

081212 The Fruit of Patience-The Spirit of Discernment

Matthew 13:24-30, 37-43; 2 Peter 3:8-15a

“Paradox and the Patience of God”

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Last week we spoke of how the Holy Spirit guides our discernment, our decision-making, when we learn to wait with intentionality, when we learn patience. I suggested that patience is, in part, the act of waiting for more information in order to make a good decision, and also the act of enduring hardship and suffering. In doing so, we allow the Holy Spirit to seek our depths and to bring forth information and strength in the face of situations requiring discernment and endurance.

I spoke about patience last week primarily in terms of our human experience. How will we be patient? How can we live into the gift of the Holy Spirit in a positive way rather than simply tolerating the need for patience? Good questions all.

Often overlooked in our examination of this particular gift is God's patience. We in the mainline church don't really like to talk about God's patience because it means having a discussion about God's judgment as well. Patience is tied to discernment because we must eventually act. We cannot wait around forever for the signs and portents to align accordingly. We have to be patient, receive what we have been given and then make a decision. Decisions always require a judgment: “I will do this and not that”, “This is the right thing to do and this is the wrong thing to do”, “I will condemn this action and not that one”. Whatever it may be, our decisions are born of judgments which are, hopefully, guided by holy discernment and patience.

Our readings today are about God's judgment, but they are also about God's patience. Both readings are intended to be comforting to those who trust in God and believe they have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. If we are seeking to live into the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control of the Holy Spirit, we are living within the boundaries of God's desire for us. When Jesus speaks of judgment, he intends it to be a word of comfort for those who follow him and a word of warning toward those who persist in speaking against God.

Let me begin our reflection today by telling you a story. This is from the rabbis, an old Hebrew legend.

One day, Abraham was sitting in his tent. In the distance, he saw a weary old man coming toward him. Being a man concerned for the well-being of the stranger, Abraham rushed out and offered the man food and water and rest. Abraham made up the food and provided for the stranger. The old man began to eat without blessing the food and God. Abraham asked the man, “Do you worship the one true God?” The old

man was a materialist and did not believe in anything beyond this world. "I worship only this fire which gives me warmth and food and worship no gods." Abraham was horrified and immediately forced the man out of his tent and sent him harshly on his way.

A little while later God came to Abraham. "Where is the stranger who was with you today?" Abraham said, "He did not believe in you so I kicked him out of my home."

God said to Abraham, "I have tolerated and been patient with that old man's unbelief for all these 80 years. You could not endure one afternoon with him?"

Peter, in today's reading, tells us the problem with human patience. For us, we perceive waiting, whether it is the simple act of waiting, or waiting with intentionality, as God not doing what God said God would do. God is slow to act, slow to perform, slow to give us what we feel we so deserve. Peter says to that perspective, "*Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with God one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance*" (2 Pet 3:8-9). The problem with human patience is, quite simply, we are not patient.

For me, it is quite an eye-opening and humbling understanding to realize how patient God has been with me. I have given God all kinds of reasons to abandon me, to let me go, to not welcome me back into his love and grace. Once, I even told a friend of mine, "*Don't go to church. Whatever you do, don't eat their food and do the whole fellowship thing with them. That is how they get you. You allow yourself to be drawn in and then they shape your mind to their will.*" Basically, I was telling him, whatever you do, don't believe what they believe. It was sort of a backhanded rejection of God.

But God has been patient with me. And, if I may be so bold, God has been patient with you. Why then, are we so impatient with one another? A big part of it is because I don't think we deal well with the paradoxes of a spiritual life. We want answers and we want definitive direction. But the reality is the Holy Spirit does not lead us into lives of certainty and clarity. Instead, she leads us deeper into the world. Somehow, we must live in the midst of massive and difficult contradictions.

This is what is going on in Jesus' parable. An enemy has sown weeds into a field of wheat. The servants, who planted the field, know they planted good seed. As the field grows up, it becomes apparent that weeds have been sown into the wheat, so they go to the master and tell him what has happened. He tells them the enemy has done this to them. The servants volunteer their services to rid the field of the weeds. After all, they clearly are capable of tending a field and know what is and is not a weed. But the master tells them to leave the field alone and let the reapers work it out. If the servants pull up the weeds they may very likely inadvertently tear up the wheat as well.

