Developing Patience!
July 18, 2010

Texts: from St Paul
“Suffering brings patience, and patience brings perseverance, and perseverance brings character, and character, hope. And this hope is not deceptive.”

From the Quran: “Seek Allah’s help with patient perseverance and prayer; it is indeed hard, except to those who bring a lowly spirit.”

From the Buddha: ‘The greatest prayer is patience.”

In all my years as a pastor I have discovered that I have never really preached on patience before or ever heard a sermon on it. That does not mean that others have not. Indeed there are sermons on the Internet but even there they are somewhat rare. Perhaps preachers are too impatient to practice what they preach when it comes to patience!

What is fascinating is that all the major religions comment on it as a very high virtue. Tolstoy the famous Russian author wrote War and Peace, famous for its tremendous length.
Perhaps he learned something in that arduous process. He said that the two most powerful warriors are patience and time.

How many a city has fallen eventually to a long siege with these warriors against them? What do these warriors tell us about Iraq or Afghanistan and how America must proceed if America is to prevail there? ...Do we have a personal problem that is difficult to solve? Try Patience and Time! John Dryden the poet laureate of England in the period of the late 16 hundreds became a very politically astute man. This is what he said about patience: “Beware the fury of a patient man!” He was arguing that we can be both furious and patient and that was a very powerful combination, the anger provides the fuel, the patience the continued pressure. Beware of such a person he cautions!

On the spiritual side the Buddha’s insight is that a prayer for patience is the greatest prayer of all. This is identifying that all of us experience being impatient, and if this is the greatest prayer of them all, then patience would go the furthest in our lives as a personal virtue to cultivate... This past week I had to fill out a bunch of forms for health care, social security, insurance, health care supplement etc. And you know what? I became impatient! I thought this sermon had better start with me. I have a lot to learn here I thought...

We do live in what has become the instant society. We are the society of quick fixes, of pressing a button for action, of instant communication and texting and email and when these things don’t work we get impatient. When I was reading the biography of John Adams one of Americas founding fathers I realized that letters would often takes months to cross the Atlantic. Today we can communicate by
phone and send documents electronically with perfect accuracy the same day and also in real time we can talk across the miles. But when we can’t for some reason, when planes are delayed at the airport due to a storm or a volcano, when we can’t get an auto part for several days we can storm out and get in a foul mood very quickly. When we get stuck in traffic we fume.

Our own Peggy Courtney wrote a poem on patience

*When in a traffic backlog or jam as some people call it, do not vent Just take deep breaths to calm yourself so a fender does not get bent.*

If we are not careful we can take impatience into our homes. Peggy writes: “*When your baby is crying and you are rocking him in a chair - patience is to calmly rock, to show him that you care.*

*It takes more patience to allow your child to tie his own shoes than to do it for him, and ultimately you will have allowed him to be a man.*

How many of us end up waiting for a spouse or our children to get ready for an event? You hate to be late and your spouse apparently cares less as they hold you up. So when you arrive you arrive late and mad and it puts stress on the marriage.

Some people have a whole different sense of time. Contrast a small town and the sense of time there with that of the pulse of a big city. Older people who do not have pressing agendas can be very frustrating to those who are terribly short of time and vice versa.
Some spouses work hard all day and come home exhausted. The other spouse has had a great day and is all ready to party and go out. The other spouse wants to play ‘coach potato’ and just relax. If this happens often, then watch the frustration level rise!

When it comes to repairing things, how patient are we? I came across this rather amusing story about patience the other day.

*When a man’s printer began to grow faint, he called a local repair shop where a friendly man informed him that the printer probably needed only to be cleaned. Because the store charged $50 for such cleanings, he told him he might be better off reading the printer's manual and trying the job himself.*

*Pleasantly surprised, the potential customer asked, "Does your boss know that you discourage business?"

