<u>July 13: The Fruit of Patience *(Galatians 5:22-25)*</u>
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Welcome, my friends, to our summer sermon series on the Fruit of the Spirit, a way for us to explore some big questions about what it means to be disciples of Jesus in our modern world. We're looking at one fruit each Sunday, with the goal of offering some practical ways for us to grow in our faith. Today we're studying everybody's favorite, the fruit of patience. We're so glad you're joining us for these conversations, and we look forward to diving in deeper with you over the next few months.

Before we begin, please take a moment to pray with me.

O God, Ancient of Days, you revealed yourself to our spiritual ancestors as compassionate and gracious, patient, and abounding in steadfast love. Thank you that you never give up on us. Teach us how to live out your divine patience as we face suffering and injustice. Amen.

This is actually my second sermon on patience. My first sermon took place many, many years ago, when I was five years old, while my family (who lived in Bangladesh at the time) was on a summer "home leave" with my grandparents in Florida. They had a cassette tape titled "Music Machine", which had a song about each fruit of the Spirit, and we kids listened to it again and again – and my favorite song, by far, was the one about patience. It featured a snail named Herbert who was a speed-demon in his youth – he crashed through spider webs and collided with beetles, until his father finally took him aside and taught him this song: "Be patient, be patient, don't be in such a hurry. When you get impatient, you only start to worry. Remember, remember, that God is patient, too, and think of all the times when others have to wait for you!"[1]

The grand highlight every stay with my Florida grandparents was visiting the Magic Kingdom in Disney World – and I have just one crystal-clear memory from the visit we made that summer. My family was waiting for the Dumbo ride, in a long, boring line that moved at a snail's pace. As we crawled along, I found myself eavesdropping on the family in front of us. They had a little girl about my age, and her mother was encouraging her to "be patient."

[1] You can hear the original song at this link (you're welcome!): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oiK4naUQu10&list=RDoiK4naUQu10&start_radio=1

As soon as I heard the word “patient,” excitement filled my body. I knew exactly what I could give to help them through this situation! I jumped in front of them and exclaimed that I knew the perfect song – and then I sang the entire patience chorus, just like I sang it for you. I think that I expected them to be delighted, to thank me with joy for my gift and maybe even learn it from me and sing it together. But that’s not what happened. Instead, they stared at me like I had three heads, then did their best to ignore our family and avoid all eye contact for the rest of that very long wait, while I pondered the failure of my attempt at exhortation and encouragement. It’s taken me over forty years to attempt another sermon on patience, and I hope that this one will go over a little better!

One of the big take-aways from that initial failure was that nobody likes to be told to be patient – kids don’t like to hear it from their parents, and parents don’t like to hear it from a random five-year-old. Patience is the fruit that you don’t really like, but you’ll eat it because it’s good for you, like cantaloupe. Patience is associated with boredom, and annoyance, and pain – another word for patience is long-suffering. I’ve been told multiple times that it’s dangerous to pray for patience, because you really don’t want to encourage God to send you the kind of trials that develop it. And all jokes aside, patience is often weaponized by oppressors to maintain the status quo and discourage resistance.

I think patience needs better marketing – and better songs. Because even though it’s true that patience involves pain, without patience there would be very little deep beauty in this world, no real love, no good future. We pray for patience not because patience itself is the goal, but because patience leads us into a brighter future, and we can’t become who we were created to be or transform the world around us without following the path of patience.

Here's how I’m defining patience: patience is the ability to respond thoughtfully, constructively, and lovingly when we’re not there yet (wherever “there” is) – when we haven’t reached a destination or goal, when we get delayed, or stuck in a place we don’t want to be, when things and people aren’t yet the way they’re supposed to be, when we don’t have answers or certainty, when justice is deferred. Patience looks like choosing to live out the fruit of the Spirit when there’s no immediate result or reward, when it feels like what we’re doing will never bear fruit. Patience is hope lived out in the present.

I think that patience is becoming more and more difficult to practice, because our technology and culture increasingly train us to expect information, replies, services, and goods – and to produce those things – at breakneck speed.

Because we're so used to things being fast, we expect near-instant gratification, and we're not good at putting up with delay or slowness. If a webpage doesn't load in a couple seconds, we abandon it. If something we want doesn't have two-day delivery, we look somewhere else. If something's broken or out of style or outdated, we discard it and get a newer model – sometimes it's impossible not to, since businesses deliberately manufacture products to have a brief shelf life. Because we can access information and "answers" so quickly, we're less willing to sit with questions, consider different viewpoints, or simply rest in uncertainty. And AI is just making it worse – now we can generate instant summaries, articles, emails, homework assignments, and speeches, making us less likely to think deeply about what we're writing and saying.

