

## WHAT IS PATIENCE?

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*Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop of the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and late rains. You also must be patient. (James 5:7-8)*

Throughout this past week as I've thought about and prayed over today's Scripture readings, two figures from history kept coming to mind. One is well known, the other less so. The lesser known person was a man named Chris Gueffroy. Gueffroy was born in 1968 and grew up in East Berlin, on the wrong side of the infamous Berlin Wall, even within sight of it. From a young age Gueffroy bristled at the restrictions that the East German government imposed on its citizens. He could not leave to travel the world. He could not choose his own career. Even worse, it would soon be time for Gueffroy to be conscripted into the East German National People's Army. He decided it was time to go. It was now or never.

Gueffroy and a friend had heard a rumor that the order to shoot fugitives at the wall had been rescinded. So late one night they scaled the first wall and took off running across no-man's land. Sadly, the order to shoot fugitives had not been rescinded. When the two fleeing young men tripped an alarm, the border guards opened fire, killing Gueffroy and wounding his friend. The date was February 5, 1989. What is truly tragic about Gueffroy's death is that the world was already changing and nothing could stop it. A new order was about to sweep across Europe. By November the Berlin Wall itself would fall, and crowds of East German citizens would pour over it and through it. I mean not to judge Gueffroy, rather to lament that had he waited just nine months he could have been among the jubilant throng at the Brandenburg Gate. He could have been alive still today, enjoying the freedoms that would have been his in the new order. Instead, Chris Gueffroy turned out to be the last person shot and killed trying to escape East Berlin.

Today's readings from the Gospel of Matthew, the Epistle of James have to do with patience. What is patience? We think we know, but the more we consider the concept of patience, the more we realize what a multidimensional virtue it is. For our purposes, then, it might be helpful to draw a line of distinction between two types of patience: working patience and trusting patience. The line is artificial, of course, but let's have a go at it. Working patience is the ability not only to wait, but to wait well and productively. In the first parish I served, the reredos behind the high altar contains carved oak figures meant to embody the various virtues necessary for the Christian life. The figure depicting patience is a woman holding a large, tangled ball of yarn, and she is working to unravel it. She isn't yanking the yarn into tighter knots. She isn't throwing it away in frustration, or cutting through it in anger. No, the look on her face is one of peaceful concentration as she perseveres in restoring the yarn to its useful purpose. The statue is a beautiful illustration of working patience, the companion words of which might be perseverance and endurance.

Sometimes the challenges of life call for a different type of patience: trusting patience. Sometimes that which we name evil has so entangled itself with the good that we are unworthy or unable to untie it. All we can do is wait for one more powerful that we are to come and take care of it. Recall the parable of the wheat and weeds. The master of the house tells the impatient servants not to pull up the weeds, because in doing so they would also pull up the wheat. He says, *"Let both grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, 'Gather the weeds first and bind them into bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"*

(*Matthew 13:30*) The master calls for trusting patience, the companion words of which might be longsuffering and forbearance. Trusting patience has confidence that God is working out his purposes, and has good things in store for us that surpass our hearts' desires. Trusting patience knows well the verse from today's Psalm (146:7): *The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind; the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down.*

What is patience? Patience is a virtue because God is patient. God's working patience is manifest in the goodness and love we know in creation, in the calling of Israel to be his people, in his Word spoken through the prophets, and above all in the Word made flesh, Jesus, God's Son. God's trusting patience is also manifest in the freedom he allows the whole creation, including you and me, to respond to his loving overtures. Rather than terrifying us into recognition of him, God holds back to allow us the time and space to choose of our own free will. So patience is of God. But it doesn't end there. To call patience a virtue means that a vestige of it, and a capacity for it – diminished though it may be by our sinfulness – still resides in humankind. In other words, we have a seed of God's patience planted within us.

Some schools of theological thought go so far as to liken the virtues to muscles in the soul that we can either exercise and strengthen, or allow to weaken and atrophy. The virtue of patience is a muscle of the soul well worth exercising. You see, patience enables us to receive gifts as the giver intends us to receive them. The reason we call someone under a doctor's care a "patient" is because that person needs to accept healing gifts from another. To declare, "I'm a bad patient," is to admit that you are unwilling to receive the doctor's gifts on the doctor's terms. Tertullian, one of the Early Church Fathers, argued that impatience was nothing short of the original sin. Adam and Eve were bad patients; they were unwilling to receive God's gift of life on God's terms; they were impatient to be like God. Patience, on the other hand, makes for a good patient who is willing to abide by the doctor's plan. In theological terms, patience allows us to receive the gifts of God. All of life and existence is a gift from God. What is more, God has good things prepared for us that surpass our understanding. What it takes to grow in awareness of God's gifts and receive them is patience. Patience is a virtue. Patience is a muscle of the soul well worth exercising. You can get better at it the more you practice it.