"Actually, I’m not supposed to tell you this, but it’s my boss's idea. You see, people are so impatient when it comes to repairing things.*

*So we usually make more money on repairs, if we let people try to fix things themselves first!"

St Paul suffered a lot for his faith; imprisonments, beatings, whippings, running for his life, being shipwrecked and eventually being chained to a Roman soldier in prison and finally sentenced to death in Rome. But Paul says that we can be happy about suffering if we view it aright.

St Paul had to learn patience like the rest of us. He is very profound on this subject because he links several qualities together in a progression.
First of all there is suffering of some kind that we have to deal with. One of the lessons of suffering is that suffering becomes our teacher in the school of patience. For instance when we suffer from physical pain that we cannot cure, we discover that being impatient with it solves nothing; whereas patience can hold out the best hope for some kind of cure. Then as St Paul says we must persevere. Perseverance and patience are like twins; they are not identical twins, but they can be born and grow up together. St Francis De Sales Catholic Bishop of Geneva in the 1600’s once said that “patience and perseverance have a magical effect before which difficulties disappear and obstacles vanish.”

St Paul also argued that patience and perseverance build character. In other words these two build our souls, which is the purpose of our creation here. This planet is a place for soul building and these two qualities working together do build character. Once character has been built in this way it connects to a hope that is not deceptive, because it is a hope that has been through the fire.

What St Paul is arguing for here is a process, not a quick fix. It begins with suffering of some kind but ends with authentic hope. The glue in this process is patience. Without it there is no progress and suffering can become pointless when there is no hope. This is St Paul at his most profound.

Jesus tells a story about a patient farmer. This is a story about our frustrated hopes. The farmer sows his seed and then goes on with his regular life. There is no frustration here or impatience. The farmer does not go out into the field and dig up the seed by the roots and examine it to see how it is growing. He appears to do nothing except one very important thing. He waits patiently. This is an active watchful
response because when it is time to harvest he wastes no time.

To every thing there is a season says Ecclesiastes, a time for everything under heaven. This farmer knows that and waits patiently. The Kingdom of God which means the rule of God in this world is like seed buried in the ground. God’s will, will be done on earth as it is in heaven, because the seed is sown in history. Trust that. Be patient. Peace will come to the earth and the meek shall inherit it.

The Quran talks about the importance of patience, linking patience to prayer. If we take the Quran’s lead we can link perseverance patience and prayer together. This is something that Jesus teaches as well. As the poor widow was before an unjust judge, we are to be patient in prayer, for God is a just judge and will hear and answer prayer on God’s timetable. We do not know the whole score. In order to understand that we need to be humble, or as the Quran says lowly in spirit. Pride and prayer don’t work together. Humility and patience do!

The great traditions all teach the golden rule. At the base of that rule is that we are to love others as ourselves. When it comes to patience therefore we are to be patient with others and also with ourselves. Frances de Sales says: “Have patience with all things, but first with yourself.”

When I was writing about courage I said that courage is something that according to Jesus can be taken. The phrase is often used Take courage just like it is something on a shelf that is available. I think that Patience is in the same category. We can take patience. We can decide to be patient in the same way that we can make a decision to be happy!
They say that when Michelangelo sculpted from the marble, that the pieces he chiseled flew off very rapidly. It was amazing how quickly he sculpted at the beginning. But then there came another stage when it was the all important details that mattered. I have stood in St Peter’s and looked at the Pieta and tears have come to my eyes. How could anyone have ever sculpted such a lifelike image of a mother holding her dead son with such pathos, *in marble* with an emotion that was palpable? Here is how, from the lips of the master himself: “Genius is eternal patience.” he said

Hinduism is also instructive when it comes to personal relationships. It counsels us to be patient with people and circumstances. We are to be agreeable, letting others be themselves without having to adjust to us. We are not to argue, dominate conversations or interrupt others. They say do not be in a hurry. Be patient with children and the elderly.

Sikhism asks us to rid ourselves of bad habits by developing patience and character strength.