And although I love two-day delivery and zippy download speeds, the problem is that our modern culture trains us to feel entitled to speed, to fast answers, to certainty, to completion, to satisfaction. We come to believe that these things are our right, and waiting – especially if the wait is longer than anticipated – is a problem that needs to be fixed, as soon as possible. And because we believe we're entitled to speed, we feel wronged when a late person or a slow driver or a bad wifi signal slows us down – our time is being stolen. And when we feel wronged or robbed, we get anxious and angry, and we often react badly. We tailgate, treat customer service reps rudely, and post rants on social media. We forget that every moment is a gift we did nothing to deserve, that every breath, even the breaths we take while sitting in traffic or being put on hold, is a miracle that we cannot take for granted.

At this point, I could go on about the importance of gratitude and mindfulness and slowing down to savor each moment, and everything I said would be true and important – but also, I would run the risk of getting very preachy, just like I was when I serenaded a random family in the Dumbo ride line. Because patience isn't just about reacting well when we're inconvenienced. Deep patience, the kind of patience that is a fruit of the Spirit – can't be described with platitudes or trite songs. It's also what we're asked to choose when *we* are the ones who are in process – when own lives or relationships are stuck, or stagnated, or enmeshed in addiction or depression or dysfunction. It's what

we're called to practice in the midst of chronic illness, or overwhelming grief, or the changes that come with aging. It means responding thoughtfully, constructively, lovingly, and hopefully when those we love deeply just keep on making hurtful choices, and there's nothing we can do to fix them. Patience is what we're called to when everything is changing and we feel helpless…when our best isn't good enough to fix a situation or make someone better…when we're pretty sure that things are going to get worse before they get better (and we have no idea when they'll start to get better)…when the bad guys continue get away with things and innocent people continue to suffer. When we're not sure we can take any more, even then, we are invited to practice patience.

This kind of patience is excruciatingly hard, and it demands a lot of us. It means accepting that we don't have control, we can't lean into easy answers or reasons, and results are not guaranteed. And while I don't want to cheapen how very hard it is to practice patience in the midst of suffering and injustice – I do want to give hope and a little guidance.

And to do that, I'm taking us to James, a New Testament letter written by one of Jesus' brothers, also known as James the Just. His letter was meant to be carried around and read to multiple churches in the Roman empire, to people who were victims of injustice, poverty, and suffering. At the beginning of chapter 5, James rips into rich oppressors who cheat their workers – "weep and wail," he writes, "because of the misery that is coming on you" (James 5:1). He rants on for a few verses, and then he switches tone and begins to address those who suffer at the hand of the rich and powerful:

> 7 Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. 8 You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. 9 Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!
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> 10 Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. 11 As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy. (James 5:7-11).

James is adamant about hope here – that oppressors won't get away with their oppression forever; that God will return and make all things right; that the moral arc of the universe may be long, but it bends towards justice. In the meantime, though, James calls his listeners to the same kind of active patience as farmers, who tend the soil and care for the land in hope that the things they can't control – like rain – will happen, and the seeds they planted will produce fruit. He reminds the community not to direct their frustration at suffering and injustice inward, by turning on each other. And then he presents two examples of patience in the face of suffering: the Old Testament prophets and Job.

What's fascinating about both these examples is that they don't exercise patience the way that we might envision it. They're not silent or passive in the face of injustice and suffering, and they don't shy away from demanding immediate change or confronting God.

Listen to the prophet Isaiah: "Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed" (Isaiah 1:17); or Amos: "Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream" (Amos 5:24).
And Job, the poster-boy for undeserved, prolonged personal pain, did not suffer in silence. He took God to task, demanding answers for what was happening to him. Job's companions repeatedly accused him of impatience, and he agreed with them; at one point, Job cried out, "Why should I not be impatient?" (Job 21:4). What Job refused to do was to settle for trite and simple answers to make sense of his suffering. He continued to pester God until he got a response.

By using Job and the prophets as examples, James shows us that the opposite of patience isn't impatience or complacency. Both the prophets and Job were impatient for justice to come and suffering to end. And like them, we can be hungry for change but still choose to respond thoughtfully, constructively, and lovingly when it tarries.

