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Communion Sunday Rev. Seth D. Jones

The Gift of Patience – The Spirit of Discernment

An Eternal Mindset

1 Kings 3:5-12, Romans 8:15-25

Patience, which is 'waiting with intention', or 'holy waiting' as some mystics call it, may be a virtue but for me, patience is mostly a lot of difficult work. In fact, the great Presbyterian preacher of Washington DC, Peter Marshall once said, *“To wait is often harder than it is to work”*.

Patience is often harder than work because in working, we feel like WE have done something when we work. Patience means waiting, it means *'doing nothing'*, or so it appears. Patience is intentionally waiting for God to work through us in such a way that we begin to see what is necessary for the sake of God's kingdom.

I am connecting the gift of patience with the Spirit of discernment. Discernment is the application of reason, faith, Scripture and experience to our decision-making. Just as patience is *'waiting with intention'*, discernment is *'making decisions with intention'*. They go together. We cannot make good decisions without patience, and patience is the foundation of all good discernment. Discernment is the process of waiting until we take action. Christian patience is intentionally waiting and inviting the Holy Spirit to act with us and to help us discern more closely what is needed by God in any particular situation. Patience is the gift of the Spirit which makes our lives intentionally focused on God and Christ. Discernment becomes the practice of exercising our choices and actions in a God-focused way. Saint Augustine says of Christian patience that *“patience is the companion of wisdom”*.

King Solomon, in our reading today, makes a highly unusual request. When God, in a dream, tells Solomon, *“Ask something of me and I will give it to you”* (1 Ki 3:5), Solomon doesn't ask for money or earthly power or more stuff. Instead, he asks for the thing which he perceives to have made King David great also – the ability to discern. *“Give your servant, therefore, an understanding heart to judge your people and distinguish right from wrong. For who is able to govern this vast people of yours?”* (1 Ki 3:9).

God grants the request with joy and pleasure: *“I give you a heart so wise and understanding that there has never been anyone like you up to now, and after you will come no one who will equal you”* (1 Ki 3:12). Solomon is so grateful for the gift he has been given by God, he offers prayers and offerings before the Ark of the Covenant and then he throws a banquet for all his servants upon awaking from his dream.

Notice that wisdom, or capacity to discern well, is first and foremost, a gift from God. As we spoke of last week, wisdom and discernment are external to who Solomon is, just as they are for us. We cannot receive a gift if we already have the thing we are being given. And secondly, the ability to discern and think through things clearly is an opportunity to give thanks to God. Do we claim our gifts for ourselves and then hoard them in the cellar of the self, or do we receive the gift with gratitude and give thanks always whenever we are able to exercise the gift?

Solomon has been gifted the holy gift of discernment, which as we know from Augustine is the companion of patience. Solomon has been given the gift of an eternal mindset. For it is only when our minds and hearts are focused on those things of God – the good, the true and the beautiful, as Paul says – that we can truly act in accordance to the will and desire of God. It seems self-evident that this requires a tremendous amount of patience.

There are two parts to patience: first, there is waiting for the information needed in order to take some sort of action; and second, there is enduring suffering and hardship with an understanding which may or may not be known to us that the Holy Spirit is at work within us. Both parts require a focus on God and eternity rather than the temporal. In the case of the first, patience leads to good decision-

making, strong discernment. In the second, patience leads to endurance, perseverance and welcoming God's blessings in even the smallest things.

Paul is speaking to both parts of patience in Romans. This is because Paul is trying to engender an eternal mindset for the recipients of this letter. What are we waiting for? And how does our patience determine our present ways in the world? The world was not made without hope (Rom 8:20). Even in the midst of the suffering and pain that surrounds us - "*all of creation groans*", Paul says - we await the redemption of creation and our bodies and all that surrounds us. Then Paul says, "*In hope we were saved...and hoping for what we cannot see means awaiting it with patient endurance*" (Rom 8:24, 25). Eternity defines our hope and our hope defines our patience. We cannot have one without the other. In our suffering we learn to endure and be patient with what we do not understand. In our difficulties and problems we learn to be patient for what we need to understand.

Both are things to be practiced. When I was planning this, I was thinking of a group of people who do this patience and discernment thing very well and deliberately - the Quakers.

When I was doing my Clinical Pastoral training at Abbott Northwestern Hospital in Minneapolis, one of the women I was participating with was a Quaker.

One day, Anne came into the gathering space and said she was having some difficulty deciding where to go with her calling to ministry. She talked to us about the decisions she was facing - very in-depth discussions about God and what he wishes us to do in our lives. She had an eternal mindset and focused the whole discussion on God and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a very big deal for Quakers. Weeks went by and still she had made no decision.

"When do you feel like you need to make a decision?", I asked.

"What do you mean?", Anne said.

"Well, do you have a time-line?", I said.