Dottie Walters, who had been homeless as a child, was married at the time of the recession that followed World War 2. They had all the trappings of early marriage: 2 babies, a home, a car and all the usual time payments. Then the bottom fell out and there was no money for anything or even food.

Dottie had no special talent, no training, no college education. She had been editor of the school newspaper in charge of advertising and so she thought maybe I could get work if I worked for the local newspaper? That might cover the house payment…

She had no baby sitter, no car, just a stroller with a wheel that kept coming off. There were no jobs at the newspaper
but Dottie had an idea. She thought that she might sell advertising for the newspaper in a Shopper’s Column. They agreed she could try and off down the country roads she trundled with the shopping cart trying to sell advertising.

The idea worked and people bought into it and the money started to flow and she covered the house payment. She even had enough to purchase an old car. She was able to hire a high school girl to baby sit from three to five each afternoon. Things were still very tight.

And her patience and resolution were to be tried further.

She had worked on four advertising prospects and all four had turned her down. When she asked why she found out that they had noticed that the President of the chamber of commerce and owner of the drug store did not advertise with her. That was a game changer for these prospects and they felt it meant that there had to be something wrong with this way of advertising.

Discouraged and about to give up she believed that her world had fallen in because if these folks had advertised with her she would have been able to cover the house payment. Now she was staring homelessness in the face once again.

Determined to persevere she decided to approach Mr. Ahlman to try to get him to advertise with her in the shoppers column. He had always refused to see her in the past.

This time he was in the store behind the counter and so Dottie put her best smile on and held up her precious shoppers column and said: “Mr. Ahlman everybody respects your opinion. Will you just look at my work for a moment so that I can tell other merchants what you think of the idea?” Ahlman simply shook his head and said “No!”
Suddenly all her enthusiasm left her. She made it as far as the soda fountain at the front of the store and sat down. With her last dime she ordered a cherry coke. Would she have to lose her home and put her babies out on the street? She remembered what that was like when she was a child, and she shuddered. Maybe she was a dud and didn’t have any talent and she began to weep.

A soft voice on the soda stool beside her said: “What’s the matter dear?” Dottie looked up into a kind face of a lovely grey haired woman. She poured out her story to her and ended it with “But Mr. Ahlman, who everyone respects so much, will not look at my work.”

The woman said; “Let me look at that Shoppers’ column.” She looked at the carefully marked newspaper and read it all very carefully.

Then she spun around on the stool, stood up, looked back at the prescription counter and in a commanding voice said: “Ruben Alhman come here!” The lady was Mrs. Alhman!

She told him to buy the advertising form Dottie. And he agreed. Then she asked for the names of the 4 people who had turned Dottie down. She went to the phone and called each one. She gave Dottie a hug and told her that they were waiting for her to go back and pick up their ads.

This story of patience and persistence was a turning point right there on the stools of the soda fountain. Dottie’s advertising business grew to four offices with 285 employees serving 4,000 continuous contract advertising accounts. The harvest of patience and persistence had come.
When the drug store was remodeled Dottie’s husband bought the old mahogany soda fountain with its nine stools and installed it in Dottie’s California office…

Dottie says that if ever you are in California and you wanted an encouraging story of patience and persistence, she would sit you down on her stools, pour you a cherry coke and tell you never to give up, to try another path around, to find another person who can give you a third party endorsement, and finally she would give you Bill Marriott’s secret that enabled him to build all the Marriot hotels:

“Failure? I never encountered it. All I ever met were temporary setbacks.”

As St Paul says: Suffering brings patience, and patience brings perseverance, and perseverance brings character, and character, hope. And this hope is not deceptive.”

In other words patience works in the real world. It can make all the difference! I guess that is what Benjamin Franklin meant when he said “He that can have patience can have what he will.”

Take Patience off the shelf today. You will be more than glad that you did.

And thank-you for being patient enough to listen.

Amen!