Patience isn't easy, and some would say not as necessary as it used to be. We can have things today faster than previous generations ever could have imagined. Who needs patience? By comparison, the slow gains of the spiritual life seem glacial. Witness the anguish of John the Baptist in today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew (11:2-11). John, as you may remember, preached a consistent theme his whole life: that the long-awaited Messiah was at hand. Before John, Isaiah had preached good news to the people in exile. He prophesied that the Messiah was coming to rescue them from captivity and give them their hearts' desire: *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy (35:1-10)*. All this and more was God's promise to his people, whose calling it was simply to be patient. The problem was, they had been waiting for centuries. Working patience, trusting patience: they'd tried it all. Now, too many had lived and died without seeing God's promised Messiah.

Then along came John the Baptist who preached with a fiery certainty that their patience was about to be rewarded. With every step that Jesus took, John was convinced that the Messiah had arrived. The new day was dawning. A new order was sweeping through creation. John was certain the wait was over. But today we find him completely out of character, his fire and brimstone extinguished. Today we find John where his life would end: on the wrong side of Herod's prison walls awaiting his execution. John sent some of his disciples to inquire of Jesus, *are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?* So there was John who had devoted

his entire life to announcing the Messiah's arrival. Now, with not much time left, he was doubting and weary and wondering if he would ever see the fruits of his patience.

John might find company with people today whose patience is wearing thin: people who are looking for a job, or longing for a spouse, or waiting for justice. Today Jesus points out a ray of dawn on the dark horizon: *"Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.* In other words, "John, with patience you can see that that which you have worked for and trusted would come is arriving. The kingdom of heaven is at hand." For John it wasn't the full consummation of the kingdom he'd hoped to see. Nevertheless, John would not die without glimpsing the "Dayspring from on high" (Hymn 56). It was Martin Luther King, Jr. who made famous the phrase originally written by Theodore Parker: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." With patience we can see the new day dawning, and even begin participating in it now.

Whoever it was that wrote the Epistle of James – whether it was James the brother of Jesus, or someone writing under his name – the author declares: *Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop of the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and late rains. You also must be patient.* If you are looking for more patience, if you think you need to be a better patient, consider the farmer. The farmer plants the seeds in the earth, allows the rain to do its work, and waits; the farmer works and trusts. Or consider God's patience. God plants the seeds of his life and image in us, waters it with the early and late rains of his Spirit, and waits; God works and trusts that the fruit of his patience will bloom in you and me. Patience.

At the beginning of the sermon I mentioned that today's readings have me thinking about two people. The first was Chris Gueffroy, who didn't live to see the new day that was already dawning. The second is William Wilberforce, who just barely did. Wilberforce was an Englishman who was first elected to the British Parliament in 1780. Soon thereafter he experienced a gradual but profound conversion to Christianity, and he took up the cause of the abolitionists. Wilberforce would write: *"So enormous, so dreadful, so irremediable did the {slave} trade's wickedness appear that my own mind was completely made up for abolition. Let the consequences be what they would: I from this time determined that I would never rest until I had effected its abolition."* To the end of slavery he introduced bills before Parliament nearly every year between 1789 and 1805, only to have them voted down. Wilberforce eventually became the enemy and the target of those with business fortunes tied up in the slave trade. Friends and supporters began fearing for his life.

Nevertheless, with working and trusting patience, Wilberforce persevered. Finally, in 1807, Parliament passed the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act. The act was only a partial victory. While it abolished the buying and selling of human beings in the British Empire, it still left slavery itself in place. Wilberforce pressed on through the 1820s and 30s. In 1833, now old and frail, he wrote his last petition. On July 26<sup>th</sup> it passed, ending all slavery in the British Empire. Wilberforce received the news at his home, and glimpsed the new day that with working and trusting patience he had longed to see for nearly fifty years. Three days later, on July 29<sup>th</sup>, he died.

Patience. *The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind; the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down.* Though the arc of the moral universe is long, patience allows us to see that it bends toward justice. Patience allows us to sing, even today, *Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!*