

Patience

Isaiah 35:1-10 *Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God..."*

James 5:7-10 *Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord.*

The writer of the Letter of James believes that patience is at the heart of the spiritual life. It is patience that comes from our awareness that God is working in the depths of life to bring about what Jesus called the kingdom of God, life as it is meant to be. In the writer's view, patience is something that every follower and every community of Jesus needs to learn and cultivate.

The word the writer uses has a richness of meaning: patience, steadfastness, endurance. For example, says the writer, look at the farmer tilling and planting, but most of all, waiting. The farmer is cooperating with a creative force larger than his own efforts. Anyone who works with the earth and growing things knows this partnership with the power of life. It is a perfect image for what it means to live as people of faith.

The first two congregations I served were in Kentucky farming communities. I don't want to idealize agricultural folks, but most of these people exuded the kind of patience the writer of James is talking about. When they would hear the scriptures speak in these kinds of images, they could quietly, knowingly nod their heads. They understood that our lives are woven into the large fabric of life. Life is not about control, manipulation, or competition, but living harmoniously with life around us. This calls for patience, steadfastness, and endurance.

I think about patience with regard to three dimensions of life: patience with ourselves, with other people in community, and in our callings and missions, the outward journey of our lives.

The inward journey of prayer, self-awareness and self-understanding, and the deepening of our spirits in God calls for patience with ourselves. The inward journey is not about trying to "get somewhere", about achieving something, even a relationship with God. It is about clearing away the clutter, removing the obstacles, unlearning a lot of stuff from our culture, including religion, so that we become increasingly aware of the relationship with God we already have. Spirituality is giving attention to our lives so that the gift of that relationship grows and blossoms through our whole being. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that we ARE the light of the world. Our inward work is to let that light shine forth, removing the bushel baskets that are hiding it.

Our inward journey work should not be forcing ourselves, beating up on ourselves, or turning our inner life into a battlefield. It needs to be a gentle, non-violent, and deepening awareness of the sources of our pain or alienation—anger, fear, loneliness, depression, resentment, guilt, whatever. When we treat these things as enemies and try to drive them out, we only add to our problems. Patience with ourselves takes a different approach. Trusting God's already-given love for us, we handle ourselves carefully and non-judgmentally, though with clear honesty. As we do this over time, we understand more fully what is going on in us, where it comes from, and how it affects our relationships with others and the way we look at life. With understanding comes healing and letting go. The fears become less fearful. The anger becomes less angry. The guilt becomes less crippling. I like very much what Isaiah says: Strengthen weak hands and feeble knees and tell the fearful heart, Do not be afraid! We can have weakness AND be strong. We can have fears AND still be fearless. We can be aware of our limitations AND be channels of what God is doing for the world. This encouraging, empowering message becomes real for us as we practice patience with ourselves.

Practicing patience with ourselves, we learn how to practice patience with others in community. Many people say they want community, long for community. The Church of the Covenant has always felt called to BE a community of Jesus, rather than an institution to be perpetuated. However, I have learned through the years that relatively few people are willing to do the work of being in community. Being in community means cultivating the patience, steadfastness, and endurance the writer of James is talking about. It means learning to drop our demands, our illusions, our desires to control and change other people. Practicing patience with ourselves, we learn to take our hands off ourselves, not treating ourselves with violence and aggressiveness. Practicing patience with others in community, we learn to take our hands off of others. They do not belong to us,

but to God. This takes much work on our part. We think we are loving and accepting people until conflicts and misunderstandings arise. Ideas with which we disagree. Habits that irritate us. Views of faith and life that conflict with our own. Weaknesses that arouse our impatience. Strengths that arouse our jealousy or insecurity. Someone hurts or disappoints us. How we respond to these things determines whether or not we will take the path that leads to community. We can roll up our sleeves for a fight. We can give up and continue looking for that non-existent "perfect community". Or we can make a commitment and do the work of understanding, insight, and growing in the kind of patience the Letter of James means.

Just as with ourselves, patience with others comes from understanding and insight. What is it about this person that drives me crazy? What has triggered aggression, violence, insecurity in me? What is it about this person's life that has shaped her to be as she is? Each person will teach us something about ourselves and about life, if we are willing to listen and to understand. Sometimes a person is benign and lovely, an easy gift to receive. Sometimes a person seems to be from another planet, stirring up our insecurities, fears, and aggressiveness. If we posture ourselves to treat others as an enemy, we never grow, we never learn. We just defend our turf and remain angry, alienated, and unhappy. However, fuller understanding makes room for love, true love, not sentimentality or warm and fuzzy feelings.

Practicing patience with others does not mean we let go of our own ideas, values, or commitments in order to achieve a false peace. Yet we can learn to hold them lightly enough to listen to another person and to understand him or her more fully. Then we can communicate our deeply-held thoughts and beliefs in a non-defensive way that offers the other person the truth of our heart and mind.

