

Practicing Patience

Menno Mennonite Church

September 29, 2019

Purpose: To place spiritual patience into the context of God's transformational work in the world.

Message: We are called to patience as we participate in God's ongoing work of transformation.

Scripture: James 5:7-11 [I will read], Matthew 5:38-48 (please read)

Synopsis: Patience is not a popular virtue at present. A sluggish download, or delayed commute is enough to put us in a bad mood. And these are the trivialities of daily living. When it comes to the bigger things, the important things of the world as we wish it would be, we are not so much impatient about their coming as we are skeptical of their reality what so ever. We know this of our world; we know this of our selves. Yet, God's is a work of transformation, promising that all things will be brought into the way of the kingdom, even that which we think most impossible. We are called to patience as an act of hope and faith, trusting that God's work will be brought to completion in the fullness of time and transformation.

James 5:7-11 7 Be patient, therefore, beloved,[b] until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. 8 You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.[c] 9 Beloved,[d] do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! 10 As an example of suffering and patience, beloved,[e] take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. 11 Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

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Let's start with the achingly obvious: Patience, though a virtue, is running short. This is not a great insight. One only needs to go to Taco Bell and be forced to wait for the meat slurry to warm up to have it be confirmed. Or better yet, get on an airplane. There is no lack of complaint there. Even the smoothest flight known to the flying public is bound to be compared to a trip to the gulag by some exasperated soul. And while I understand the indignities of modern air transportation, it always strikes me an odd complaint. Because no matter how bitter the experience, it must be remembered the conversation is being held on the equivalent of a couch *in the air* that is taking you to your destination at speeds heretofore not even imagined by anyone before your grandparent's generation where people bring you drinks you want them. In context of the miles of wagon train travel it would seem a rather petty gripe. My grandmother was a strong subscriber to a series of books extolling various character virtues by way of cartoon biographies of famous people and the trait that made them that way; I think Focus on Family was putting them out. You might see or own the same—nice white books with bright colors. I cannot remember who patience was represented by—Thomas Alva Edison in his long search for the right material to make the lightbulb or someone of that ilk—but it was definitely in there somewhere. And that is where values such as this stay—good ideas and well intentioned ambitions for being good people. It is not a value much for daily living, nor appreciated value that we pride ourselves in. To the North American ears, long accustomed to the value of getting what we want when we want it, patience while nice, might be read as much as a lack of ambition or a bit a schmuck if you aren't going to demand what you want the instant you want it.

Yet here it remains. Patience. A fruit of the spirit—one of the symptoms by which we are to tell the activity of God around us. And rightly so; there is little denying its importance as a spiritual value. Not because of who it makes us to be, or the inclinations patience instills in us, but because of what the spiritual life requires of us. Let me rephrase that because I think it is an important point; we are called to be patient because living in anticipation of the kingdom requires patience; patience is not a required behavior in order to be part of the kingdom. Let me explain.

The piece of Matthew that was read burns brightly in our imaginations. It is that part of the Sermon on the Mount that is central to the Anabaptist project of taking the Jesus ethic from the page and into the world. We profess that the love of enemies and forbearing of retaliation are central to the Christian life and experience. So much so that we forget that not all Christian

denominations read these words in the quite the same way. Most see these commands as aspirational promises, to be lived well now, but more so to be fulfilled more than the day to day way of being in the here and now. “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” is followed with an understood “someday” in most people’s minds; perhaps yours as well. Theologians call this the “interim ethic”; we know that Jesus wants this of his followers, but we are stuck doing the best we can because the world renders it hard to do right now. But in the meantime, we can’t be stupid. We need to do what works because the big cruel world requires that of us. As much as we still struggle with what to do with all Jesus has to say we read these words as meaning that we ought to be about them right here and right now. By no means are we perfect at them, but more than most that’s what our fundamental theology says—this is stuff that is for today as well as being for tomorrow. We know it’s hard, and more time than not we get it wrong and fall short of loving those who irritate us or wish us good, let alone those with actual physical malice.

We know that it is hard to do all this stuff the Jesus talks about. I don’t need to tell you that the day where this vision of the kingdom has yet to come. One only needs to open up your newspaper (or internet browser in this day and age) to know the love has yet to be written on the human heart. We reel to think of the power that hatred holds, be it in the place of the most recent mass shooting or our own hearts and minds. We know this deep down in our souls and are often left like so many generations before us wonder aloud: “How long, Oh Lord?”. We are in the meantime—those moments where there are bills to pay, institutions to sustain, fears to be considered, pain to be endured. We are int the mean time—the waiting time. The time we spend in waiting—for the phone to ring, the plane to land, the letter to arrive, the check to come—waiting for—the grades to come in, for the lab report— waiting to see, to hear, to know—while the meantime is the most difficult.

