

# WORSHIP

Sermon | 7.22.2018



## Fruits of the Spirit: Patience

By the Reverend Katherine C. Kerr

Galatians 5:16-17, 22-26

Samuel 1:9-17

Today we continue our sermon series on the fruits of the Spirit, in which we are using Paul's words from Galatians 5 as our framework, and a biblical story as the illustration. As Katelyn read just a moment ago, in Galatians Paul lifts up the nine fruits of the Spirit as outward signs of the working of God's Spirit in our lives. Each of these fruits is a "habit of virtue" that focuses not just on an individual's personal faith life, but more importantly, centers around love for others and life in the community of faith.

Today we will consider the fruit of patience, using the Old Testament story of Hannah. We meet Hannah at the beginning of the story of Samuel, where we learn that she was one of two wives of a man named Elkanah. Hannah had no children, but Elkanah's other wife, Peninah, had children.

Elkanah and his family made an annual pilgrimage from their home in Ramah to the temple at Shiloh. As part of that practice, he would distribute portions of the sacrifice to his family- his wife Peninah and her children each got a portion. Elkanah always gave Hannah a double portion, as scripture says, "because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb." But Peninah taunted and belittled Hannah because of her barrenness year after year, and Hannah was distraught. Elkanah didn't understand why Hannah was so upset, because he loved her deeply and wanted his love for her to be enough.

We pick up Hannah's story in verse 9 of I Samuel 1:

After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly. She made this vow: 'O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and



remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head.'

As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. So Eli said to her, 'How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine.' But Hannah answered, 'No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.' Then Eli answered, 'Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.'

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"It'll happen when you least expect it."

Every time I read Hannah's story, I imagine someone saying that to her. Intending it to be supportive, no doubt. Poor Hannah, the loved wife of an important man who is unable to have a child. Day after day, year after year, she lives with the reality of her deepest desire going unfulfilled while all around her, and right in front of her, were others who had the very thing she wanted most.

It's a hard place to be. It's a place many in this room have been, or are right now. It's a place I have been. And I have to admit to you that when I was in that place, I came to hate that phrase. And I imagine Hannah may have felt the same way.

When someone we know is in the throes of waiting for something that their heart deeply desires – be it a relationship, a child, a job, a cure, strength, answers, direction - most of us want to fix it for them- to help them, to make it better for them. So we say things like, "it'll happen when you least expect it," or "try to focus on something else." Or "be patient."

These are not inherently bad things to say, but for a person stuck in between what is and what they hope will be, they are not always helpful.

Phrases such as these imply that if you could just stop wanting that thing that you want, then it will come to you.

But the truth is that that's not how it actually works, and it presents a misguided notion of what patience really is.

Many of us labor under a misunderstanding of what patience is. Now, I'm not talking about



the day to day need for patience when we're sitting in traffic or waiting to be called into the examining room to see the doctor.

The patience I'm talking about is that which we must call upon when we are in limbo- those times in our lives when what we want is not what we have, or what we have is not what we want. Those wilderness experiences when we are not where we expected or hoped we would be, and we don't see a way from where we are to where we want to be.

I'm talking about soul patience.

And I think this is what Paul was referencing when he chose to include patience in his list of fruits of the Spirit. Patience is tucked in there between peace and kindness, listed with love, generosity and self-control. These are big attributes that reflect the work of God in our lives, and so we can safely bet that he wasn't just talking about being patient with minor annoyances.

As a fruit of the Spirit, patience goes much deeper than resisting barging to the front of the line because you just have a couple of things to buy or fighting the impulse to run the red light because you absolutely positively have to be there as soon as possible.

Yes, we need to practice patience in those times, but those times are fleeting.

The patience I think Paul is talking about is patience in the face of broken dreams, long odds, and seemingly impossible situations. Patience when it seems like God is absent from our lives, doesn't care about our situation. Patience when it would be so easy to give up. And this patience requires some work on our part.

The unfortunate truth is that in our world, patience is often mischaracterized as passivity. When the world values quick results and instant success, patience can easily be seen as a weakness.

But scripture actually presents patience as the opposite of passivity. In the bible, patience "usually connotes a calm, abiding endurance," which necessitates a good bit of strength, and it is often associated with the virtues of wisdom and humility. Patience is an outgrowth of faith because it holds onto hope in the midst of disappointment and sorrow, acknowledging that God is in charge, even when we can't feel it, don't understand it or don't like the way things are going.

