

WAITING AT THE GATE

Louder Than Words (Part 4) | Luke 15:11-24

The Waiting Game

For the past few weeks, we've been exploring some dimensions of character that the Bible calls the Fruit of the Spirit. Whether it is shaping our children or leading teams in the workplace or relating to our spouse or witnessing to our faith in the public square, our character speaks louder than words. I can't think of any area of life that would not get better if we and others brought better character to it. So this morning, I invite you to join me as we think together about one aspect of character for which life keeps us in constant training. I'm talking about Patience.

In countless ways, the process of daily living seems to require an inordinate amount of pure and simple waiting. Waiting... for that special someone who will walk into your world and long to be your companion for life. Waiting... for the kids to mature enough so as to give you more than a moment's rest. Waiting... for that job to turn up, for the clear guidance you need to make that big decision, for the parking space, for the medicine to take effect, for the traffic to clear... for the sermon to be done!

Every day brings new "opportunities" to cultivate the fruit of patience, only they don't feel like anything so cheerful as "opportunities," do they? More like occasions for boredom, frustration, or pain. And, usually, it is people upon whom our waiting depends and who make it so tough. There is the client who won't pay his bills and the inconsiderate slouch who doesn't get back to you. There are those people who try your patience with their endless talking or their unwillingness to talk; with their excessive interest in themselves or their pushy interest in you. There is hardly a party, office, highway or home where waiting on imperfect people is not a necessary but frustrating element of life. So the question becomes: How do we cultivate greater patience -- and do it quickly!

If you remember nothing else about this series of sermons, I pray you will remember this. Qualities like love, joy, peace, or patience aren't just humanistic virtues. Before they are ever those, they are attributes of the character of God. And character, as you parents well know, is caught more than taught. It grows most quickly through regular contact with Someone who already has it. There is a telling verse in the Book of Acts where the religious and political authorities of the day have arrested some of Christ's disciples and are stunned by how serene and confident these guys are under pressure. **When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus (Acts 4:13).**

The people who followed Jesus so many years ago must have sensed that proximity to Jesus could help change them into the kind of people they wanted to be. I think this is what helps explain why so many of us are here today. We want to get close to Jesus so

that his character rubs off on us. So that we can be better parents, and truly valuable friends, and more influential leaders, and just more able to live our lives in a healthy, beautiful way. And if that describes your desire... if, for example, you want to develop greater patience with imperfect people... then draw close to Jesus right now and listen to this story he tells us about the character of God. I'm going to add some imaginative detail to set this tale in a modern context, but this is the essence of what Jesus describes.

A Father's Story

Once upon a time there was a father who had two sons upon whom he lavished all the affection and resources any parent could. Each boy was given a significant place in the important work of the family estate. Perhaps like many of us who are parents, the father hoped that having all these blessings and working beside him would help his sons grow up to be people of character like HIM. But something went wrong.

One day, the younger of the two sons came to his father with a hardened look on his face and said, in effect: "Look, old man, we've got to talk. This life isn't working for me. I'm tired of being your back-up. The servants treat me with less respect than they do you. The credit cards all have your name on them. And this house is done up in a style that doesn't reflect ME."

"But, son," the father interrupts, "you know that everything I have is yours; I'm just trying to help you get ready to take it all on." "Yeah, yeah, I've heard all that before, but don't you see that I'm sick of waiting for it. I know that when you kick the bucket I'm going to get half of all this stuff, anyway, so how 'bout you give it to me NOW? I want my own place, my own bank account, my own life, and I want it now." "But son..." "Would you quit with all that 'son' stuff! I don't want to be your son! Just **give me my share of the estate**, and give it to me now!!"

Those who listened to this story when Jesus originally told it, probably held their breath at this point, just waiting for the other shoe to fall. None in first century Judaism could treat their father like that and get away with it. The entire fabric of Jewish society was held together by the ancient law of honor towards one's parents. Children were routinely disinherited for outbursts considerably tamer than this outrageous demand. You see, to ask for one's inheritance at this boy's age was tantamount to saying: "Father, I wish you were already dead. If you won't satisfy me by dying, then at least be willing to spend the rest of your days living on only half of the assets you've worked to build. My desires should come first."

By now, Jesus' original listeners were gasping. They knew that children in their culture weren't sent to their room or grounded for saying something like that. For the sake of the social order, ungrateful, impatient, impudent children like this one might be taken outside their village and stoned to death by everyone who could lift a rock. Imagine the

shock wave, then, that blew through the crowd of listeners as Jesus went on with his story.

With the curse of his son's words still ringing in the air, the father went to the safe, pulled out papers and cash, and gave his son everything for which he'd asked. **"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country, and there squandered his wealth in wild living."** The crowd probably murmured, "It serves him right, the stupid fool." Only it wouldn't have been the SON of whom they spoke. This story has been called by modern readers the Parable of the Prodigal -- or "wasteful" Son. But that's not what Jesus' audience would have called it. They would have thought that the "wasteful" one was any FATHER who could allow a child to squander the family's resources and publicly reject him like that.

What would become of a world where children were allowed to turn upon the One who had given them life, who showered them with every imaginable gift, whose character was so good that you'd be crazy not to want to stay close to it? What has become of this world? Would that father not be wiser to destroy those children and start all over again? That's the kind of father the people of Israel believed in. And, if you think about it, its also the kind of character the world often trumpets today -- the kind that won't suffer fools, that brings rapid retribution to vile offenders, that acts in righteous impatience with those who irritate?

