew 18:21-35

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The one thing that everyone agrees on about patience is that it is a good quality for *other* people to have. Children want their parents to have more patience just as parents wish their children had more. Spouses hope for patience from their partner. Employees look for it in an employer. Debtors plead for patience from creditors. If only other people were more patient with me, I could be a better person.

But becoming more patient oneself is not often sought. We tell ourselves that we should be more patient, but we don't really want it. And the reason is simple. Patience entails suffering. We learn patience by enduring trials. Patience comes with inconvenience, with acceptance of the unacceptable, with forgiveness of the unforgivable. We are patient with those who fail us. Patience is not required for those who do their work, for those who do right by us.

Patience might mean extending kindness to someone who hurt us. It might mean refusing to speak evil of someone who criticized us behind our backs. It means tempering our anger, overlooking a slight, or tolerating an injustice.

The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience.... Maybe the spirit could just keep that one? As a culture, we don't value it. We see patience as enabling bad behavior, as compromising excellence, even as creating an unnecessary burden on society. The way to get people to do better jobs is by holding them accountable when they fall short. The best way to keep from getting hurt again is by striking back twice as hard. No it's not pretty. That's why we call it the rat race. We value strength, toughness.

The Bible talks a lot about God's patience, but usually as a justification for the coming judgment. God waited many generations for the people to repent before flooding the earth, before allowing the Assyrians to dismantle the northern kingdom of Israel, and before sending the leaders in Jerusalem into exile in Babylon. This is not to minimize the patience of God. Moses is gone forty days at Sinai and he returns to a golden calf. The people were delivered from slavery in Egypt for a matter of weeks before complaining about the lack of water and food. I mean they need these things, but wishing to return to slavery is not much gratitude. There's a lot of wickedness, and clearly a limit even to God's patience. And if God struggles with it, what hope is there for us?

And yet love is not as good as it can be without patience. A lack of patience can dampen our joy. Peace isn't sustainable without it. As we've said in past weeks, these fruits of the spirit play off each other, giving a greater depth to each other. The scriptures urge patience upon us. The parable we read outlines serious consequences for the impatient slave. James sees patience as key for the community in enduring their current trials. If they will be patient, they will reap the rewards of their faith. So let's think about patience.

We often associate patience with tolerance. We make allowances for the toddler who hasn't quite learned about cooperative play. We allow our teenagers to make poor decisions without comment. We listen quietly to the contrary opinions of our friends.

James seems to encourage this when he tells the faith community not to grumble against one another. We read earlier in the letter about a tension that existed between the wealthy and poorer members of the community. The inequities that existed in the larger community were not eliminated in the faith community. So James encourages the rich not to flaunt their wealth, and not to presume upon their privilege. There were undoubtedly legitimate grievances. But while James speaks to them, he also advises the community to be "quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger." He emphasizes the enormous harm that the "tongue" can cause. Saying too much may result in one's self coming under judgment.

The parable in Matthew makes this same point. The king is content to be patient about the slave's debt until the slave's lack of character is exposed by his impatience with his debtors. The story illustrates quite well Jesus' words from earlier in the gospel, "Judge not lest you be judged."

We hear these texts encouraging us to tolerance, but as with the limits to the patience of God, so too tolerance has its limits. When the toddler's behavior becomes dangerous or hurtful, we intervene. When a loved one's choices begin to impact others, we speak up. When opinions threaten the integrity of the relationship, we speak up or we walk away. Jesus tells us to go ahead and remove the splinter from another's eye after removing the log in our own. And the king in the parable not only throws the slave in prison, but also tortures him until the debt is paid.

It's not tolerance being encouraged in these texts. It's humility. After telling his readers to be slow to anger, he encourages them to root out wickedness and to "welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls." I'm not suggesting that tolerance is bad, but our presumption that this is what stands behind patience is simply not true and in some cases harmful. Humility fosters patience because it demands that we examine our own souls before speaking. Tolerance doesn't actually refrain from judgment. It just refrains from speaking it and acting on it. It protects the integrity of the community, but it doesn't transform the soul.

The other common mistake we make about patience is that it seeks to avoid conflict. It is true that we sense a kind of peacefulness around patient people, but it is not a peace that ignores the reality of tension in the world around them.

James holds up Job as an example of patience, and yet for over thirty-five chapters he complains about the injustice he suffers. When I think about patient people, I think of Gandhi and King fighting for civil rights, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton fighting for the vote, Mandela fighting against apartheid, Harvey Milk fighting for gay rights, and tree-huggers fighting for redwoods.

All of these people have been portrayed as angry, bitter, whiny, and unreasonable. They were beaten, mocked, threatened, thrown in prison and some of them killed. Despite this they didn't resort to violence. They persisted in delivering their message and in hindsight we honor them. Why shouldn't Indians reap the benefits of their labor? Why should black people endure separate and unequal treatment? Why shouldn't women vote? Why was the majority of a population excluded from governing? Why should one's sexual orientation limit access to housing or employment? In truth these patient protesters were speaking God's truth.