Hannah is a powerful example of faithful patience. For years- we don't know how many, exactly- she lived with a deeply held, unfulfilled desire- the desire to have a child. Like so many before her and so many since, she grieved every day her inability to do the thing she



most wanted to do- to bring a child into this world. Sure, she had a nice life – a home and a community, a husband who adored her, but still she was brokenhearted over her childlessness. And then like alcohol on a cut, there was Peninah relentlessly harassing her over what she didn't have.

We can imagine a hundred ways in which Hannah might have dealt with her pain- withdrawing into herself and shutting her husband out, lashing back at Peninah, running away to try to get away from it all. But in verse 9, we learn what she actually did. Hannah took her agony, her disappointment, her desire and her grief to God. In honesty and with great strength, she poured out her heart to God in an act of sheer faith, asking for what she wanted and promising that if she received her heart's desire, she would return the gift to God in a way that seemed fitting.

Patience is not passivity. It doesn't demand that we sit silently, ignoring our feelings, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Patience makes room for, sometimes even demands, action. So in the midst of patience, it is okay to pray for what you want, to get out and talk to people about your situation. To do the fertility treatments and take the medication. To go to therapy and go to the gym. To take up a new hobby or find ways to meet new people. In the midst of putting your trust in God, you can also take action to help find your way out of the place you don't want to be.

If you're familiar with Hannah's story, then you know what happens next. After she bravely defended herself against Eli's mistaken charge of her drunkenness, and he blessed her prayer, Hannah returned to her husband. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son, whom she named Samuel. After weaning him, Hannah brought him back to the temple, where he was dedicated to a life of service to God through the priesthood.

While Hannah's persistence in prayer and strength in honoring her vow to God are commendable, we must resist the temptation to view this story as some sort of formula for getting what we want from God. As I read this text, it is not about Hannah promising something to God in order for God to give her what she wanted. It is, rather, about Hannah's trust that God will provide for her, and her intention to respond to God's gift of grace by offering that which is most precious to her to God.

Hannah asked for what she wanted- how many times she asked over the course of years, we don't know. But throughout that time she lived out biblical patience by trusting in God, making her desires known, and then responding to the ultimate granting of her desire by



offering her child back to God's service.

Patience is not passivity. Patience requires strength and faith, trust and hope.

One of the most extraordinary stories of biblical patience in modern times is that of Nelson Mandela. Imprisoned for twenty seven years because of his work to overthrow the apartheid system of his native South Africa, Mandela endured unspeakably harsh conditions and heartbreaking years of separation from everything he held dear.

But through all of that, he never gave up hope – hope that he would once more be free, hope that he would be reunited with his family, hope that his beloved nation would overthrow the vicious racist system under which it was imprisoned. He spent countless hours in his prison cell writing- letters, essays, treatises- that outlined his hopes and his dreams for himself, his family and his country, continuing his important work of bringing justice and equality to bear in a very broken system.

While he was in prison, Mandela's oldest daughter, whom he had not seen since she was a very young girl, married and had her first child. In Mandela's tribe, tradition held that grandfathers named their grandchildren, and so Mandela named his first grandchild. The name he chose for her was Zaziwe, which means "Hope."

Years later, he reflected upon this, writing, "The name had special meaning for me, for during all my years in prison hope never left me—and now it never would. I was convinced that this child would be a part of a new generation of South Africans for whom apartheid would be a distant memory—that was my dream."

Mandela was eventually freed from prison and went on to play a critical role in the dismantling of apartheid. He was elected President of South Africa and served in that capacity for five years. He died in 2013. Last Wednesday would have been his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. As one writer reflected, "The life of Nelson Mandela is one of the greatest examples of the power of patience. With calm persistence, he helped bring about a miracle not only for himself, but also for the 43 million other blacks and whites who inhabit South Africa."

Patience is not passivity. Patience doesn't mean giving up on hope or abandoning your dreams. Patience is harder than that. It asks more of us. Patience is a fruit of the Spirit that reflects deep trust and abiding faith in the God who is sovereign over all things.

At the end of this service, we will sing an old hymn. "Great is thy Faithfulness" was written in 1923 by Thomas Chisholm, and it is a testimony to the faithfulness of God over the course of a lifetime. It has become a foundational hymn for many Christians.

In its final stanza, this hymn has a phrase that has, for years, been comfort to me- one of those phrases I pull out and hold onto when I need a little extra support.



*Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, it says.*

This is as beautiful and concise a definition of patience as any I've ever heard.

My prayer for us is that we all might have strength for today- trust in God's presence with us no matter what we are facing; and bright hope for tomorrow- trust in God's promise of fullness of life even if it doesn't look like we'd hoped it would, so that God's presence would bear fruit in our lives.

Amen.

