

Isaiah 40:27-31
James 5:7-11

Eighth Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
July 31, 2022

The Power of Patience

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

As Jewish exiles in Babylonian captivity, the people of God would appreciate a word of hope and encouragement. And through his prophet, God does seek to comfort his people. Listen to these words from Isaiah 40:27-31...

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson

In the verses just before our Epistle Lesson for today, James has denounced the oppressive behavior of the rich toward the poor. With a *therefore*, he offers instruction to the poor, imploring them to patient endurance, confident that God will vindicate them. Listen to these words from James 5:7-11...

Sermon

Ross Enamait, an athlete and trainer, had this to say about patience:

As a young fighter, I broke my hand inside the ring. I was impatient and never gave myself time to heal. I returned to action too soon. I broke the hand again, again, and again. It was an ongoing problem that could have been entirely avoided with patience.

Someone said that the prayer of the modern American is this:

“Dear God, I pray for patience. And I want it right now!”

“Patience is a virtue” is a proverbial phrase referring to one of the seven heavenly virtues, said to date back to the fifth-century poem “Psychomachia,” (si’ ko mock’ ee uh)—meaning “conflict of the soul”—by the Latin poet Prudentius. Whatever the world may think of it, patience occupies a high place in the Biblical list of virtues. Paul called it one of the fruits of God’s Spirit in a Christian’s life.

While patience involves the capacity to endure hardship, suffering, or inconvenience, this ability to tolerate delay does not indicate a dull passivity, just twiddling our thumbs, hoping and waiting for something to turn up. It is a strong, active virtue. It is running the race with endurance, holding on while others are giving up. It is a patience which masters things.

Patience moves our minds away from frustrations, expectations “shoulds,” and “oughts,” and aligns us with reality. When we are patient, our energy is available to make good things happen. And patience is a virtue that can be developed over time and through experience. It’s like a muscle that we can exercise to gradually build strength, like an athlete who spends many hours in practice before the first game.

There once was a farmer who went to town to buy seeds for his farm. As he was returning home one of the squash seeds he had purchased fell from his pocket onto the ground. It happened that within a few feet was another seed of a different type. The place where the two seeds lay was rather fertile, and they both took root.

After about a week the squash seed showed signs of growth. The second seed showed none. After two weeks the squash began to sprout leaves. The second seed showed none. After seven weeks the squash began to show fruit. The second seed still showed no progress. Four more weeks came and went.

Shortly, the squash plant reached the end of its life, having borne much fruit in that time, and about the same time the other seed finally began to grow. Many years later, the squash was long forgotten, but the other tiny seed, an acorn, had grown into a mighty oak tree.

So many people want their spiritual life to be like the squash. They want to experience it all right away. But spiritual growth requires patience and endurance.

In our Epistle Lesson James counsels patience until the coming of the Lord. Those who might protest that the Lord is too slow in coming are reminded of the time it takes before a farmer can harvest his precious crop. The farmer patiently waits for rain. But he also cultivates and cares for his plants.

Let us look at the power of patience by asking some rhetorical questions. First: “Are you patient with yourself?” Have you ever noticed how frustrated some of those tennis players get when they make a mistake? John Gladstone says, “The hardest battle on the hands of most of us is the battle with ourselves.”

Remember Peter, one of Jesus’ chosen disciples. Peter slips and slides all the way through the gospel record. Simon was a fisherman by trade. But one day Jesus called him to give up fishing and to follow him, and fish for men.

Peter lived in close personal association with Jesus. Once he boasted that he would never forsake him. But sadly, we know that when Jesus was arrested and led to Caiaphas the high priest, Peter was outside in the courtyard, and there, three times he denied even knowing Jesus. Later, after the crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus restored Peter and told him to “feed my sheep and tend my lambs.” And subsequently Peter became a great leader in the early church. But Peter, this one upon whom Jesus would build his church, knew what it was to fall short of God’s glory. Are we patient with ourselves?

Secondly, are we patient with our family members? I know some of you don’t have children or grandchildren, but most of us come into contact with children. When a child is baptized in the church, we promise to help raise that child. In a profound sense, they *are* our children. How readily we forget what we were like at age 5 and 13 and 20! How easily we forget some of the things we did when we were young! Are we patient with our children?

And what about our parents? Our brothers and sisters? And what about our spouses—are we patient with our husband or wife? Patience does not mean that anything goes. But it does recognize that no one is perfect. Are we patient with our family members?

Thirdly, are we patient with the church? It is fashionable to be impatient with anything institutional today, and not least the church. But if we love the church, let us hear again Paul's words in his first letter to the Corinthians: "Love is patient" (13:4a).

The truth is that no church is all it should be. We overlook the fact that God builds the church out of the rough material of human beings—people like Peter—like you and me. People like Paul, who once admitted that he did things he would not and failed to do things he would (Rm. 7:15). Paul declared that as the foremost of sinners,

But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life (1 Tim. 1:16).

That doesn't mean that we should not make our voice heard. It does mean that if we love the Church, we won't leave it or withhold our funds the first time the Church makes a decision we don't approve of. In his Letter to the Church in Ephesus Paul said,

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:1-3).

Ourselves, our family, our church. And finally, are we patient with God? Sometimes we're baffled by God's time schedule. In commending patience during times of suffering, James cites the example of Job. It wasn't that Job never questioned or complained, but through all his suffering Job stilled believed in God; he kept the faith. Job refused to condemn God when he lost his crops, his property, his cattle and servants, and finally his children.

Sometimes we feel God doesn't care. Look at Isaiah 40:27:

Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
"My way is hidden from the Lord,
and my right is disregarded by my God"?

Isaiah assures us that God knows, cares, and will renew our strength, if we but wait upon the Lord. Then

...they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

The purposes of God often develop slowly because his grand designs are never hurried. The great New England preacher Phillips Brooks was noted for his poise and quiet manner. At times, however, even he suffered moments of frustration and irritability. One day a friend saw him feverishly pacing the floor like a caged lion. "What's the trouble, Mr. Brooks?" he asked. "The trouble is that I'm in a hurry, but God isn't!" Haven't we at times felt the same way?

In his book, *Man, The Dwelling Place of God*, A. W. Tozer says,

The faith of Christ offers no buttons to push for quick service. The new order must wait the Lord's own time, and that is too much for the man in a hurry. He just gives up and becomes interested in something else.

Some of the great missionaries devotedly spread the seed of God's Word and yet had to wait long periods before seeing the fruit of their labors. William Carey, for example, worked seven long years in India before the first Hindu convert was brought to Christ.

Andrew Murray tells of a doctor who was once asked by a patient who had met with a serious accident, "Doctor, how long shall I have to lie here?" "Only a day at a time," was his answer. This taught the patient a valuable lesson. It was the same lesson God had recorded for his people for all ages. If we are faithful a day at a time, the long years will take care of themselves.

Christian patience is rooted in the conviction that God's time is always the best time, the right time. When Jesus came "in the fullness of time" (Eph. 4:4-7), it was after years of waiting for God's people, and many had given up hope. We believe that no one who trusts God will be finally disappointed. But we cannot force the hand of God, who as a loving Father waits for prodigals to come home. God who could send armies to do his work, but chooses to make his appeal from An Old Rugged Cross, willing to patiently wait for us to be won by his love.

My friends, patience is a virtue that brings strength and resilience. And it's a fruit worth cultivating, day by day.

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