Patience with one another can also mean living with unresolved tensions and suffering that come from misunderstandings and conflicts. There may not be an easy resolution or any resolution at all, at least as far as we can see. That's when we decide to live together at that deeper level, continuing to be together as those whom God has reconciled, even if we don't feel it or are unable to act like it at the moment. This is when patience as steadfastness and endurance comes into the foreground, as we learn to live lovingly with the differences, disagreements, and conflicts. Yet we remember that God is working at a deeper level, and we remain open to that time and moment when a breakthrough may occur.

Finally, we learn and grow in patience with the work to which God has called us. Isaiah was very clear where God's presence and activity are seen—in the lives of those who are suffering, neglected, or maligned by religion and society. That's where God is working. That's where Jesus calls us. Hearing this good news and experiencing it in Jesus, we are called to be those who strengthen weak hands and make firm feeble knees, the ones who speak and are good news for persons who are suffering. We are called to some mission, some way of being a channel of God's kingdom dawning in the world.

This church community began out of the belief that every person needs to discover what God is calling her to do with her life, and what gifts God has given him to use in the living out of that calling. In a Festival Center Mission Group meeting about six years ago, John Withrow said something that touched a very deep place in me. I don't know if this is exactly how John said it, but I'll say it the way I heard it: We do not find peace by withdrawal from life and its difficulties and challenges. We find peace by discovering our place in life and living out of that place that God has uniquely given to us. Discovering and affirming our "place" in life, who we are and what we feel called to do, does not often happen quickly or easily. This, too, asks of us patience and watchfulness as we discern all through out lives what God has called us to be and do for the sake of the world. Then we begin to give ourselves to it with discipline and commitment, with patience that includes steadfastness and endurance.

This outward journey of our lives is has its struggles and times of pain. There will be self-doubt, wondering if this life we feel called to is not a wild goose chase. There will be obstacles, inward and outward, that seem just too overwhelming, and sometimes are. Yet we can have patience with the missions, the work to which God calls us because it is God who has called us and it is God who is working through us. We keep ourselves open to the ways God may be bringing things about, usually in ways we did not anticipate or plan. And having patience means celebrating and being thankful for what is going on now, not always looking to the results we want or expect. The point is to be joyful for what God has given us to do, and to do each thing with carefulness and attention and love. That is the way we plant and tend so that God can bring the growth that God wants.

Patience with our outward journey, as persons and a community, also means knowing that things happen according to God's time, what the scriptures call *kairos*. This is different from *chronos*, clock time, schedules,

the imposing of our expectations and plans on the movements of God's spirit. I now find myself speaking of "Church of the Covenant time". Things emerge and develop according to God's spirit working in the lives of those God calls. We work with taking responsibility for this call in our lives and growing more confident in using the gifts God has given us to meet some need. This is why we don't sit around cooking up things that we think should be done and then recruit people to do them. We wait for that "called" person to emerge. And we acknowledge that quite often the outward ministry itself may take a long time to come to fruition. All of this takes patience, watchfulness, attentiveness, and a growing ability to sense the movements of God's spirit in our own lives, in the lives of others, and the life of our community.

Practicing and growing in patience with ourselves, with others in community, with the things we feel God has called us to will bring us to moments of new life, most often when we least expect it. We will be able, with greater clarity, to see the presence of God's realm, God's kingdom. Isaiah used beautiful, lush images of God's bringing of new life. Water gushing forth in the wilderness places. Deserts bursting with flowers. Burning sands becoming cool oases. A broad and safe highway opening up through the dangerous wilderness. The desert places, the fear-filled wastelands we find ourselves in can suddenly erupt with new life.

I remember one day years ago when I was experiencing a very difficult time and was thrown back hard upon my inward journey, struggling with feelings of inadequacy and generally beating up on myself. That afternoon I was down at the Festival Center working out my dismal mood by stripping and waxing the floor in the children's room. Waiting for the floor to dry, I went to the chapel to clean windows. I was startled by soft noises at the doorway of the chapel. Josh and Malike, a wonderful and challenging twosome from our Saturday children's program, had sneaked in, delighted to have scared me. We went into the other room, liberated some cookies and juice from the kitchen, and chatted a while about school and other things. I told them I had to get back to my work. They respectfully stood and put on their coats, saying cheerfully that they would see me Saturday. As they left, I realized that the whole landscape of my inner life had changed. Flowers and springs were blooming and gushing all over the desert I had been in. The work of my inward journey had not brought this about, but it did prepare me to receive something beyond myself, in the form of two eight year-old prophets of good news. The kingdom, the realm of God was right there, right then, right in front of me. It had been there all the time. I had simply gotten lost. That's how it happens. We do our inward journey work, cultivating patience with self, others, and the thing God has called us to do. And suddenly, God brings some sort of harvest, some bursting forth of the kingdom. It is as though the curtains are pulled back and we see the world as it truly is, the way God created it. The whole process, the whole journey, as hard as it can be, has about it this joy that comes from a growing faith that God is continually present and working with us and the world, bringing us to new life.