

Reality Check
May 18, 2014
Matthew 13:24-30

For the second Sunday in a row, we will be listening to a story about farming. More specifically, our Scripture reading is yet another parable in which Jesus talks about someone sowing.

Listen for the voice of our Still Speaking God in these words from the thirteenth chapter of Matthew's Gospel:

He put before them another parable: The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away.

So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?

He answered, An enemy has done this. The slaves said to him, Then do you want us to go and gather them?

But he replied, No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.

May God bless the reading and the hearing of these words.

Let us pray. God of Many Names, help us to glean some of the rich and timeless wisdom found in this morning's parable. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

Summer is almost here. It is a magical time for children – a time without school and a time for family vacations. All of us who have traveled with children know to expect four very important words with some regularity during any trip: Are we there yet?

We expect impatience with children for whom the joy isn't in the journey, but the destination. But, what about ourselves? Are you anything like me when it comes to struggling with patience?

Maybe we should not be too hard on ourselves. After all, we live in a culture that promotes impatience and demands that everything continue to move at faster and faster speeds.

Why else would it be normal to eat fast food, surf the web on high speed internet connections, receive packages sent by express mail, and even carry phones on our person wherever we go?

Perhaps, like children, we need a seasonal reminder to slow down. Summer obliges.

For many annual residents of Southwest Florida this change of pace comes when the traffic on the roads fades away and reservations are no longer needed at restaurants. Elsewhere the change of pace comes through the distinctly American sport of baseball – a game that is measured in innings rather than by time. The other major American sports – football, soccer, basketball and hockey – are all constrained by a clock designed to measure the exact time allotted for a given athletic contest.

Patience isn't supposed to be limited to the summer months, but they certainly offer us a good opportunity to renew our focus on this discipline. Maybe you know someone who has the patience of Job? Or maybe the prayer you would fashion on the topic starts like that of one by the Methodist minister Ted Loder:

I'm impatient, Lord,
and it drives me crazy,
to say nothing of those around me.
But you don't seem to have deadlines, God.
Who would set them, after all?
You have eternity.
I don't!

So, forgive me, I want quick miracles,
quick miracles of healing,
of reconciling, of changing for good.
of justice rolling down now,
and of peace coming to the world, to my heart,
of water turning into wine,
grief and joy turning into joy
within at most a season's breath.

Quick miracles, Lord, not slow ones,
which are your specialty, it seems
so slow people die in the meantime,
and children starve, are shot,
storms and droughts destroy,
hate and indifference flourish,
cruelty rules the day,
my life slips away.
Life is short!
I have deadlines!

I am not a patient person.
I have only so much time to strive,
to accomplish what I have to do,
to right some wrongs, to make amends,
to create some beauty, help the poor,
welcome the outcast gays,
clear the ghettos, repair the city,
only so much time . . . ¹

Patience isn't a four letter word. It isn't an attribute to be sought by a select few. And, it isn't something that comes naturally for most of us.

Patience is, however, a godly virtue. It is a fruit of the spirit.² And, it is something we can learn.

How shall we begin? There is a story told about the founder of Hasidic Judaism that has been told many times, and with several variations.

The great rabbi was once in the synagogue and he prayed for a very long time. All of his students were done with their prayers, but he continued without paying any attention to them. They waited around for a while and then went home.

After a couple hours of running errands and what not, the students went back to the synagogue and found their rabbi still deep in prayer.

Later he said to them: "By going away and leaving me alone, it was a painful experience. I needed my community." Then he said, "Let me tell you a parable.

¹ *Men Pray: Voices of Strength, Faith, Healing, Hope and Courage* (SkyLight Paths, 2013), p.74-75.

² Galatians 5:22-23.

“You all know about migrating birds that fly to warm countries in the autumn. Well, people in one of those lands once saw the most glorious multi-colored bird in the midst of a flock that was journeying through the sky. Nobody had ever seen such a bird. It was so beautiful.

The bird landed on the top of the tallest tree and nested in the leaves. When the king of the country heard of it, he made the people fetch the bird with its nest. The king ordered a number of people to make a ladder up to the tree by standing on each other’s shoulders. It took a long time to build this living ladder. Those who stood nearest the ground lost patience and shook themselves free, and everything collapsed.”³

The Rabbi’s wisdom about patience and community should resonate with us. While we can be impatient on our own, we tend to be most impatient in the company of others.