A book that I read in preparation for this sermon is *Why We Can't Wait,* by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It contains his famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," in which he responded to local pastors who had criticized him in an open letter titled, "Call to Unity". They said they recognized the "natural impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in being realized," but were convinced that the Birmingham demonstrations were "unwise and untimely."[2]

[2]"A Call for Unity," https://www.dbu.edu/mitchell/modern-resources/_documents/acallforunitytextandbackground.pdf

Dr. King responded forcefully to this call for "patience": "Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor," he wrote. "It must be demanded by the oppressed…justice too long delayed is justice denied…I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience."[3]

For Dr. King, patience didn't look like complacency or doing nothing – what it did look like was thoughtful, constructive, loving action that refused to employ the tactics of the oppressor, like coercive power, violence, and appeal to fear and hate – even though those tactics are effective at bringing fast results. The kind of action that Dr. King chose came from the ground up, like the work of a farmer – it was slow, and collective, and leaned into the fruit of the Spirit, and didn't always look like winning. But it was powerful, and it was transformative – and instead of dehumanizing and defeating the oppressors, it invited them to change and choose life and justice.

History, literature, and movies are full of examples of how groups or individuals who start out resisting oppression begin to employ the tactics of the oppressor because those tactics work – and then they end up just as tyrannical as the ruler or system they defeated. There's no transformation – oppression just takes on a different face. Responding to injustice by resisting with love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control rarely brings instant results. It will cost us something, and we may never see the results of our labor. We have to hope and trust that the seeds we plant will receive what they need to grow and flourish in strength and beauty. We trust that our efforts aren't lost, that we've joined the story of transformation and newness and justice that God is writing into this world.

We human beings are stuck in time that goes in a straight line, in one direction only – we can't go backwards and recover what's in the past, and we can't go forwards to figure out what's coming. Once a second is gone, it's gone, and once we reach the end of our allotted lifetime, it's over. Out time gets lost, and wasted, and it's hard to practice patience when time is finite and running out. But God's not trapped in linear time, like we are, and to God, nothing is lost or wasted – every word, every tear, every question, every prayer, every brave and loving action – I believe that all of those matter deeply to God, and all are held safe and used by God to transform us and the world around us.

[3] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait,* (Berkeley: Signet Classics, 1963) p.91, 93.

And so God's not fussed and anxious, in the same way we are, when things take a long time to change, or when we take a long time to change – God can see how everything is going to become, and God holds hope for us and for the world, and God has all the time in the world. God has put eternity in our hearts and is preparing us for eternity. God is infinitely patient with our slow, halting journey towards completeness and justice.

And honestly, sometimes I find that frustrating, and like the writer of Psalm 13, I cry out, "How long? How long, Lord?" Waiting for change to come might not seem like long to God, but it sure seems long to me, and I find it hard to trust in the slow work of God, in me and in the world.

But then I remember how almost everything deeply beautiful in this world – great works of art and music and literature, natural landscapes that take our breath away – all of that beauty is the product of significant time and effort and patience. And maybe the journey I'm on, the journey we're on – when we walk that journey with patience and hope in the midst of suffering, our lives become deeply beautiful and compelling in a way that wouldn't be possible if we never had to practice deep patience.

Like every week this summer, we're sharing practical ideas to help us grow the Fruit of the Spirit in our lives – and I'm going to close by inviting you into three practices to help us cultivate patience.

The first practice of patience is listening – specifically, listening to somebody else tell their story or share what's happening in their lives, without interrupting or giving advice or trying to fix their problems for them. This kind of nonjudgmental, attentive listening is a gift, and it requires great patience on the part of the listener to simply sit with somebody while they are in process, to be there for them and wait with them for their change to come.

The second practice of patience I invite you to do is to ask questions. Read through the book of Job and take note of the questions Job lobbed at God and at his companions, as well as the answers he rejected. And then make a list of your own questions. Don't be afraid to point out the fractures and unfinished, unanswered places in the world, in your community, in yourself, and don't rush to find answers. Sit with the questions, pray the questions, be patient with ambiguity and mystery. Listen to these words, written by Austrian author Rainer Maria Rilke, to a young poet: "I want to beg you as much as I can…to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves…do not now seek answers which cannot be given you

because you would not be able to live them…Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without knowing it, live along some distant day into the answer."[4]

And finally, inspired by James, I want to call us all to be farmers. Maybe not literal farmers, although I think that does help develop patience. Instead, I want to invite us to cultivate a demonstration garden right here in this community. A demonstration garden is a small-scale plot that showcases gardening methods, design, and plants so that people who spend time in it can develop a vision of what's possible in their own spaces. We don't have the power to change the whole world so that it flourishes, and we don't have the power to fix all of the injustice we see. But we can channel our impatience into fruitful action right here, right now; we can together cultivate the fruit of the Spirit through small, patient actions like the ones on this Bingo card, and we can grow a garden here that reflects the future we long for, and that becomes a vital part of the story of transformation and newness and justice that God is writing into this world.

May God send all the rain and sunshine we need to grow the beauty we long for. Amen.

[4] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet,* translated by M.D. Herter (Norton, 1954), p.46-47.