

PATIENT LEADERSHIP: THE STORY OF BARNABAS

Acts 11:19-26

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There are a lot of quotes about patience. Like, “Lord, give me patience, but please hurry.” Or, “Patience is a quality you admire in the driver behind you but can’t stand in the driver who’s in front of you.” Or this one, in the form of a cheer: “What do we want? Patience! When do we want it? Now!”

The Bible has some things to say about patience. In what is called the love chapter, I Corinthians 13, patience is the first word that describes love. “Love is patient, love is kind...”, Paul says as he delineates the attributes of Christian love. Love requires patience. Why? Because none of us is perfect. If you were to stop loving someone the first time you grew impatient with him, you would live a lonely life. There is not one single human being you could spend your days with who would not irritate you at some point. It’s just not possible! Patience is taking deep breaths before responding in anger, or before saying the first cynical word that pops into your mind. Patience is reminding yourself of all of the good qualities in the person you love. When we’re patient, we’re empathetic. We take the time to ask the question, “Why is my child responding in this super annoying way right now?” Understanding comes with patience. And that includes self-understanding, realizing that we, too, can be annoying and irritating, and that we, too, crave to be treated with patience.

In our relationships with our partners and spouses, patience is essential. Because feelings will ebb and flow. There will be times of giddy infatuation, times of

warm glow, but those times don't last forever. Patience tides us over and reminds us of those highs, until they return.

In the book of Galatians, Paul says that patience is one of the fruits of the spirit. If we are living life according to God's will, our lives will bear fruit, and one of those fruits is patience. Here is the whole list of the fruits of the spirit. They are: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. As I read over this list this past week, I couldn't help but wonder how different our current political season would be if these biblical qualities were taken seriously, if we looked for these attributes in our candidates, if we expected these characteristics of our leaders. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

One last biblical reference comes from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. This is one of my favorite passages of scripture. Some of you may remember its use in the film, "Chariots of Fire." This is Isaiah 40, verse 31: "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint."

Waiting, with patience, is a spiritual discipline. The fact that the Bible mentions waiting and patience so many times should clue us in to the idea that patience has always been hard for human beings. Impatience comes naturally; patience has to be developed, cultivated, practiced. When things happen quickly we feel more in control. We like the energy that comes from fast pace.

And surely the technology of our era makes us much more inclined towards impatience than our ancestors. We're so accustomed to the instant world. Want to read a book? You don't have to go to the library, or the bookstore. You don't have to

wait a whole day for Amazon overnight delivery. You can download it instantly. Millions of songs, thousands of movies and TV shows are a click away. We live in a culture of instant gratification and we become addicted to it. It's challenging for us to step away and realize that there is a time for quick and fast and instant, and there is a time for waiting patiently.

Do you want to buy the car that the manufacturer slapped together as quickly as possible? Or the car that the manufacturer delayed because they were trying to get the new systems working just right?

There may be a need for fast food, but do you want every meal to be fast? In our Healthy Families class on Wednesday night, Julia Bartram talked about the ways in which cooking as a family can actually reduce stress. Spend time with your loved ones in the kitchen, and notice the conversation and the laughter that can occur there. Notice the colors of the vegetables as you make a salad and marvel at the variety in God's universe. The ten minutes you spend chopping and sauteing might be just the therapy you need to transition from the world of work to the world of home.

When we take the time to observe the natural world, we see that God created it with a rhythm and a pace. Imagine how jarring it would be to move directly from the first day of winter, the shortest day of the year, to the first day of summer, the longest day of the year. It is such a pleasure to watch the days lengthen, slowly, gradually, as our part of the earth tilts towards the sun.

Farmers and gardeners know how to be patient. You can work at creating the most nutritious soil, you can pay close attention to what you've planted, you can fertilize and water, but you cannot force your vegetables to grow more quickly.

Anything worthwhile takes time. Relationships. Personal growth. Changing habits. Shifting the direction of institutions. Developing a new culture within a group of people. Raising children. Anything worthwhile takes time.

Following Jesus' earthly ministry, the church was born. But the controversy that Jesus experienced during his time on earth remained. The Romans were still very suspicious of this new Christian movement, and in many places they persecuted Christians. At the same time, the Jewish community was hotly divided. Some Jews became Christians, and some were very resistant. All of that is a way of saying that it wasn't easy to be a Christian in those days. It was risky. In some places Christians went underground. Their meetings were held in secret, they had signs that would direct believers to each other's homes.

In the city of Antioch, then the third-largest city in the Roman Empire, a church emerged among non-Jewish people. Barnabas was at that time a leader of believers in Jerusalem. He was sent to Antioch to help shepherd this new church. When he arrived in Antioch he saw a group of faithful, enthusiastic people. It was a healthy church and he wanted to nurture it, to form a solid foundation for it. It's just the kind of job any consultant wants. Barnabas didn't have to solve any entrenched problems, he didn't have to put out fires. He was there to make a good thing better. After he'd been in Antioch a while, he left to go get Paul. Maybe there was more work than one person could accomplish, maybe he just wanted Paul's company. What we know is that the two of them stayed in Antioch for a year. A year!

If we hired a church consultant today, that person might come and stay with us for a weekend, get a feel for who we are, meet with representatives of various age and

interest groups, then maybe come back once, or maybe just issue a report. Some consultants do most of their work by teleconference or webinars.

But Barnabas stayed with the people of Antioch for a year, and his primary focus was teaching. Our passage gives us this one tidbit of information about what happened during that year. “It was in Antioch that the disciples were, for the first time, called Christians.”

So we know what Barnabas was teaching, one group of people after another, for a year. He was teaching the practices of the Christian faith. Not just the stories of Jesus’ life but what it means to live that story. What it means to care for the poor, the way Jesus did. What it means to not be afraid of death. What it means to proclaim justice, and embody it by embracing all people.

Barnabas was forming identity, teaching not just beliefs but practices. He was patiently working with men and women, answering questions, gently directing, planting seeds, watering, weeding, fertilizing. And the church grew, and the people grew, and he saw the fruits of the spirit that emerge from people who have their roots firmly planted: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

And they were called Christians for the first time, because people saw something Christ-like in these people.

In this Lenten season of spiritual growth, I encourage you to be patient with yourself. We are all works in progress; God isn’t finished with any of us yet. You might want to just work on patience this week, or maybe for the four weeks between now and Easter. The days will grow longer, each one a reminder of the gradual way God works.

We will gain over an hour of daylight in the next four weeks, but we gain it two minutes a day. You'll notice, if you take the time.

As I was reading about patience this week, I came across this story. An American traveler planned a long safari to Africa. He was a compulsive man, loaded down with maps, timetables, and agendas. Men had been engaged from a local tribe to carry the cumbersome load of supplies, luggage, and other essentials.

On the first morning, they all woke very early and traveled very fast, and went very far. On the second morning, they all woke very early, and traveled very fast and very far. On the third morning, they all woke very early and traveled very fast and went very far. And the American seemed pleased. On the fourth morning, the tribesmen refused to move. They simply sat by a tree. The American became incensed. "This is a waste of valuable time. Can someone tell me what is going on here?"

The translator answered, "They are waiting for their souls to catch up with their bodies."*

When is the last time you stopped, to breathe, to pay attention, to notice, to listen?

As Gandhi said, "There is more to life than increasing its speed."

*Story found in Terry Hershey's book, Pause.