Many here are ready to move ahead – some are even impatient about the waiting involved in readying for the next steps in the life of this community of faith.

Why can’t all of the pieces of the puzzle come together immediately?

- When will our new Director of Music begin?
- How quickly can the Bargain Basket renovations be completed?
- Why must we wait six more weeks to hear Pastor Mark preach?

By this stage in life hopefully many if not most have learned that there is a time and a season for everything. Trying to make tomorrow happen today or attempting to insert the future into the present in any shape or form is a sure sign we are suffering from impatience.

The good news is that patience can be learned. There are more than enough self-help resources on this topic to overwhelm you.

In my own hurry to be helpful, I browsed through list after list experts have written about how to be or become patient. I wanted to sort through them so that I could share with you 10 simple steps to becoming a patient person.

³ Rabbi Michael Satz. “Patience.” <<http://rabbisatz.blogspot.com/2012/09/patience.html>>

While some of the lists did include suggestions we might all find useful, it became clear to me that there isn't a one-size-fits all approach that I could encourage us to adopt. Instead, I think we must learn by sharing our experiences and also by being intentional about practicing patience.

Sheena Jeffers, a dance instructor, found life presented her with a year of patience – a year of her life when it became clear that the many challenging situations she faced were tools designed to help her learn patience. While all of those ordeals were helpful, it was ultimately a conversation that made all the difference. Here is how that conversation went for her:

Me: I just don't get it! Why?! I've thought about it over and over, and it doesn't make sense. AND I'VE PRAYED FOR IT.

Friend: Well, what are you praying for?

Me: PATIENCE.

Friend: You're praying for the wrong thing.

Me:what? How can you pray for the "wrong thing?" There is no right and wrong in prayer and hope.

Friend: If you pray for patience, you are asking God to put trying moments in your life so that you are provided the opportunity to learn and practice patience. You can't just pray for patience and get it. You have to do the work in the moments that call for it.

This was the moment that I realized how silly I had been. I thought I was the "bigger person" praying for patience, when really... I was getting exactly what I was praying for and I wasn't listening.

I wasn't willing to do the work. I wanted patience wrapped in a box with a polka-dotted bow to apply to my life as easily as spritzing Chanel No. 5 on my neck and wrists before work.⁴

By now you are likely becoming uncomfortably aware of just how often life presents you opportunities to learn patience. Maybe like Sheena you will have your own year of patience or perhaps just a week when you focus on patience will do.

⁴ Sheena Jeffers. "Learning Patience." <<http://www.sheenajeffers.com/learning-patience/>>

As your pastor I consider preaching an important part of my ministry. In constructing this sermon, I consulted many commentaries and scholarly resources to deepen my understanding of the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares. I learned more than I really wanted or needed to know about some of the details.

More importantly, however, I found that writer after writer commented that this parable was a lesson about patience. And, so, I have shared with you an encouragement to cultivate patience in your own life. I have also found myself challenged to do likewise.

It is worth revisiting Jesus' parable again. In addition to teaching us about patience, it also provides perspective.

Charles McCollough, a UCC scholar and sculptor who spoke here in our sanctuary earlier this year, explains it this way:

A servant is ready to attack the weeds; but the owner prevents the attack.

He allows the wheat and the tares (good and evil) to grow together, and leaves the judgment, separation, and exclusion to other beings and to another time.

In my Sculpture, the householder and the slave are presented in a simple relief image that allows the extended hoe and hands and arms to "speak."

Matthew seems to have Jesus say, "When we presume to know who is evil and to cut them out, we (who are presumed to be good, because we judge ourselves good) will damage ourselves in the process" – just as the householder warns the worker that his weeding will kill the good wheat plants along with the weeds.

In other words, we cannot finally know good and evil . . .

The sculptural image (the one printed in your bulletin) suggests the wisdom of not trying to play God, who alone judges good and evil.⁵

⁵ Charles McCollough. *The Art of Parables: Reinterpreting the Teaching Stories of Jesus in Word & Sculpture* (CopperHouse, 2008), p.181.

We must strive to become a patient people.

A people who are comfortable in the present yet confident about the future.

And, a people who are willing to let God alone be God.

Amen.