

## ***The Gift of Patience***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship on the Second Sunday of Lent

February 28, 2021

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

Text: James 5:7-11

Patience is something that does not come easily to most people. Patience, that ability to wait for something calmly for as long as it takes to materialize, can and often is a downright scarce commodity. I confess I am not always the most patient person, although some folks think I am. That is true in some regards, but not all. For example, my son always says that anyone who has ever been stuck with me driving in heavy traffic would not believe I am a pastor. It's true, the longer I am stuck in traffic the less patient I become, and the more colorful my language. It's odd, really, because in so many other respects I am a very patient person. I am patient with slow moving cashiers and with young moms juggling cranky toddlers while trying to check out of the grocery store. I am patient with filling out the same forms in medical offices over and over again. I am patient with family members who tend to forget things I really needed them to remember – no names here! But, stick me behind the wheel of a car inching its way through the traffic on 95 in Providence and my patience melts away. I'm not totally sure why that is but I suspect it has a lot to do with feeling like I am wasting time I don't have to waste. Why sitting in traffic feels like a waste of time but standing in a long line at Target does not is a mystery to me. But, such is life. We all have our quirks. And we all, every single last one of us, is in need of the gift of patience in our lives. I think that's why our friend Paul includes patience as one of the fruits or gifts of the Spirit in his list in Galatians. It is most assuredly a trait, a gift we long to possess, especially in those moments when it is in such short supply.

As I was thinking about patience this week, I became curious about exactly how the dictionary defines it. Webster's offers the decidedly unhelpful definition of patience as "the capacity, habit or fact of being patient." Not especially helpful until one looks up "patient," and that's where things get interesting. Patient, which is an adjective by the way, has five definitions the first of which is "bearing pains or trials calmly or

without complaint.” Interesting here is that the first and therefore presumably the most common usage of patient goes right to pain. Hmmm. So, cringing when my second Covid vaccine stung a bit going in was being patient. Well, alright. Patience and the Covid vaccine do seem like things that should be going together right now. The second definition of patient is a little more challenging: manifesting forbearance under provocation or strain. I had to look up forbearance. It means, essentially, lenience. So, that makes this second definition similar to the first. Patience is showing lenience when one is provoked or under strain. This seems to be speaking directly to me to keep in mind when I am stuck in traffic in Providence. Enough said. Now we come to the third definition of patient: “not hasty or impetuous.” Indeed, an important trait to possess and an aspect of patience very important to cultivate as the impetuosity of youth hopefully matures into more measured responses to the world around us. The fourth definition is the one I would have placed first, if I was the editor of Webster’s: “steadfast despite opposition, difficulty or adversity.” This is what I think of when I think of someone who is patient – someone who is steadfast, committed, unswayed by circumstance. It is closely related to the fifth definition, “able or willing to bear.”

So where does all this musing over definitions leave us in our consideration of patience, the virtue James is urging his readers, in this morning’s text, to practice to the utmost they are able? Common to all of the ways we can understand patience, or the ability to be patient, is coping with things not going the way we would want, if we were in charge. Patience has to do with bearing pain or trial calmly, even responding with lenience or kindness directed toward that which is causing the discomfort requiring patience. It means responding to such provocations thoughtfully rather than hastily or impetuously. No knee jerk reactions accepted! The gift of patience also means being able to remain steadfast, committed no matter how difficult it becomes to do so. Strength in the face of discouragement and despair. This is what we must be able or willing to bear – that very thing which most taxes our patience, that pushes us toward anger and frustration putting us at risk for impetuous action which could feel good in the moment but cause more problems in the end. Yes, dear ones, patience is truly many faceted and much more complex than it

appears on the surface. No wonder Paul elevates it to the status of a gift to be bestowed by the Holy Spirit, to be the much desired fruit that results when we strive for the deepening of our faith, our relationship with God through Jesus. In certain moments, patience seems like a super human ability. We all know this from this past year's Covid experiences. It feels like we have been asked to be patient over and over again. Be patient with all the shut-downs and up-ending of our lives in every conceivable way. Be patient and endure giving up so many of the aspects of life that give us meaning and purpose, from the way we engage with our work and volunteer activities to how much time we can spend face to face with friends and family. Patience?? We are quite literally sick of being patient with Covid and everything that has come with it! No wonder Paul considers it such a precious and rare commodity which can only come to us from God.

