

WAITING AT THE GATE
What Would the Fruit of Patience Look Like In My Life?
Rev. Daniel D. Meyer, Senior Pastor
Text: Luke 15:11-24

I

We continue our discussion of the Fruits of the Spirit by turning this morning to the one aspect of Christian character for which life is kind enough to keep us in constant training. And what fruit is that, you ask? Why Patience, of course. And haven't you had your share of practice in that?

In countless ways, the process of daily living seems to require an inordinate amount of pure and simple waiting. Waiting...for that special someone who will walk into your world and long to be your companion for life. Waiting...for the kids to mature enough so as to give you more than a moment's rest. Waiting...for that job to turn up, for the clear guidance you need to make that big decision, for the parking space, for the medicine to take effect, for the traffic to clear.

It seems like every day brings with it new "opportunities" to develop the skill of patience, only they don't feel like anything so cheerful as "opportunities," do they? More like occasions for boredom, frustration, or pain. And more often than not, it is people upon whom our waiting depends, and who make the waiting so tough.

There is the client who won't pay his bills; the person who overlooks your gifts; the inconsiderate slouch who doesn't call. There are those people who try your patience with their endless talking, or their unwillingness to talk; with their excessive interest in themselves, or their pushy interest in you.

There is hardly a cocktail party, office, highway or home where waiting on imperfect people is not a necessary but frustrating element of life. So the question becomes: How do we gain that incredible patience which seems to mark the lives of those rare saints we meet?

If you remember nothing else about this series of sermons, I pray you will remember this. Qualities like love, joy, peace, patience and kindness aren't just humanistic virtues. Before they are ever those, they are attributes of the character of God. And character, as you parents well know, is caught more than taught. It grows most quickly through regular contact with someone who already has it.

The people who followed Jesus so many years ago must have sensed that. They worshipped with him each week, sought the fellowship of other believers in-between, and gave themselves in service to Christ throughout, because they found that when they did so, Christ's character rubbed off on them. Thus, it is not surprising that when Jesus began to tell this story, they—longing to have what he had—listened with all of their heart—as I pray you will today.

II

It seems that a certain man had two sons, upon whom he lavished all of the affection and resources that any parent could. Each of them was given a cherished place in the important work of his estate, and each night that father probably prayed—as all parents do—that the unstinting offering of these blessings would help his kids take on his best attributes and grow up to be people of generosity, stature, and grace.

One day, however, the younger of the two sons came to him with a hardened look on his face. Since the boy was apparently not yet married, he could not have been more than 17 and, with the cold frankness peculiar to many of us at that age, the boy said something like this:

"Look, old man, I've been thinking it over, and this life isn't really what I had in mind. I'm tired of playing second fiddle to you. The servants treat you with more respect than me. The checks all have your name printed at the top. And this house is decorated in a style that is definitely not me."

"But, son," the father interrupted, "*you know that everything I have is yours*; I'm just trying to help you get ready to take it all on."

"Yeah, yeah, I've heard all that before, but don't you see that I'm sick of waiting for it. I know that when you kick the bucket I'm going to get half of all this stuff, anyway, so why don't you just give it to me now? There's a whole world out there ripe for the killing. I want my own place, my own bank account, my own life, and I want it now."

"But son..."

"Would you quit with all that 'son' stuff! I don't want to be your son! Just give me my share of the estate, and give it to me now!!"

Those who were listening to this story probably held their breath, knowing that it was only moments before the other shoe was sure to fall. No one in that culture could treat their father like that and get away with it. The entire fabric of Jewish society was held together by the ancient law of honor towards one's parents. Children were routinely disinherited for outbursts considerably more tame than that one. And to ask for one's inheritance at this boy's age was tantamount to saying: "Father, I wish you'd croak right here in front of my eyes! And if you won't do me the courtesy of dying, then go ahead and spend the rest of your miserable days living on only half of the assets you've worked so hard to build. My desires are more important."

Friends, life in that day operated by harder rules than in ours. Children in that culture weren't sent to their room or grounded for saying something like that. For the sake of the social order, they were frequently taken outside of the town and stoned to death by everyone who could lift a rock.

Imagine the shock wave, then, that blew through the crowd of listeners as Jesus went on.

With the curse of his son's words still ringing in the air, the father went to the safe, pulled out the deeds to the family estate, and gave his son everything for which he'd asked.

"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country, and there squandered his wealth in wild living." The crowd probably murmured, "It serves him right, the stupid fool." Only it wouldn't have been the son of whom they spoke.

This story has been called by modern readers the Parable of the Prodigal—or "wasteful" Son. But that's not what Jesus' audience would have called it. They would have thought that the "wasteful" one was any father who could allow a child to squander half the family's resources and publicly reject him like that.

What would become of a world where children were allowed to turn upon the One who had given them life, showered them with every imaginable gift, and promised them more where those came from?

What has become of this world? Would that father not be wiser to destroy those children and start all over again?

That's the kind of father the people of Israel believed in. And isn't that the kind of character the world still values—the kind that won't suffer fools, cuts its losses, and protects its pride—a character that acts in righteous impatience with those who flout its good will?

But Jesus knew a different Father—a Father who, when he has every justification for acting in judgment, prefers instead simply to wait.

