

Practicing Patience

Galatians 5.13-25

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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¹³For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. ¹⁶Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. ¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²²By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

This text from Galatians comes as a hard word to us Mennonites in this time and place. For the last few years, we in the Mennonite Church USA have been biting and devouring each other—precisely what verse 15 admonishes us *not* to do. I refer, of course, to our fights over gay and lesbian issues. In the comment sections of websites for *The Mennonite* and the *Mennonite World Review*, on social media like Facebook, in letters to the editor, in congregational meetings, in conference annual sessions, and at biennial conventions, we Mennonites have too often behaved badly with each other. To use Paul's words in verses 19 and 20, we have engaged in "enmities, strife . . . , anger, quarrels, dissensions, [and] factions." When I read some of the mean things we Mennonites say to each other on the Internet, I am shocked. I feel discouraged and sad.

We are living in a time when our denomination is changing. Many churches have already left MC USA, and more will probably leave in the near future. In the last four years two new groups have formed, the Anabaptist Renewal Circles and the Evana Network, both of which seek to promote traditional teachings of human sexuality within an evangelical Anabaptist framework. While it's too early to tell how large these groups will become, it's possible that no small number of MC USA congregations will withdraw from the denomination and join one or both of these groups.

On the other side of the disagreement, meanwhile, we have groups such as Pink Menno and Brethren Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Interests which seek to promote inclusive teachings on human sexuality within a progressive Anabaptist framework.

To be sure, some people on both sides exhibit the fruits of the Spirit that Paul names in verses 22-23: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. I want to be clear about this, so let me say it another way: you can see fruits of the Holy Spirit in some of the people who prefer a traditional view *and* you can also see those same fruits of the Spirit in some of the people who prefer a progressive view.

And yet some of the people—in both camps—more often display what Paul calls “the works of the flesh”: “enmities, strife . . . , anger, quarrels, dissensions, [and] factions” (vv. 20-21). Throughout the Mennonite Church USA, many of us have been biting, devouring, and consuming each other, to borrow Paul’s words. This is strong language, and Paul intends it to be strong. The imagery he uses comes from wild animals fighting each other in the Roman games. Think of a water buffalo and a lion fighting each other, and you get a sense of what Paul is referring to. Many of us in the denomination are guilty of this. I confess that while I’ve tried to control my tongue in public conversations—with greater or lesser success—I have definitely allowed unkind thoughts to cross my mind. For that I repent, especially because Paul says that people who engage in works of the flesh like enmities and strife “will not inherit the kingdom of God” (v. 21). I really would like to inherit the kingdom of God, and I’m sure you would too.

Conflict is a normal part of church life. As such conflict is amoral. There is nothing wrong, nothing sinful, in disagreeing with other people. The sin comes when we attack, discredit, defame, malign, or manipulate other people. The ethics of conflict lie largely in how we respond to conflict, in how we conduct ourselves in the middle of conflict. How do we treat people who disagree with us? That’s the real issue here—the issue Paul wants us to grapple with.

Throughout life, and during conflict, Paul wants us to grow the fruits of the Spirit. Growing the fruits of the Spirit is an intricate dance between us and God. Think what happens when you raise fruits, vegetables, or flowers in your garden. To get that fruit, you have to take action. You have to till the soil, plant the seeds, fertilize, water, and pull up the weeds. With some plants you also have to prune. If you want fruit, vegetables, or flowers, you can do all those things. In fact, you have to do them.

Yet there's also a component to growing fruit that lies outside of your control. The processes of creation also have a role to play—the blueprint of DNA, the division of cells, organic chemical reactions, and so on. Growing fruit is this wonderful mix of human effort and divine gift which is structured into the processes of creation.

Growing fruits of the Holy Spirit works in a similar way. You and I have to invest some effort to make love, joy, peace, patience, and all the rest of them grow. We can't just sit on our duffs and expect God to do all the work. Yes, God will do some of the work, but we also have to do our part. I had a wise teacher once who put it this way: we have to do what only we can do, so that God can do what only God can do. Growing spiritual fruit is both our responsibility and God's gift.

