

The Patience of Love

Exodus 16:1-8

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A group of children were asked what love is and here are some of their responses:
“When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis too. That's love.”

"When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You know that your name is safe in their mouth."

"Love is when someone hurts you, and you get so mad, but you don't yell at them because you know it would hurt their feelings."

"Love is what's in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen."

"Love is like a little old woman and a little old man who are still friends even after they know each other so well."

"You really shouldn't say 'I love you' unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget."

In 1 Corinthians 13:4, The Bible says “love is patient and kind.” We looked at the kindness of love last week and today we explore the patience of love. Patience is the ability to bear trials and adversity calmly and without complaint. Without this ability you will not be able to sustain love in any human relationship or with God. Which brings me to our text for today from Exodus 16:1-8. It’s a story about the perils of impatience and the miraculous patience of God.

In verses 1-2 we read the situation of the Hebrew people: They are only 45 days out from being liberated from slavery; they are in a desert wasteland and they are grumbling. How quickly patience is lost! Only 45 days ago they were witnesses to the greatest act of slave liberation in human history and faced with the trials of life in the desert they are ready to go back to Egypt. This illustrates one of the strangest things about human nature: people actually prefer slavery over freedom. That’s because freedom requires trust, courage, and patience. Slavery doesn’t require anything of us. Slavery takes care of us.

That is why people prefer to live in sin and obey the law of sin and death which rules over them. Slaves cannot practice love, only free people can truly love and love requires patience. What we learn here is that the Hebrew people have been liberated but they still have a slave mentality. What about us Christians? Christ has set us free but do we still live as slaves?

Patience is faith in God's providence. Providence is not a city in Rhode Island! It is the Biblical concept that our loving heavenly God governs history and provides for his people. The lesson of the story screams at us this morning: Do you not think that a God who just liberated a million slaves after 400 years of oppression in Egypt will not also keep them alive in the desert? As I read the text, they were not even hungry or thirsty yet! They were living off the land; perhaps eating grasshoppers and whatever wild and edible plants they could forage. It wasn't very tasty but they were alive.

Jesus said something similar: "Look at the birds of the air, they neither sow nor reap yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of much more value than they?" In each case, God is teaching us to look to him and not to our circumstances. Patience is lost when we focus ourselves on just how bad it is. Patience is born when we focus on just how powerful God is.

If you don't have much patience, one of the most effect ways to develop it is to change your perspective. The Bible says to set your heart on things which are above, not on the things of this earth. What are a few lost golf balls or a flat tire or a poor driver in the face of eternity? They become as nothing.

Even the bigger things change with our perspective: injustices, betrayals or abuse we have experienced. God is infinitely more concerned about injustice and abuse than we could ever be. We can patiently control our righteous anger when we release it to him.

In verse 4 God makes a promise, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out and gather enough for that day." Patience is faith in God's promises. In order to be patient we have to give up our relentless craving for security and certainty. This craving can never be satisfied by any amount of money, investments or insurance policies. Confident living can only come when we stop trying to control and guarantee what's going to happen tomorrow. To be patient is to embrace what God has given for today and to trust him for tomorrow. Is not the resurrection proof enough that we can

trust the future to God? Christian believers have every reason to believe that no matter how bad things get for us, the best is yet to come for Jesus has risen from the dead!

There is one person in this story who is supremely patient. We who need to learn patience should apprentice ourselves to him. In verses 6-7 He is the LORD who brought us out of Egypt and died to take away our sin. Consider the astonishing patience of God not just in Exodus but throughout the Bible. God never gives up on people. If you had set the Hebrews free only to hear them grumble a month and a half later, would you stick it out with them or abandon them? How quickly we give up. Yet with Jesus Christ, even a lifetime sinner gets forgiveness in his dying breath when Jesus said to the thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in paradise."

We see the patience of God most vividly in Jesus Christ. We see it when he is wrongfully accused, unfairly tried by a kangaroo court, mocked and abused by the crowds, jeered at by the religious leaders of his day and wrongfully executed. He bears it all. He absorbs it. That is what patience is: the ability to absorb annoyances, inconveniences and ultimately injustice itself. Patience comes for those who release their anger to Christ whose hunger for justice and righteousness is far greater than ours could ever be.

Ralph Otteson was 82 years old when I met him some 25 years ago. He was a crotchety old farmer full of vinegar. He never went to church a day in his life. He dutifully drove his wife to worship every Sunday, and then he'd drive out onto some country lane and park. He'd turn on the radio and pull out a bottle of whiskey from underneath the seat and have a snort. When the hour was up he'd pick up Ruth and drive back to the farm. She prayed for him for all 49 years of their life together but she never nagged him or judged him about Christ. She was a saintly woman. One Sunday about a month after her funeral, Ralph appeared in the last pew at the back of the church. Each Sunday after that he'd move up a pew. Soon he was in the front row and after church one Sunday he asked me about baptism and shortly after the members of the little Petersburg United Methodist Church witnessed the most remarkable conversion they'd ever seen: the baptism of an 83 year old man.

Love is patient. God is patient with us because he sees what we can become. Love is patient because it looks at everyone and everything not for what it is but for what God can do.