I chose this text from James' epistle as the focus for our conversation about patience because here he is addressing the importance and value of patience in the person desiring to follow Jesus. Authorship of this letter is unknown, although many theories about who James was abound. The most obvious answer is the Apostle James who was also Jesus' brother, but evidence this is the case is pretty thin. Some scholars even suspect Paul himself is the author but, again, this seems unlikely. The real question here is, does it really matter who wrote it or does the truth of its message stand on its own? I admit to coming down on this latter perspective. James has a direct way of speaking that cuts through all the "chatter" which is why this book has been so popular even though it was almost excluded from the earliest canon of Scripture. James was concerned that one's faith in Jesus made a visible and discernable difference in the way one led one's life each day. It is in James that we find the famous words, "faith without works is dead" (James 2:17). This was and remains controversial in some Christian circles where the emphasis on faith alone is seen as paramount to salvation. For James the pursuit of individual salvation is meaningless if the way you treat others reveals nothing about your love of Christ.

This is why James' words on patience are especially worthy of our careful consideration. James is addressing all those folks in his time who were growing impatient that Jesus was not returning as they understood him to have promised to do. These people are angry because they gave up

everything based on this expectation of Jesus' imminent return which has yet to have occurred. In today's text James urges them to be patient "until the coming of the Lord." He compares it to the patience a farmer needs when waiting for his crops to grow. The farmer endures sun and rain as he waits but never surrenders his belief that the crops will grow. Jesus' followers must do the same, enduring whatever they must as they wait for the fulfillment of Jesus' promise. They must rekindle their patience because their lack of it is causing them to grumble at each other, the very people they need for the continued nurturing of their own faith as they wait. James reminds them of the patience of the prophets of the Old Testament who knew the prophecies for the coming of the Messiah but never saw them fulfilled. They have seen the Messiah and now must wait to see what that will ultimately mean in the end. James reminds them that just as Job endured all he went through with patience, so must they, remembering that God is always compassionate and merciful.

So, what does all this James is telling his people in the 1<sup>st</sup> century have to say to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? That's the real question this morning, isn't it? Important to note here is that James, along with most of the New Testament writings, presume that Jesus will be returning at any moment. When this didn't happen, how they understood Jesus and his significance began to change. James' words on patience seem especially appropriate to this reality to me. His advice to the people of his own time still stands for us as well. And what is that advice? To trust patiently in the promise of Jesus, like the farmer trusts that his crops will grow. Noteworthy to me here is that the farmer is still planting crops, still planning for the future of a life continuing on as it is. In other words, the promise of Jesus is shifting to an "already/not yet" way of existing. Jesus will return one day but no one knows when and it serves no purpose to get hung up on that since that is entirely in God's purview. All we know is that we are trust, to have faith, to live and love as Jesus taught, enduring whatever comes along that tries to knock us off our course. We are to work at our relationships with each other, remaining steadfast in our commitment to God, to each other and to sharing the Good News of Jesus far beyond our walls. In the words of James, we are to treat each other always with love, mercy and compassion, just as God treats us. What gives us the strength to do this? To be patient

when faith seems like too much effort and evil too strong? The strength needed is beyond mere human ability. It can only come to us from God through Jesus, enabled by the Holy Spirit to be a part of our lives each day. Our patience, dear ones, comes from love – the unique love we experience in God and because of God’s love for us which knows no bounds. This love “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (1 Corinthians 13:7) In other words, dear ones, it is love that makes patience do-able. It is love that empowers and enables patience. It is love that grows from wisdom which itself takes root in patience. It is love that provides the strength the practice of patience requires in this world where immediate gratification seems to drive too much of the way people look at the world.

Patience is a fruit of the Spirit, one that must be carefully nurtured and encouraged to grow roots, deep and resilient in our lives because it is patience that allows faith to endure despite and because of everything that life throws at us. Patience is the gift which grows out of the careful nurturing of faith in the midst of this broken and fragile world in which we live our lives. Patience is a key brick in the foundation for living life each day that our faith becomes for each of us if we are willing to invest in nurturing our souls. This, dear ones, is what Lent is all about. So, my question for you this morning is this – where in your life do you need more patience, more steadfast endurance for whatever comes your way? Once you figure that out, remember to invite God into that conversation and see what happens. If you’re able to be patient, you just might be surprised at what comes next. Amen.