So what is it that only we can do? What role do we have in tending the garden of spiritual fruit? The Christian tradition has said over and over again that our role is to develop a series of spiritual activities or practices. Just as a gardener engages in certain activities, or practices, to make physical fruit grow, so do we have to engage in certain activities to grow spiritual fruit.

Let's focus on only one of the spiritual fruits that Paul names, the fruit of patience. How can we practice patience?

I think it starts in ordinary daily life. In the course of conducting our daily business, many of us have to wait in line in the cafeteria, the post office, or the grocery store. We wait to see our family doctor, our dentist, and our optometrist. A while back we Schrocks changed our phone providers and simultaneously had to get our Internet service fixed. For a couple of weeks I spent a lot of time on waiting on the phone for my turn to come up so I could talk to the right technicians.

When we wait in line, we have a choice: we can be patient or impatient. If we choose to take it, we have a wonderful opportunity to practice patience. Our turn will come soon enough, probably in just a few minutes. We can remind ourselves that other people in the line have business just as important as our business.

Other parts of life also offer opportunities to practice patience. If you happen to be married, marriage offers unending chances to practice patience. If you happen to be single, you will get plenty of chances to practice patience at work and with friends. If you're a parent, well, enough said! Raising children can sometimes try the patience of any saint.

When we become impatient, we also become self-centered. Our needs, our wants, and our agenda become more important than anyone else's. If I get impatient with you, I fall into the trap of thinking that my schedule is more important than your schedule. My goals are more important than your goals. My theology is more important than your theology.

Congregational life gives us many situations to exercise the muscle of patience with each other. Casual conversations, structured conversations, small groups, committees, congregational meetings, and even worship services all have the capacity to test our patience. His personality quirk; her mental proclivity. Their ideas that I privately think are absurd, their theology that I quietly believe to be atrocious. Her slow pace. His fast pace. Long decision-making processes. Poorly conceived decision-making processes. You get the point: any time we get two or more human beings together for virtually any purpose, we are likely to find ourselves in a situation where things are not going the way we want them to. And in that moment we have a choice about how we will respond—with patience or impatience.

Here's the thing: as we practice patience over and over, the Holy Spirit comes along beside us and does what only the Spirit can do. We are given some gift. For example, the Spirit might put into our hearts a feeling of compassion for the other person or the other group. Or the Spirit might create invisible bonds of friendship and community between us. Or third, the Spirit might enlarge our capacity to trust that God

is somehow working for good in this situation, even if we don't see what that good is right now.

Patience is a uniquely Christian virtue. In scripture, we see patience displayed in the lives of Abraham and Sarah, in Job, in the Suffering Servant in Isaiah, and pre-eminently in the life of Jesus, particularly after his arrest. The stories of Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion portray him as an incredibly patient person who when he is provoked, does not get riled up; who when he is verbally accused, does not bite back; who when he is forsaken by his friends does not condemn them. Jesus models patience. He is God's patience in motion.

It's common these days to say that God is love, and that's true. But what difference would it make if we said and believed and acted as if one of God's most important qualities is patience? Perhaps it will help to think about your own life, and to remember how incredibly patient God has been with you. Remember the times you screwed up? The times you blew God off? The times you maybe even walked away from God?

Well, the world didn't end and God did not strike you down. You are still here. That all by itself demonstrates the exquisite patience of God. If God had chosen to be impatient with you, just imagine how much worse off you'd be right now. Just imagine what a mess you'd be in if God had not extended enormous patience to you.

From that deep well of God's patience, can you and I—in our congregation, our conference, and our denomination—extend patience to each other? And can we do it even when we disagree about issues relating to LGBTQ persons? Can it be a gift of the Spirit working in our relationships?