

on patience

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scripture reading: James 5:7-11
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*Patience is the most difficult
and the only thing worthwhile to learn.
All of nature, all of growth, every kind of
freedom,
all flourishing and everything beautiful in
the world rests on patience,
requires time, requires silence, requires
trust.*

-Herman Hesse

growing frustrations

As I prepared on the theme of patience, I must confess, that I became very impatient with myself and easily irritated. Maybe the topic is too close to home. Or it might have been the challenge of avoiding a moralistic approach. For we all know that we need to be more patient. And we all want to learn it, but if possible now, now.

Over the last two Sundays I spoke to you about the forbidden and forgotten pleasures of kindness

and of longing. Patience can also be seen as one of those forbidden and forgotten pleasures. At least this is how Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels saw patience: It should be forbidden and be quickly forgotten, especially the kind of patience preached by Christianity at that time. According to Klaus Berger in his book *Spiritualität 1839/41* they both studied Protestant theology at the University of Bonn (mainly with Bruno Bauer). When considering Paul's letter to the Romans 8:22 and the topic of creation's groaning and sighing they already developed their criticism of religion. For while they acknowledged that Christianity did help to make suffering visible, they also thought that it only offered a cheap, otherworldly comfort (Karl Marx, *Frühschriften*, 1953, 207.224). Instead the time has come for people to take things into their own hands. Christianity was seen to be

nothing but "the opium of the people." Its call for patience was a way of bowing down to the status quo and the powerful. But on the other hand today's capitalism reveals its own impatience with patience. The idea of unlimited progress does not hold patience in high regards. And the constant technological progress is both a blessing and a curse. We begin to realize that endless progress is not sustainable. And those technologies that are meant to help us become more efficient and save time turn out to make our lives even busier and more stressful. The need for constant availability and presence tends to make us less patient with ourselves and others. The time has come again to give patience its important place in our moral cosmos.

In an article on "The power of patience" (in Psychology today) the psychiatrist Judith Orloff makes a strong argument for patience as a lifelong spiritual practice and a way to find emotional freedom. In view of the enormous developments in our digital age she detects an emotional Zeitgeist with a low tolerance for frustration. It plays itself out in the way we relate to others and ourselves. At the same time she notices how every world religion understands patience as a way of knowing God and as having the power to draw us inward towards a greater wisdom. And while patience has received a lot of bad press, accused of turning us into doormats and weaklings, she attempts to re-awaken the possibilities that come with re-owning patience as a pathway to new freedom. A freedom from feeling irritable and victimized, from thinking we have to force a certain outcome. We are to harness the power of patience which cannot be equaled with passivity or resignation. We should rather think of patience as a form of compassion and a re-tuning to intuition. Patience becomes the remedy for our many frustrations. She recommends regular practices of patience: Choose the mother of all slow-moving lines to wait and then: Take a deep breath, consider it as refreshing pause, as an occasion to speak to others in line, to daydream and begin to notice the stress release. So, your best training ground might very well be a visit to home affairs. Sometimes it also helps to find another word or phrase for patience in order to reignite our interest and curiosity, to discover new aspects of

patience we have not considered before. My favorite phrase to replace the word patience has become "big heart." To be patient is to have and show a big heart. It connects well with Orloff's attempt to understand patience as an expression of compassion and intuition.

„slow to anger“

The biblical text of this morning makes a strong argument for patience, which is mentioned six times in those 4 verses. Three dimensions of patience are highlighted: Patience in relation to nature; patience in relation to other people; patience in relation to suffering. It is an invitation to slow down and reflect on the gift of patience, to move from a place of frustration and alienation to a place of compassion and trust. It should be noted that when the writer uses patience for the first four times he uses a Greek word that literally means „slow to anger.“ In the Hebrew Scriptures it is often used as a description of God, who when faced with Israel's failings to remain faithful to God, proves to be slow to anger and compassion. (see Exodus 34). It is only in relation to Job's suffering that the writer of the letter of James changes the Greek word for patience to one which rather emphasizes perseverance. Was he thinking that it would have been inappropriate to describe Job as „slow to anger“ in relation to God? After all we know how frustrated and angry he became with his God himself, early on cursing even the day of his own birth. But Job did show perseverance, in the way he insisted on his innocence when

challenged by his theologically minded friends.

waiting patiently

The experience of being a farmer represents the first perspective. Think of all the parables of Jesus that also center around the practice of sowing and planting, and the wisdom he gleans from it to illustrate the mystery of God's kingdom. And very often it is about the gift of patience as an expression of trust in God. The parable of the wheat and weed warns us not to be too quick to pull out the weed, for we might pull out also some of the healthy wheat. A warning to all those who are quick to judge and uproot. Let God be the judge. The parable of the seed that mysteriously grows while we are asleep invites us to trust the natural process of growth and that with God the really important things might happen at night, while we are asleep. In other words, it is not all up to us. There is a synergy between our actions and God's contribution. There is only so much we can do. Then we need to let go, sleep, and trust. And the parable of the mustard seed calls us to be patient and trusting when it comes to small beginnings. Especially when there are not immediate results, something visible and concrete. It is about trusting the subversive qualities of the mustard seed, a weed with take over qualities. Wait and see what happens. Don't rush it. A good example for the experience of Christ's disciples who must have felt at times: How can this ever bring about the change we are hoping for.

