**Fruit of the Spirit: Patience**

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**Texts: Galatians 5:22-23, James 5:7-10**

If they didn’t mean for the sewing machine to go that fast, why did they make the pedal go down that far? This is what I would ask my mom when she would implore me to be patient when I was learning to sew. I had no patience for the slow and steady work of sewing and even less for the tedious work of pulling the stitches out when my mother insisted I redo it correctly. “Be patient,” she said.

The plant didn’t bloom immediately. The bread took forever to rise. The wood glue took an eternity to dry. The trip was still weeks away. As a child, I hated waiting. “Have patience,” my grandmother would say, “good things come to those who wait.” But I had no patience for waiting. I wanted the world to move at my pace. And having absolutely no ability to make a natural process go faster was infuriating, but no amount of complaining could change it. “Have patience,” she told me.

I was talking to the doctor who was treating me for ADHD. We were discussing how I enjoy routines. And how I don’t like it when my plans are changed. And how I like things done my way. He asked what I did. I told him I was an early childhood teacher. He stared at me and said, “how does that work?” Young children are known for their ability to question routines and throw a monkey wrench into the best-laid plans. I shrugged, “patience is a virtue?” Anyone who has ever watched someone do something differently or waited for someone to be ready to go and just wanted to jump in and do it for them knows the struggles. But patience is a virtue, they say.

And in today’s passage, James implores his readers, “Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord” (Jas 5:7). Patience, according to the dictionary, is the capacity to accept or tolerate delay, trouble, or suffering without getting angry or upset. It’s the ability to wait, to accept what is as it is, be it a sorrow or a joy, calmly, without anxiety, and without the impulse to seek revenge. And this tracks with what James has been saying…in the first chapter of his letter, he writes, “whenever you face trials, consider it all joy” (Jas 1:2) and “blessed is anyone who endures temptation” (Jas 1:12). Be patient, he says. Just wait it out with quiet acceptance because Jesus is coming and Jesus will make it right, right?

But I’m not sure that it’s that simple.

First, James has spent the last 4 chapters making it clear that, for him, faith, without works, is nothing. James says, “what good is it if you say you have faith but not have works? Can faith save you?” (Jas 2:14). And he tears into them for the ways that they are oppressing the poor and needy among them and leaning into disputes among themselves as they vie for the right to be the “right-est.” Whatever patience he is calling us to is not one of quiet resignation.

“You must…have patience” like “the farmer [who] waits for the precious crop from the earth” (James 5:7-8), he says. I’m not a farmer and I lack the patience to make plants grow, but I do know, having watched my grandmother and my mother-in-law coax flowers and food from the earth, and having watched my father-in-law painstakingly tend to grape vines, waiting for something they cannot see, hoping for something that is uncertain, praying for God’s abundance of rain and sun at just the right time, that farming is not a passive event at all.

Here, to have patience is to stick with your practices, to keep doing the things you know you need to do, no matter how long it takes, no matter how many times it seems futile, and even if you aren’t sure exactly how it will turn out. For James, to have patience is more about the way we live while we are waiting…not simply waiting for something to happen to us at the end.

At the end of the book of Exodus, there is a story about Moses where God tells him that he will not make it to the promised land. And Moses tries to change his mind, but God is insistent. Eventually, God says, essentially, “Enough of this. You’re not going. But your people are. So, here’s what you need to do. Get them to the border. Train Joshua to lead them. And write a song to remind them of everything you’ve taught them. They’ll forget it. They won’t do it. But, one day, their children will.” We do this work of faith because we have hope that one day the world will be made right. We might never see it, but we keep on keeping on, because we have hope for the world.

Having patience means welcoming whatever arises and being present with it, not letting our stories of what was or what should be blind us to what is right now. And then working with that. Doing the next right thing and refusing to give in to what is easy but is wrong or hurtful to our common life. Doing the next right thing even when we know that we may never see the fruit of our labor. Doing the next right thing because God’s salvation is not just a personal one, but communal one.

