

Transformational Patience

Menno Mennonite Church
September 12, 2021

Purpose: To explore the way that patience tests us all toward the fullness of Christ

Message: The Spirit inspires in us the work of Patience which takes us far.

Scripture: James 5:7-11; Matthew 5:38-48 (to be read by someone else)

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 whatsoever. 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.

James 5:7–12 (The Message)

⁷Meanwhile, friends,
wait patiently for the Master's Arrival.

You see farmers do this all the time,
waiting for their valuable crops to mature,
patiently letting the rain do its slow but sure work

⁸Be patient like that.
Stay steady and strong.
The Master could arrive at any time.

⁹Friends, don't complain about each other.
A far greater complaint could be lodged against you, you know.
The Judge is standing just around the corner.

¹⁰Take the old prophets as your mentors.

They put up with anything,
went through everything,
and never once quit,
all the time honoring God.

¹¹What a gift life is to those who stay the course!

You've heard, of course,
of Job's staying power,
and you know how God brought it all together for him at the end.

That's because God cares, cares right down to the last detail.

¹²And since you know that he cares,
let your language show it.

Don't add words like "I swear to God" to your own words.
Don't show your impatience
by concocting oaths to hurry up God.

Just say yes or no. Just say what is true.
That way, your language can't be used against you.

As much as I think we hate to admit it, our lives are shaped around that which we wait for. It is not a terribly flattering thought; we would prefer our destinies to be the product of the individual decisions and visions that we have for our individual destinies. Yet, when we are waiting on something, someone, it has a way of altering who we are in the meantime. Want proof? *You better not shout; you better not cry; you better not pout I'm telling you why—Santa Claus is coming to town.* Chances are, if you are singing this song with even the slightest amount of sincerity, the implication is clear here—straighten up and fly right or it is coal for you, if you are waiting of Santa to make good on his contract. And it is not just who we wait on that changes us. Almost 10 years ago now, I had the privilege of walking with my uncle in his last months. Being on sabbatical, I was given the space and time to work outside my usual responsibilities, and I was able to spend a fair amount of time in Lancaster with him and his family as they lived those months. What was interesting of note was what became important in this time of waiting for him. The to do list was not particularly grandiose bucket list sort of stuff. It was fairly mundane: transplant a bush he long wanted to relocate, work in the July heat chopping wood to ensure that there would be enough for a winter he knew he would not see, seeing his siblings again the best he could to share again, to say goodbye. The day-to-day pursuits of building and planning and scheming pretty quickly fell away. There were two priorities that remained—making sure those who he left behind would be comfortable and connecting with family. Many times, it is like this when people know the end is near. Waiting on what they now know is coming with far greater certainty than we all do shaped him. What was important was the simply. Everything else kind of falls away. That which we wait on shapes us; profoundly so.

We don't often get here without some lens to see it through. Waiting, being in a state where we know, implicitly or explicitly that there is something next puts us in an in between place, which is not fun. Theologian Paul Tillich speaks to it well when he wrote: *"Although waiting is not having, it is also having. The fact that we wait for something shows that in some way we already possess it."* Waiting, says Tillich, *"anticipates that which is not yet real. If we wait and hope in patience, the power of that for which we wait is already effective within us. Those who wait, in an ultimate sense, are not that far from that for which they wait."* Things are already in effect, we know it will happen, but it may not already be fully so. It is the already, but not yet. When we were preparing to move, knowing that the border would not allow anything in

our load that was food, we began eating very deliberately, finding our way to the far recesses of the freezer where the stuff we had great plans for and forget about goes to die. But the time was coming when it was either eat it or throw it in the garbage (and I don't like to waste food), so you end up with some very eclectic, freezer burned meals. It wasn't yet, but it was already.

Something had already changed for us just knowing that there is something on which we are waiting and planning. We are shaped by waiting on the ending of a pandemic that we had so fervently, expectantly had hoped was over. Yet we anticipate that day. Any event projects itself backward, changing the present.

This is where patience comes in. Speaking personally, this is not a strong point; I don't many patient people. We are society of instant gratification. What we once took for granted as taking time—communication, cooking, transportation—now seems unbearably and unalterably slow if it is less than instant. How we live our lives shows itself in our spiritual life. We want to make our world Zion, and we want to do so now, if not sooner. We want to regain the Eden that we lost, we want to bring about the kingdom NOW, to remake the world NOW, to end the suffering that we see all around us NOW. We are impatient for the project to complete itself. We see the world groaning with the pangs of the way things are, and we cannot help but grow impatient with it all.

Yet, even in our impatience, we are invited into something new. James' call to patience is what it is—the counter cultural call to be about the work of the kingdom in the waiting on the Lord—because it asks us into the a different kind of patience. This is not a patience of simply trying to get someone to bear with you for a few more minutes while you finish that which we know we need to do. This is an active patience that has planted seeds, is tending, watering, cultivating, and anticipating the harvest yet to come. James is calling us to a practice of patience that is active and identifies with those with whom we wait. In short, waiting in the Spirit for the fullness of God's good time, living the already reality of the kingdom. God with us asks us to do the work of the kingdom here and now. We were not meant to get through the moments of life by ourselves—the good or the bad. They both need to be shared. We learn in identifying with each other way of the kingdom that we are waiting on becomes more evident, allowing us to better live into the consequence of what comes next. In short, even as we wait on the kingdom coming, we in this active patience are shaped into the form and way of that kingdom as well.

Because the spiritual life requires patience. As much as we would like baptism, or better yet, a confession of faith to be some sort of magic wand that makes everything alright rarely does that happen. Even when there is a radical change, often it is the beginning of something, not the end. I think that the spiritual life is far less a reality made possible by patience, or resulting in patience, but rather something that simple struggles to exist in the absence of patience. Seldom does growth happen on our schedule, or how we would like it. Our spiritual maturing demands patience with other people, with God, and with ourselves.

We know patience with others. If we have lived in a household for more than about 2 seconds with someone other than ourselves, we know that this is required. Wives are called to be patient with their husbands and visa versa not out of a lack of care or concern for each other, rather because of it. If we don't care, we don't invest, and if we are not invested the little things don't bother us so much. Waiting together allows us to wish "why don't they..." and sometimes become discouraged with the results. We can be impatient because we would just as soon those near us would know us well enough to empathize with us without the messy work of needing to explain and talk through everything every time. Where there is love, patience must surely come closely behind.

Patience with God is harder still. We wait on the Lord, but we would be far from the first to look at our watches and wonder what could be possibly be taking so long. I have heard time and again in recent months, now years us wondering aloud "Surely things are sufficiently messy for the Lord to come and soon." We wait for God to act, to answer prayer (or for ourselves to understand the answer we received) to heal the nations to make a difference, to remedy the pain. The list is endless, and we can grow impatient in the waiting. We have all wondered from time and again "why doesn't God just do something already", wondering even if that means there might be no God to wait on at all. We are called to remember that it is God on whom we wait and in God in whom we hope. Our lives are shaped inevitably on whom we wait; our waiting changes us in ways big and small. 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 know our present pain. This is a discipline. It takes practice. It takes perseverance. It takes hope.

Most of all, we need to have patience with ourselves. This is the hardest of them all. We need to give ourselves enough grace to transform to heal, to forgive, to wait. And that is hard because we know how much we are ready for our lives to change in big and small ways. We know those habits that we wish would just go away; those places we ourselves would love to change but eludes repeatedly. We cannot fathom how even that which we hate in ourselves might be used 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 and in spite of 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 and soon.