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## THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT: PATIENCE

Psalm 37:1-9, 39-40; Romans 8:18-25

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I could not wait to get my first car. I did not have a car in high school. When I went to college I lived on campus, so a car was not an absolute necessity – at least to my parents' way of thinking. I knew that when I got a car, I would have it made. There would be no more bumming rides, chipping in for gas, or depending on other people's schedules. I was certain that my dating life would improve. In my senior year of college, I had a job off-campus, so a car became a necessity. My first car was a 1973 light green two-door Datsun 510 with manual transmission and no air-conditioning. It was wonderful except in the summertime South Carolina heat. After a while, I noticed that my social life did not improve all that much. It was not fancy enough to impress dates. It cost a lot of money to keep up a car. I thought the car was going to change my life; but, in the end, it was just a car. I had spent so much energy dreaming about a car, waiting impatiently for that car, that the reality of owning a car could not measure up to my expectations.

I look back at the moments in our lives when we long for certain things: a new job, a place on the team, a role in the play, a boyfriend, a girlfriend, a house, a family, the birth of a child, a vacation home, early retirement,

a soldier to come home from overseas, the outcomes of medical tests or surgery, some particular trouble to be over, or a child to do well in school. We wait for important things, meaningful experiences, and deep relationships. We can easily get frustrated and impatient. We also spend a lot of time waiting for things that we think are really going to make a difference in our lives – only to discover just how trivial some things are that we thought we had to have. When we achieve our dreams, we always seem to be waiting for something more. God made us so that no matter what we gain, we are never fully satisfied. All our yearning is connected to an even greater desire – a longing for God. God made us so that only God can satisfy the deepest hungers of the human heart. As St. Augustine wrote, "Our hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee, O Lord."

In the 37<sup>th</sup> Psalm, an older King David ruminates about how to handle the evil schemes of those who plot against him. In his anxiety, he turns again and again to his confident faith in the goodness of God. He knows that God will uphold the righteous and bring down the evil. Father Richard Rohr once said, "You can endure and absorb the painful

mystery of things, if you are upheld by the unconditional love" (Kanuga Conference on Spirituality, 1991). Yet, even as David trusts God, he is troubled and waiting impatiently for God to act. It sounds as if he is talking to himself when he says:

Commit your way to the Lord;  
trust in the Lord, and God will act.  
The Lord will make your  
vindication shine like the light,  
and the justice of your cause like  
the noonday. Be still before the  
Lord, and wait patiently for God;  
do not fret over those who  
prosper in their way, over those  
who carry out evil devices.  
Refrain from anger and forsake  
wrath. Do not fret—it leads only  
to evil. (Psalm 37:5-8)

David longs for God to act; he knows that his life is in God's hands. This is the only truth that can give him the patience he needs as he waits for God.

In the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans, Paul talks about the deep longings of the human heart. These longings arise because of the gap between the struggles of this present life and the future glory that God has planned for all creation. The great figures of the Bible are not immune to human suffering. Paul knows all about pain, disappointment, and heartbreak. Paul writes in II Corinthians of what he has endured for the sake of the gospel: imprisonment,

floggings, stoning, shipwreck, hunger, cold, thirst and sleeplessness. He is disappointed by his friends; he is anxious about the congregations he establishes; he faces controversy in the church; he has a vexing physical ailment.

Despite all these things, Paul says that the sufferings of this present age are not worth comparing to the glory to be revealed. He does not deny suffering. No, he looks suffering squarely in the face. In fact, out of the agony of suffering a new world is being born. More than that, Paul declares that the whole creation is engaged in waiting. The creation itself knows what it is to suffer; the creation knows what it is to hope for what is not yet seen. In his paraphrase of Paul's words, J.B. Phillips says that the creation stands on tiptoes in order to see God's future. The word Paul uses to describe this eager longing comes from the image of a person standing with the head fully extended, watching to catch the first glimpse of the future.

We are bound together with the world. The creature and the creation are in bondage to decay; together we will be set free by God to obtain redemption. God's redemptive work touches all of life. Each flowering plant, rushing stream, musical note, and distant star is holding its breath in anticipation of the new creation. Each tiny baby, hungry villager, endangered bird, wounded

soldier, spotted leopard, lonely soul, and cornflower in bloom is caught up in this cosmic longing for redemption. The creation and we ourselves are groaning together in labor for a new world to be born. We endure the pain for the joyful outcome. The Spirit is at work in all things, bringing about the glorious future that God has planned. The sighs, the groans, and even the unspoken anguish in our hearts are the work of the Spirit transforming us and pointing us toward God's future which we cannot yet see. Paul says that "if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience" (Romans 8:25). The Spirit is at work in us calming our anxious hearts and transforming our impatient spirits. Therefore, Paul speaks of patience in the letter to the Galatians as a fruit of the Spirit.

Two weeks ago we celebrated, on what would have been her 94<sup>th</sup> birthday, the long and faithful life of Bunny's mother. The daughter of a presbyterian minister and church musician, she lived her life in faith, hope, and love. She taught the Bible to all ages, raised six children, cared for the hungry and the poor, and served Christ in the church and community. Like all of us, she endured the challenges and struggles of life and health. I like to think of her, even in her final years of diminished health, standing on her tiptoes in order to see God's future. She lived her life in hope. She waited in patience for that

new creation which is now hers in full.

As Christians, we wait in patience. We hope for what we do not yet see. We wait with eager longing because everything in this present world, in our lives and in the church is not as it should be. Everything is not as it is going to be. Anyone who waits beside the bed of a sick child knows how difficult it is to wait with patience. Anyone who grieves over the violent death of students murdered on college campuses knows how hard it is to wait patiently for a solution to such violence. Anyone who prays for a resolution to the conflicts in the Middle East knows how hard it is to wait for God to show us a way forward. Anyone who grieves over the despoiling of our land and air and the pollution of our rivers and oceans knows how hard it is to have patience.

Theologian Paul Tillich wrote that waiting "means not having and having at the same time." We do not possess God. If we think we do then we are worshipping an idol of our own making. God is always before us. Our longing for God reminds us that there is much we do not yet possess. Yet, Tillich declares that waiting can also be a kind of having. He wrote, "If we wait in hope and patience, the power of that for which we wait is already effective within us... He who waits in absolute seriousness is already grasped by that for which he waits. He who waits in

patience has already received the power of that for which he waits”

(Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, Ch. 18).

When I was a child, I loved to ride my bike to my grandparents’ home. When I arrived, I often found my grandfather sitting in his favorite chair and reading the *Wall Street Journal*. I liked to play Chinese Checkers with him. I would get the game out of the cabinet and bring it to him in hopes he would play. No matter how engrossed he was in his reading, he would put the paper down and set up the game on the stool in front of that chair. We would play for hours. I never thought about it at the time, but he was a man of a quiet disposition and infinite patience. He never showed any signs of boredom, frustration, or a desire to get on to something else. He just put everything aside and played Chinese Checkers with me.

I have always been an impatient person. I wondered how I would preach on this spiritual gift today. My wife thought somebody else should do this one. I am impatient about getting things done, waiting on something to happen, about accomplishing some goals, finding an answer to a problem, or getting a group to move forward. One regret I have as a father is that I was never very patient with our children – always rushing them to the next thing.

My grandfather’s chair is now in our study. When I find myself

getting impatient about a problem or a situation I cannot change, I sit in that chair and think about my grandfather’s patience. I put myself in a kind of mental and spiritual time-out. Patience comes as a gift from God. Even though I cannot see the outcome, I seek, as David said, “to be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for God.”