We live in a world which gives us good choices and bad choices, good people to associate with and

bad people to associate with, good things and evil things. Evil happens. We are surrounded by conflicting beliefs, conflicting opinions, conflicting worldviews. And here, what is the master's advice? *Live with it. Live within it.* There really is no gentle way to take this.

But it gets more intense when we recognize a distinct possibility in this parable: Jesus may not be talking about good people and bad people – he may be talking about you and me as individuals. In the Jewish tradition there is the idea of the *yetzer ha'ra* and the *yetzer hatov*. Everyone is born with them. The *yetzer ha'ra* is the inclination to evil and the *yetzer hatov* is the inclination to the good. Neither inclination is inherently evil or good, but the focus of each can lead to either evil or good. So a child who grows up being allowed to give into the *yetzer ha'ra*, which is the inclination to pleasure, possession of things and the need for security, will more than likely be led into ways of evil to fulfill the pressures of the inclination. The child who is guided to fulfilling the *yetzer hatov* will marry well, be successful in business and will seek the good of the community.

The twist is troubling, however. The *yetzer hatov*, the inclination to the good, is not born in a person until they are 13, which is when study of Torah and the Jewish way begins in earnest. Not coincidentally this is the time of bar and bat mitzvahs. So a child who has given in to the *yetzer ha'ra* in his or her childhood has a tremendous challenge on his or her hands when the *yetzer hatov* is born within. Weeds and wheat begin to grow in the same field.

There is another twist as well, made clear in Jesus' explanation of the parable. In the parable, the sorting of weeds and wheat, the discernment of the state of one's life and soul before God, is left to the messengers of God, the angels. In other words, we, the servants of God through the work of Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit, are not capable *and nor are we allowed* to determine and judge who is good or bad in the eyes of God. To do so may rip up the good things of God just as we are tearing out the things opposed to God. This is true for other people and for us.

This all is taking place under the umbrella of God's steadfast and continuing patience *with us*. If we are not capable of judging well the weeds and the wheat in our midst, why are we so unwilling to extend the patience God has with us, his field in the midst of great paradoxes and difficulties, to others around us?

Discernment by way of the Holy Spirit requires a high tolerance for paradox and standing in the midst of unanswerable questions and situations. Weeds within ourselves and in the people around us draw us in and force our hands in ways that disturb us, that force us to cover ourselves with self-justifications and self-recriminations. On the other side, judgment looms. We judge ourselves and others in an attempt to preempt God's judgment on us, feeding a cycle of guilt and personal judgment which rips up the good wheat within us and others. The gift of patience steps in and provides a check on the drive to give in to the weeds and the judgment.

We live in the paradox of Jesus having already come and the time when God comes again, the time when the “completion” comes, as Paul calls it in 1 Corinthians 13. We live in the paradox of the already and the not yet, stretched between times, 'groaning with all of creation' as we said last week. Time slows way down here. The ability to discern the action which most serves God is compromised by our not-knowing. The gift of patience allows us to breathe, allows us to seek the peace of mind and calm heart Jesus calls us to.

Once we are living deeply into the gift of patience, we begin to see God's patience itself as what it is – our salvation. The fact that we are concerned about these things, the reality of living in the paradox of temptation, time and faith, means we become keenly aware of God's patience.

Peter says, *“Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things – the harvest of the wheat, the coming again of God in Christ, the fullness of time in your body and spirit – strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish. Do not give in to the yetzer ha'ra within you. And regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.”* As always, everything switches over in the vision of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Now, the goal is not attaining heaven. How can we? We don't know enough to determine weeds from wheat. Now, the charge is to live patiently until we are found by God.

And Jesus tells us what it means to be found by God in his explanation of the parable. He says, when the angels have found you and gathered you up, you, the righteous of God (you are righteous before God because you are living into the gifts of the Holy Spirit), *“will shine like the sun in the kingdom of your Father.”*

So wait with intentionality. Be patient with yourself and have patience with the development of your patience. Most of all, be patient with others in the same way God has been patient with you. This patience we learn from the Holy Spirit. It is not something you can do, because – and I know this from experience – you are NOT patient. Nor am I. We must learn it. Trust God's patience, and trust the Holy Spirit as she teaches you to be patient. For therein lies our salvation. Amen.