"I suppose my time-line is when I am done with this course. But it isn't really my time-line, is it?"

"No, I suppose not", I said.

Anne had an eternal mindset about her decision making process and a tangible and obvious patience about her. She embodied 'waiting with intentionality'. But Anne had another thing most of us do not have. She had a Clearness Committee. The Clearness Committee is where patience and discernment come together.

Before we get into what a Clearness Committee is, I want to take a moment and help you understand how important patience is to Quakers. Do you know what a Quaker Meeting is like? You gather together in a space. The chairs are set in a circle. Sometimes there is an opening prayer, sometimes there is not. Sometimes Scripture is read, sometimes not. It depends on the Meetinghouse and what it is they decide to do as a group, programmed or unprogrammed they call it. The gathered people center themselves and sit in silence. They have a beautiful phrase for it - 'hold one another in the light'. They gather in silence to await the word of the Holy Spirit. They may sit for 5 minutes before someone feels 'a leading of the Spirit'. The one led by the Spirit may stand and say a few words or a lot of words. The group may sit for an hour in silence.

Decisions in the Quaker community are always made by consensus. Consensus means a unanimous vote in which all concerns are heard and welcomed and discussed. Votes are taken until the issue is held by all people present as agreeable even if they disagree with parts of the issue voted upon. This is why you may not hear about the Quaker position on a particular issue for years after the issue in the culture is settled by law or public vote. The Quakers may have been on the front-lines (as they often are) protesting war, violence, for civil rights, against slavery, for women's rights. They are unabashedly anti-war and anti-violence and strong defenders of civil rights for all. But it could take them years before they as a unified body can come to a statement that all can agree to. Being a Quaker means having a very high tolerance for silence, for group process and a very well-developed gift of patience.

So Anne formed a Clearness Committee. A Clearness Committee is a group of peers in a Quaker

community called together to help a person discern the best decision for any given situation which requires Christian ministry. It may be how to deal with someone in a Christian manner. More often, it is designed to help a person get clarity on their calling from God as to their next steps in ministry. A Clearness Committee is a way for a person to get Spirit-led feedback on a decision. The person who calls the committee chooses who will be on it. Back when Quakers were a little more structured, the Elders would make sure people you did not get along with were on the committee.

Then they gather with you. You begin with worship together – prayer, some hymns, Scripture reading. You are invited to present your concern to the committee. The committee then questions you gently, carefully and in an open-ended way. The committee tries to reflect back to you your concerns and questions. Then they try to find 'clearness' on whether to support and how to support your ministry. At this meeting, which took about 3.5 hours, Anne was found to be strong in a ministry of support and help for others. The committee also supported her by recommending that she continue on with Chaplaincy training and she is now a hospice and end-of-life chaplain in Minneapolis.

From start to finish, Anne was the model of patience and longing for discernment. How did our Psalm put it? *“The unfolding of your words give light; it imparts understanding to the simple. With open mouth I pant; I long for your commandments. Turn to me and be gracious to me, as is your custom toward those who love your name” (Psalm 119).*

As we gather as a covenanted church today, let us to think about patience and eternal things. I know many of you want, long for, pant for certain things in this church. You want it to be like it was all those years ago. You want us to be thriving with young people. You want many things. I do also, for us as a church, for myself, for my spiritual life. We are not a patient people. We are used to getting whatever we want when we want it. Whether it is stuff, power, money, healing. Now, rather than being a gift and an opportunity for gratitude, patience itself is something we tolerate in a negative sense.

Contrary to our Puritan tradition, let us take a page from the Quakers and develop a tolerance for patience. Let us learn to wait for God's call upon us to see where our ministry will lead. It doesn't mean we just sit around. We talk, we discuss, we make decisions and we plan things. But being patient means waiting expectantly. Lovingly, joyfully, peacefully. Patience means we allow ourselves to soak up the gifts of the Spirit, trusting the Spirit will make herself known among us.

Without patience, we cannot make decisions well. Without patience, we do not learn the value of a mind set on the things of eternity. Without the things of eternity in our minds, we cannot discern good from evil. Like Solomon, let us all look beyond our personal wants and desires and instead long for the things of eternity. Like Paul, let us hope on what we cannot see, *“how is it possible to hope for what we already see?”* and trust in the Holy Spirit to grant us the patience to endure and guide our minds to better decisions. And like the Quakers, let us patiently hold one another in the light in such a way that God's love and Christ's presence define every element of our lives.

Let me finish with a quote from George Fox, the founder of the Quakers. He says, *“Be patient and still in the power and still in the light that doth convince you, keep your minds unto God...If you sit still in the patience which overcomes in the power of God, there will be no flying.”* In other words, in patience, we know the power and light of God. We stay focused on God. Patience overcomes all things and keeps us grounded in the needs of God's kingdom. May it be so for each of us and may we be held in the Light of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.