My grandmother used to say, “it is what it is.” I’ve been told that this is hurtful, a way of saying that you should stuff your feelings and take it. But that’s not what my grandmother meant. She meant that I couldn’t change what had happened…I couldn’t wish it away or rail against it until it disappeared. I had to deal with it. I could recognize I’m angry because anger is my brain’s way of telling me something needs to change. But then I respond with the slow and steady pace of hopeful love, not vengeful anger. Have patience with the situation, look at it, listen to it, know it, and find ways to bring light into it.

Martin Luther didn’t care for the book of James, famously calling it “a book of straw.” He railed against it partly because he felt that James put too much emphasis on works when we are justified by faith alone. He worried that people would think they could earn their way into heaven. But James cared deeply about faith…he just thought that if our faith doesn’t produce faithful action, if it doesn’t produce fruit, it isn’t really a Spirit-filled faith. Patience is a virtue…a virtue we have through the Spirit that implores us to live in ways that exemplify the kindom living we are hoping for while we are waiting.

Joanna Adams, a pastor from Atlanta, Georgia, tells a story about a woman that, despite a lifetime of hardships, held on to her faith and the promise that one day this world would be like the kingdom of God. She raised six kids and sent them all to college. When asked how she did it, she replied, “I saw a new world coming.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

If we truly have faith in God’s promised kingdom, then we must live like it, turning the world upside down with love and kindness because we know God is with us. We must live out a fuller model of the new world we see coming. We must meet injustice with service and non-violence. We must be people who model Jesus’s love and welcome to all people. We must be people that take action when we see oppression even when we don’t understand what is right because we know that oppression is not right. We must propose alternatives, a more grace-full and loving style of life, and then live it out in our churches, in our homes, and in our interactions with others even when it’s not popular and even when it’s hard and even when it feels futile. We must be relentless at this work, working with endurance, having patience as we anticipate, in word and action, the new world coming.

We’re living in a world where a lot of people are hurting. Children are starving while food rots. Climate change means some people’s lives are on fire while others drown in epic floods. Immigrants and refugees are whisked away and treated not as honored guests, but like animals. LGBTQ people are denied medical care and personhood. People of color see the progress toward equality reversed. People are dying because they can’t afford basic medical care. And people have ceased listening and throw insults instead. How are we to have patience in the face of suffering?

Ignatius of Loyola, a priest and theologian in the 16th century, is credited with having said, “we pray as if everything depends on God…and work as if everything depends on us.” If we are Jesus’s hands and feet, we can’t afford to just sit around and wait for God to make it all pretty again. We’ve got to turn our prayers into actions having faith that God works with us. This is what James is telling us. Having patience means not giving up or giving in but believing in God’s promises and doggedly taking part in the kindom building work.

That’s why we participate in civic life, advocating for the care of our neighbors and why we show up at pride events and unity breakfasts and heritage festivals to show that no one is all alone. That’s why we feed our neighbors and support mission work that cares for the hungry and poor around the world. That’s’ why we speak up against hateful language and policies and ask questions when we don’t understand.

James said, “let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness” (Jas 1:19). Did you notice that it says, “slow to anger,” not never be angry? Being patient doesn’t mean ignoring your feelings, but it does mean not letting anger lead the response. If we see injustice and it can be improved, by all means, we should do something. This produces God’s righteousness. Patience in the face of injustice that can be changed is not a virtue, patience with injustice is complicity with the evil that perpetuates it. But to do this, we must not become anger incarnate, instead become love lived in the flesh. Good thing we’ve got a good example of this in Jesus, right? We listen, we consider the words we use, we seek to mend, not make worse, the divisions that got us here.

A virtue is a behavior showing high moral standards. Patience is indeed a virtue. Patience is our behavior, our works, that show our trust and belief in what God has told us to do and has promised for us. Patience isn’t just sitting in despair as we wait for the kingdom to come. To be patient is to do the work because we trust in what God is doing and will do with us. Be patient, then, until the coming of the Lord. Amen.

1. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 1* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), pg. 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)