But Jesus knew a different character, a different Father -- a Father who, when he has every justification for acting in judgment, often prefers simply to WAIT. In time, the story continues, the fortunes of the younger son turned from marvelous to meager to mud. The friends who had been so devoted when his stocks were up, put little stock in his company when the market was down. And before long he found himself lucky to get a part time-job slopping hogs. Jesus said that **he longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating; but no one gave him anything.**

And it was then that the boy **came to his senses**, and saw himself for what he had become. Jesus says that he remembered how even the hired servants in his father's house were given more than enough to eat, and there began to grow within that self-sealed heart the faintest glimmer of humble confession. There in the squalor of his empty independence... there in that place to which we come when all of our gambling with the resources we have been given has left us with little to show... there in that distant country some of us may be dwelling in now... there this lost child began to realize that he had strangely, stupidly, sinfully turned his back on the one dependable, one truly abundant, character he had ever known. And he turned his heart towards home.

"What a fool," Jesus' listeners must have thought. This time, however, they would have meant the SON. They would have wanted to say to the boy: "Do you really believe there could possibly be a place for you there? Drown yourself in an alcoholic stupor. Do away with yourself in utter despair. Please do anything but think there could ever

again be anything but wrath and judgment for someone who's forsaken his father's grace like that. ONE father might be wasteful enough to let you take his precious resources and squander them on selfish living. ONE father might allow you to do that and go unpunished, but NO father -- even if you were prepared to clean toilets for life -- could ever WELCOME you HOME." Or could he?

Jesus suggests that after many days of weary travel, the younger son finally crested an all-important hill. There, spread out at his feet, was the vast expanse of his family's estate. Everything looked much like it had when he had left, save for the great swathe of land to the south now ringed with someone else's fence. There were the workers laboring under the glow of the late afternoon sun. There was the rambling farmhouse, nestled among the golden fields. And yet there, down at the end of the dirt lane that ran up to the house, was an unfamiliar sight. There where the road met the driveway of the family home, was the figure of a lone man, silhouetted in the light of the setting sun -- a solitary watchman who stood **waiting at the gate**.

What the boy could not know -- for who on earth could believe it could be so -- was that that lone figure had stood in that place through the heat of every long day since his child had left home. And then, all of a sudden that figure broke his stolid stance. With every step his pace became faster. In a moment he was jogging, then running, then dashing wildly up the hill towards the boy -- his eyes filled with tears of joy -- as if he'd suddenly found a part of himself he feared was lost forever. "He's home!" he shouted. **Quick, bring out a robe -- the best one -- and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.** Kill the fatted calf and prepare the celebration. For he that was lost is found. My child has come home!!"

When God Wants to Make an Oak

Do you grasp that God LOVES YOU with a **patience** like that? Donald Gray Barnhouse once observed that love is the ground from which all the Fruits of the Spirit -- all the facets of God's character -- grow. Joy is love singing. Peace is love resting. And patience is love persevering. Patience is love refusing to give up hope, in the knowledge that growth takes time.

Some who have read this parable have missed that point, and tried to turn this powerful parable into a moralistic story. When we finally come to our senses and clean up our act, they say, then God receives us home. In other words, being received by God is a matter of proving ourselves repentant enough. We know from the text that the son IS sorry. He knows he's done a heinous wrong in God's eyes as well as his dad's. He's even rehearsed the speech he wants to make to his Father. But the son's character is NOT the point of the parable. As far as that father knew, when the boy came over the brow of that hill, he might not have changed at all. Given his past record, the higher probability was that he was returning to scam more money! The crowd who listened to Jesus tell this story would have bet on that probability. And yet that is precisely what makes the real message of this parable so utterly amazing.

I don't know how it is with you, but let me say that I find it difficult to be patient with people who are ignorant of their folly. I find it even harder to be patient with those who are uncaring about their impact on me. On my best days, I can sometimes find it in my heart to be patient with people who know they've made mistakes and admit a desire to mend their ways. But the kind of patient hope that Jesus ascribes to God here is something altogether transcendent. Notice the order of events. Jesus said that **while [the boy] was still a long way off** -- before the son ever says a word to give his father any rational hope that he is a different person than when he left -- **his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him, and kissed him**, welcoming him home.

When James Garfield, the twentieth President of the U.S., was principal of Hiram College in Ohio, a father approached him quite irritated by his son's slow progress through school. The father asked Garfield if the course of studies could be shortened so that his son could graduate in less time. "Why, certainly" Garfield replied. "But it all depends on what you want to make of your child. When God wants to make an oak tree he takes a hundred years. When he wants to make a squash, he requires only two months. Tell me, sir, just which fruit did you have in mind?"

The Father Jesus shows us does not grow impatient when our course in discipleship takes time. He loves us when we are still a long way off: when we are still more stuck on acquiring luxuries than on serving the poor; when we are still more concerned with impressing others than pleasing him; when we are still more interested in sports than in worship, in the passing news than the timeless scriptures, in being right than being righteous. God loves us patiently. He doesn't quit on us when we are little more than moral squash. He doesn't send a slave to tell us the things we must change before we will be worthy of his love. He waits at the gate patiently himself, and then comes running to welcome us home. Having met that Father today, tell me friends, might the messy people in our life this week -- meet a little more patience in you and me?

Let us pray...

Lord, we give you thanks for the inordinate patience with which you meet everything about us. Help us never to live as if that forbearance were ours by right, instead of the amazing grace it truly is. Then send us forth to love others with that same enduring hope. For we pray these things in the name of Jesus who came to seek and to save the lost. Amen.