James talks about the autumn rains that after three months of no rain at all would come down and soften the ground, prepare for the sowing of seeds. And then the spring rains that would continue to bless the earth with the life-giving water. Now, after this long draught in the Western Cape we know what it means to wait for rain and the frustration and despair that comes with waiting and waiting. I never thought that I would harvest precious water with such delight and gratitude. Just as a farmer we are taught that one cannot hurry growth. There is only so much we can do. Then we have to wait and trust for the gift of growth. A Chinese fairy tale talks about a farmer who became impatient. He kept looking out for the plants to finally emerge from the soil and show themselves. When he spotted the small ears of wheat he became impatient and tried to help them grow faster. Day by day he would pull at them a little bit. After 10 days, when he returned to the field, all the ears of wheat were lying on the ground, completely dried up. His impatient pulling led to them being uprooted.

This week we celebrated Nelson Mandela's 100th birthday. Here is a picture taken 1977 and titled "a prisoner working in the garden". It was his 13th year of imprisonment. A group of reporters were allowed to Robben Island to take pictures and show the world how humane the

conditions on Robben Island were. Propaganda. And Mandela is clearly not very impressed. But we now know how important his own small vegetable patch in the open yard at the top of the prison became to him. He loved gardening and was so proud of his garden. He grew brinjals, tomatoes, onions, and spinach. On Fridays the wardens would make a special stew with those veggies and some meat for him. And he would share it with them. Gardening filled Madiba with pride and dignity. And it must have taught him patience.

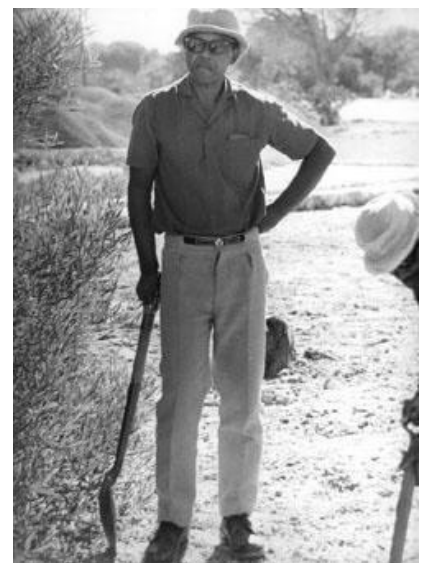
I have very fond memories of our own vegetable garden at Pollsmoor prison which Joy Wanless and the RUC prison team started there. And I remember the pride and joy with which our students would hand over Joy a big black bag with the harvest to be delivered to one of the local shelters in Cape Town. The frustration the students had to deal with was less about the slow growth of the garden, but rather the fact that some wardens seemed to keep helping themselves with the fresh produce. They wanted to build a fence within the prison court yard to protect their garden.

protecting our humaneness

The writer of the letter of James also calls us to be patient in our dealings with each other, to be slow to anger, and to not allow our own frustrations of time

pressure and efficiency to affect our interactions with others.

An experiment conducted at the university of Princeton reveals the close connection between a lack of patience and inhumaneness. The plot followed the story of the Good Samaritan. Three groups of students were asked to take important documents to an office on campus. 15 students all together divided into three groups of five. The first group was given 15 minutes, the second group was given 45 minutes and the third group three hours. Three actors were tasked to create an emergency scene along the way. The first actor held his head and pretended to be in great pain.



A little bit further down the road the second actor lay on the stairs to a building, with his face turned to the ground as if he is unconscious. The third actors, a little bit further down the pathway, appeared to have suffered a fit. How did the three groups respond not knowing that all those three scenes were staged? None of the students from the first group, which was only given five minutes stopped.

Only two of the students from the second group, which was given 45 minutes, stopped. All five of the students from the third group, which was given three hours, stopped and tried to help those in need. It shows how close the connection is between inhumanity and being pressed by time. In other words, kindness and compassion are always connected to our experience of time, of having time, of not being pressured.

being patient with what is unresolved

In a third step the writer of the letter of James considers patience in the face of suffering. He refers to the prophets who suffered in their resistance to injustice and had to learn patience, to be slow to anger towards those in power, and yet at the same time to remain insistent and outspoken about God's vision of justice and equality. The writer then turns to Job. We have to admire Job's perseverance to not simply accept what happens to him as some kind of fate, but to insist on his innocence and to seek God's face and challenge him. He is not slow to anger, but still shows patience in the sense of resisting to withdraw into resignation and silent submission. And he is rewarded in the way that God speaks to him out of the storm. God's speech does not answer all of Job's questions and leaves much unresolved. But we encounter a God who encourages Job to consider the paradoxes and contradictions of this world and invites Job to join

him in responding to the powers of chaos and confusion. Job's innocence is affirmed and he is called to fully own his role as a co-creator. He rises from the ashes.

In his *Letters to a young poet* Rainer Maria Rilke reflects on the challenge of living with unresolved questions taking us back to the beginning and the use of farming and nature imagery to capture the gift of being patient with patience:

In this there is no measuring with time, a year doesn't matter, and ten years are nothing. Being an artist means: not numbering and counting, but ripening like a tree, which doesn't force its sap, and stands confidently in the storms of spring, not afraid that afterward summer may not come. It does come. But it comes only to those who are patient, who are there as if eternity lay before them, so unconcernedly silent and vast. I learn it every day of my life, learn it with pain I am grateful for: patience is everything!

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.