In time, the story continues, the fortunes of the younger son turned from marvelous, to meager, to mud. The friends who had been so devoted when his stocks were up put little stock in his company when the market was down. And before long he found himself lucky to get a part time-job slopping hogs. Jesus said that *"he longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating; but no one gave him anything."*

And it was then that the boy "came to his senses" and saw himself for what he had become. Jesus says that he remembered how even the hired servants in his father's house were given more than enough to eat, and there began to grow within that self-sealed heart the faintest glimmer of humble confession.

There in the squalor of his empty independence... there in that place to which we come when all of our gambling with the resources we have been given has left us with little to

show... in that distant country some of us may be dwelling in now... there he began to realize that he had somehow madly turned his back on the one dependable, one truly abundant goodness he had ever known. And he turned his heart towards home.

"What a fool," Jesus' listeners must have thought. This time, however, they would have meant the son. "Do you really believe there could possibly be a place for you there?" they would have wanted to say to the boy. "Go ahead and drown yourself in an alcoholic stupor. Go on and slit your wrists and be done with the sham. Go ahead and do anything but think there could ever again be anything but wrath and judgment for someone who's forsaken his father's grace like that. One father might be wasteful enough to let you take his precious resources and squander them on selfish living. One father might allow you to do that and go unpunished, but no father—even if you were prepared to clean toilets for life—could ever welcome you home."

Or could he? Or has he?

Jesus suggests that after many days of weary travel, the younger son finally crested an all-important hill. There, spread out at his feet, was the vast expanse of his family's estate. Everything looked much like it had when he had left, save for the great span of land to the south now ringed with someone else's fence. There were the workers laboring under the glow of the late afternoon sun. There was the gracious farmhouse, nestled comfortably among the golden fields.

And yet there, down at the end of the dirt lane that ran up to the house, was an unfamiliar sight. There where the road met the driveway of the family home, was the figure of a lone man, silhouetted in the light of the setting sun—a solitary watchman who stood waiting at the gate.

What the boy could not know—for who on earth could believe it was so—was that that lone figure had stood in that place through the heat of every long day since his child had left home.

And then, all of a sudden that figure broke his stolid stance. With every step his pace became faster. In a moment he was jogging, then running, then dashing wildly up the hill towards the boy—his eyes filled with tears of joy—as if he'd suddenly found a beloved part of himself he feared was lost forever. "He's home!" he shouted. "My boy has come home!! Quick, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Kill the fatted calf and prepare the celebration. For he that was lost is found. My child has come home!!"

III

Friends, God loves you and me with a patience like that. Do you remember how Donald Grey Barnhouse said that love is the ground from which all the Fruits of the Spirit grow? Joy is love singing. Peace is love resting. Kindness is love's shaping touch. Well,

patience is love persevering. Patience is love refusing to give up hope, in the knowledge that growth takes time.

Some who have read this parable have missed that point, and tried to turn this powerful tale of Jesus into a moralistic story. When we finally come to our senses and clean up our act, they say, THEN God receives us home. Being received by God is a matter of proving ourselves repentant enough.

Yet that is clearly not what this parable says. As far as that father knew, when the boy came over the brow of that hill, he might not have changed a wit. Given his past record, he might just as easily have been coming back to ask for more money.

The crowd who listened to Jesus tell this story would have bet on that explanation. And yet that is precisely what makes the real message of this parable so utterly amazing.

I don't know how it is with you, but let me say that I find it incredibly difficult to be patient with people who are ignorant of their folly, or uncaring about their impact on me. On my best days, I can sometimes find it in my heart to be patient with people who know they've made mistakes and admit a desire to mend their ways.

But the kind of patient hope that Jesus ascribes to God here is something altogether transcendent. Notice the order of events. Jesus said that "while [the boy] was still a long way off"—before the son ever says a word to give his father any rational hope that he is a different person than when he left—"*his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him, kissed him,*" and welcomed him home.

When James Garfield, later President of these United States, was principal of Hiram College in Ohio, one father approached him quite irritated by his son's slow progress through school. The father asked Garfield if the course of studies might be shortened so that his son could complete his degree in less time.

"Why, certainly" Garfield replied. "But it all depends on what you want to make of your boy. When God wants to make an oak tree he takes a hundred years. When he wants to make a squash, he requires only two months. Tell me, sir, just which fruit did you have in mind?"

The Father Jesus shows us does not grow impatient when our course in discipleship takes time. He loves us when we are still a long way off: when we are still more stuck on acquiring luxuries than on serving the poor; when we are still more concerned with impressing others than pleasing him; when we are still more interested in sports than in worship, in the newspaper than the scriptures, in being right than being righteous.

God loves us patiently. He doesn't quit on us when we are little more than moral squash. He doesn't send a slave to tell us the things we must change before we will be

worthy of his love. He waits at the gate patiently himself, and then comes running to welcome us home.

Having met that Father today, tell me friends, might the people in your life this week—meet that sort of patience in you?

Let us pray...

Lord, we give you thanks for the inordinate patience with which you meet everything about us. Help us never to live as if that forbearance were ours by right, instead of the amazing grace it truly is. Then send us forth to love others with that same enduring hope. For we pray these things in the name of Him who, for our sake, stands waiting at the gate. Amen