First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

September 11, 2022

Patience

1 Timothy 1:12-17

**12**I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he considered me faithful and appointed me to his service, **13**even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, **14**and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. **15**The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance: that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. **16**But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, **Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience** as an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. **17**To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever, Amen.

So, I have a confession folks. Patience is not one of the virtues I possess in any large quantity. Oh, I have *some* patience, to be sure. But the amount of patience I have, is like comparing an eye dropper full of water to the amount of water in the entire ocean. To put it bluntly, your pastor is not a patient man. I want what I want, when I want it and my stink eye is legendary among my family and friends, when things don’t go my way. I’m not patient when I have to wait in any sort of line, be it at the grocery store, or the gas station or the bank. I’m not patient when I have to wait at traffic lights and no one is coming, and I’m most definitely not patient with anyone who drive below the speed limit in the left lane. Now and then, when I find myself in one of these situations, words not suitable for the pulpit will escape my lips. (I wasn’t referred to as the cussing pastor in my last call for nothing, after all.) Now, if hearing about my lack of patience, and the fact that I know how to cuss with the best of them, shatters any illusions you may have about my perfection, well I’ll just have to live with that and, since I’ve recently renewed my covenant to be your pastor for another year, so will you!

Our reading today is a letter from the apostle Paul to his disciple Timothy. Now, we’re not quite sure if Paul is the actual author here, and there’s actually a fair amount of debate amongst Biblical scholars on this point, but for our purposes today, we’re going to assume that this letter was indeed written by Paul, as the authorship is less important than the message being conveyed.

In this letter, Paul is expressing gratitude for the mercy that God has shown him which seems only right, given his history. We had a very interesting discussion about that history, at the Tuesday night Bible Study, and the general consensus was that before Paul’s encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, Saul of Tarsus, as he was known then, was not at all a nice man.

This is, after all, the same man who ordered the death of Stephen and even held the cloaks of those who carried out that order. This is, after all, the same man who carried out persecution of the early church because of the overwhelming zeal that he had for his Jewish faith. This is, after all, a man who simply could not bring himself to believe that the prophecies of the coming Messiah; which had been proclaimed by so many of the ancient prophets, for so many years, had actually been fulfilled.

Paul’s zealousness stemmed from the fact that he was a Pharisees. He came from a family with a long and storied tradition of being staunchly observant, and this new movement; these People of the Way (as early followers of Christ were called), deeply offended Paul. The People of the Way were heretics and violators of the law and he was not going to sit by and watch as these people rejected everything, he held dear. To make matters worse, for him (and I imagine what must have really pushed him over the edge), was the fact that these violators of the law were wining people over to their point of view! It must have been, in Pauls’ way of thinking, an existential threat that had to be stamped out as quickly as possible. And because he was a Pharisees, charged with ensuring that the law was upheld and the rules followed, the percussion of Jesus’ followers was, in his mind, a righteous and just cause. In Philippians 3:5-6, we read the following words Paul himself uses to describe the person he was when he undertook this work: Paul writes that he was: ***5****circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee;* ***6****as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.*

So, here’s a guywho knew the law as well, if not better, than just about anyone; someone who relished his license to persecute those who didn’t agree with him, and was absolutely convinced that he would be held blameless before God for *any* of his actions, because he was following God’s law. This description of Saul of Tarsus can describe any number of people in the modern-day church and is, unfortunately, frighteningly familiar to many Christians, and non-Christians alike, in our twenty-first century world.

It took an encounter with the risen Christ, himself, to change things. It’s as if God said, “OK, what’s it gonna take to get this guy on the right path?” “Let’s try making him blind and see if that does the trick.”

Well, it did do the trick and after Paul’s sight was restored, Paul was immediately baptized and began his mission of spreading the Good News, far and wide.

I’ll point out here, that Paul was indeed the recipient of not only God’s mercy, but God’s patience, as well. Now, an argument could be made questioning just how merciful God was, considering all of the trials and tribulations Paul would have to endure, following his encounter with Jesus. But think about this, God could have certainly intervened much earlier in the narrative, and God could have done much worse than simply blinding Paul. God could have ended Paul’s life in the blink of an eye.

Instead, as we read in verse 16, Paul says that … I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience as an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.

If God showed mercy and patience to a man who ordered the murder of another human being, if God showed mercy and patience to a man who’s only mission in life was the persecution of the righteous, don’t you think it’s possible that we are eligible to be recipients of that same mercy and patience? Of course, we are.

Fast forward two thousand years, and the question becomes what do we do with all of the mercy and patience God shows us? Do we continue to expect God to be merciful and patient with us while at the same time failing to exhibit even a sliver of mercy and patience to others? This is, unfortunately, exactly how many Christians think it works. Hoarding God’s mercy and expecting God to only show God’s mercy and patience to a select group of people, is something that runs rampant in the church.

Too many believers have fallen into the trap of thinking that the only way to be a true follower of Christ, is to belong to what I call the “Church of the Law.” The church of the law is all about the rules. Don’t do this, can’t do that. You can only do this a certain way, or it doesn’t count. Why? Because the rules say so. Break any of the rules and you won’t receive God’s mercy or God’s patience.

There is, however, an alternative to the church of law. It’s what I refer to as the “Church of Love.” The church of love doesn’t toss the rule book out, but places mercy, patience and the love of our fellow human beings, above rules contained in a book. The church of love seeks flexibility in the rules in order to be emissaries of God’s grace.

A pastor friend of mine was approached by a first-time visitor to his church, not too long ago. The gentleman, who my friend had never met, wanted to have his grandchildren baptized. He had been to several churches in the neighborhood, and each time his request had been turned down. The reasons varied, but in essence, the rejection of this gentleman’s request came down to the fact that neither he, nor his grandchildren were members of a particular church.

My friend called me to ask my advice and, I’m sorry to report, the first thing that I did was to quote the rules. “They have to be members of your church!” “You can’t baptize someone you’re never going to see again, it’s against the Book of Order!” My friend listened patiently while I pastor-splaind why he couldn’t honor this request. After I was done spouting the rules, he quietly said to me, “That’s what the church says, but that’s not what God says.” That brought me up short, as you might imagine.

My friend went ahead with the baptism and in doing so, I believe he demonstrated the love, mercy and utmost patience that we read about in verse 16.

Are we modern day Pharisees’, concerned only with our membership in the Church of the Law? Are we impatient with those who don’t follow the rules to the letter? Do we persecute those who see things differently than we do?

Or are we willing to be members of the Church of Love, where we follow the rules as long as they cause no harm? Are we willing to bend, or even break, rules that limit someone’s access to the Kingdom of God? Are we able to exhibit the utmost patience when dealing with people who don’t fit our idea of what we a follower of Jesus Christ should look like?

We’ve all had Road to Damascus moments, where we’ve encountered the risen Christ, and our lives are changed forever. Are we who able to take our changed life and use it to show God’s love, mercy and patience to others? Are we members of the Church of Law or the Church of Love? We have to make that choice for ourselves, no one can make it for us.

I believe that mercy and patience walk hand in hand and are inextricably bound together. We can’t have one with the other, and combined, mercy and patience create grace. And without grace, where would any of us be?

The lessons we can learn from Paul’s letter shouldn’t stop at simply being grateful for God’s mercy and patience. It shouldn’t stop at simply being recipients of God’s grace. Those lessons should also serve as a call to action. A call to turn and share the same mercy God showed Paul, the same mercy and patience that God shows us each and every day with everyone, no exceptions. Because, when it comes down to it, aren’t we all in the grace business?

AMEN