Bernie raised the question as to how we know when God is speaking in Bible study this past week. Most of Jeremiah's words were calls to repentance and in the passage we were reading, he was prophesying words of judgment to the other nations around Jerusalem. It seemed natural to ask whether God spoke words to the nations today. Over the last couple of decades, we've had people from across the theological spectrum claim to speak a message of judgment from God. America is apparently being judged for failing to condemn homosexuality, for permitting abortions, for being too liberal generally as well as for failing to address inequities impacting race, gender, poverty, and being too conservative. It's easy to speak a word from the Lord. Sorting out a genuine word, not so easy.

Patience has something to say about this. If becoming patient involves being quick to listen, then we know that listening is key to discerning. But what are we listening for? Well, what does God listen for? If we look almost anywhere in the Bible, we see God listening for pain. God hears the cries of the slaves in Egypt and sends Moses. God hears the cries of the widows Ruth and Naomi, and provides a way of redemption. Jesus hears the cries the cries of Bartimaeus and grants him sight. Jesus gives hearing to the deaf, food to the hungry, and deliverance to the possessed.

God offers joy to those who mourn, food to the hungry, the kingdom to the poor, the earth to the meek, and kinship to the peacemakers. Quick to listen doesn't mean hearing all points of view. It almost always means listening for the pain. It means refraining from judgment before one has fully heard those who are crying out.

I applaud the city of Kalamazoo for beginning to take measures to address the lack of adequate shelter for the homeless people of this community, but we've really only been partially listening. We don't make time to hear their stories. I drive by a panhandler on a busy street and I try not to make contact. I don't want to give them a dollar. Are they going to use it for food, or for drugs or for alcohol? I'm past them before even have time to ask all the questions that might occur to me. I may later think about the problem of homelessness as a mix of societal failures: not enough affordable housing, inadequate mental health services, lack of good and affordable treatment facilities, and of access to health care and insurance. None of this tells me what God might be saying to me through the panhandler. I'm not really attending to the cries.

In general I find we allow our interpretation of the issues to shape our understanding of the people affected by them; rather than allowing our relationship with people to shape our understanding of the issues. I think of the many who consider themselves pro-life for whom the circumstances and pain of the pregnant woman makes no difference, who would rather pass a constitutional amendment than pursue the many other measures that would reduce the number of abortions. I think of parents who turn their children out for loving another of the same gender. I think of landlords who turn felons away before hearing their story. We take so many positions without listening to the cries. In so doing we miss the voice of God.

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.” I was bothered by this image when I read this parable again, bothered by the idea that there were “accounts” that needed to be “settled” in the kingdom of God. But the more I thought about it, the more I thought, “How could it be otherwise?” Communities exist precisely because its members see themselves as indebted to one another. We are made for each other and therefore we owe each other. The king does exactly what he’s supposed to do. The slave pleads for time, for the king to exercise patience until he can pay his debt, and the king grants him mercy. The slave then meets another member of the community who in turn pleads for patience, but the slave has him thrown in prison. The slave refuses to listen to the debtor. Other slaves witness this and report it to the king. Why? Because the community cannot exist without patience, without a recognition of our mutual indebtedness.

People are pleading for patience. We need to listen. It will take time, a lot of time. There’s a lot of waiting involved in communities, not just sorting our indebtedness, but sorting out what each of us have to offer to the solutions. It will not be enough if everyone else is patient. We will need to turn our experiences of others being patient with us into our being patient with others.

I love this image from Barbara Kingsolver’s poem, *Forests of Antarctica*, She’s talking about the trees beneath the Antarctic surface from long ago. She says about these trees,

....And I
could pass among them hearing nothing.
Or I could pause on the tilted light
of slate-scrabbled path in a silence
of moss and try to fathom their stillness:

How nothing stirs their hearts.
How patience is a promise a seed makes
to its ground, from the day of cracking
and rooting in, clinging to this escarpment
since before the trials of Socrates....

(p. 105).

“How patience is a promise a seed makes to its ground....” Or a promise each of us makes to the community of faith, to the kingdom of God; a promise to hear each other’s

pain, a promise made in humility acknowledging our common humanity, a promise that refuses the arrogance of superiority, the presumption of righteousness.

It sounds like a heavy load, but there are few things more beautiful than a congregation that practices forgiveness. Together we are the soil, the water, and the light that makes the seed to grow. Beneath the love, joy, and peace is patience that makes these things possible. Patience informs our mission as we listen to the pain of the world. It holds us on the path of loving our neighbor. It undergirds the love that we have for one another. It's one way the spirit holds us together. Maybe it's not as great as love, but it makes love better or maybe I should say, it's one of the more beautiful expressions of love. Love, joy, peace, patience... there is no law against these things. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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Kingsolver, Barbara. *How to Fly (In Ten Thousand Easy Lessons)*. HarperCollins Publishers: New York NY, 2020