And that brings us back to patience. Patience, Webster would have it, is defined “*as the bearing of provocation, annoyance, misfortune, or pain, without complaint, loss of temper, irritation, or the like.*” All of which is a pretty tall ask. I know that were I God (and trust me, I am not and that is good) I would be moving a whole lot faster that what things seem to be moving right now. It is hard to maintain an optimism about the fate of the world when we continue to encounter so much pain. This week we had people talking about the literal end of the

world in the shape of climate change concerns. We all shake our heads at the level of disfunction we see in the world. We need to be continually reminded that God's project is not a mere unveiling of a world of completeness that has been there all along, but rather the transformation of what is here and now into what is then and in the future. We need look no further than ourselves to have this confirmed. We do not become people of peace simply by deciding that Jesus is the one we should follow. We know that the true life of faith has far more to do with the day-in, day-out minute alteration of our minds, attitudes, hopes, and dreams far more than it does the radical reformation of bad to good as a matter of overnight change. We need to patient—with others, with God, and with ourselves as part of our journey to get where we all ultimately are going.

Being patient with others we get because that one is common. Generally, it is the habits of those with whom we wait that irritate us the most. The wondering of “why couldn't they just...” comes to mind on a frequent basis. Sometimes it those we love the most for whom we must find the most patience as closeness of relationship makes us most keenly aware of those habits that irritate us the most. When Emily and I were dating and then waiting (impatiently) to be married in separate countries, we would spend hours on Skype, talking the night away and playing online games against each other. And as such enforced conversation of the medium (it is hard just to hang out online) we were left looking for something new to talk about when all conversation had been exhausted. We quickly learned each other's habits—like my humming the Star Wars Imperial death march when I was about to roll over and take her land (we were playing risk). We had to push each other's buttons a little bit if only just to have something to talk about. We had to learn how to deal with impatience with the other as we both tried to navigate a situation that neither of us preferred. Patience with each other, and remembering we are all in the same boat goes a long way.

Patience with God is harder still. In the midst of all that is wrong in the world, we are often left wondering whether transformation is possible at all, let alone whether it is happening around us. To say that we would not do things God's way were we given the opportunity is the height of understatement. We want our candy and we want it now. But that's not God. We are called to remember that it is God on whom we wait and in God in whom we hope. We wait on God and trust in God. Our lives are shaped inevitably on whom we wait. We assist the process

of patience with God when we call out for each other those places where we see glimpses of God's kingdom. We must remember the stories of God's faithfulness already—in others lives and in our own—in order to maintain our rootedness in the hope of God's transformation. As much as we wish we could see where all of this ends, that is not how our world, how our God works. Were that so, we would not be called to faith, nor would we live in hope. We are patient with God when we can trust in the hope of his transforming promise, even as we acknowledge our present pain of many roots. This is a discipline. It takes practice. It takes perseverance. It takes hope.

And that brings us to the hardest kind of patience of all: patience with ourselves. We know all too well those points of our lives longing for transformation. We know those pleasures longing for change that eludes over and over again. I don't speak only of weight loss here. I know for me, nothing infuriates me more is when I know how to do something in my mind, but I struggle to achieve in my body. We are quick to discount, let alone trust, that God's work in us is long term, and will have a fruition in its own time. We cannot fathom how even that which we hate in ourselves might be used by God; loved by God. We need to be reminded that God's love is unconditional, which is a far harder concept to grasp than one might think. In our world, we know nothing that is without limit or absent a condition. But unconditional love tells us that no matter how often we fail, or how far from the kingdom we stray, God's passion for us will pursue us still. We struggle to imagine that because it is so much unlike ourselves. Patience with ourselves is manifested in a willingness to extend grace to ourselves even when we feel least graceful. It blossoms when we can honestly see our failings and know them fully and turn them over to God's good work, even as we ourselves work within them. It bears fruit when through perseverance we learn the hard lessons of life and bring ourselves more into the kingdom.

Patience is easy to dismiss, but impossible to live without. God's work is always one of growth, planting seeds, tending, pruning and growing into that which we do not know and cannot fully see. We must embrace that growth as patiently as we can. For one day, even patience will come to an end as what we see dimly now, we will see clearly in God's transformed kingdom. May we be given strength to continue, and may that day come, Lord, May it come.

Matthew 5:38–48 (NRSV)

³⁸“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’

³⁹But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;

⁴⁰and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well;

⁴¹and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.

⁴²Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’

⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

⁴⁵so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.