

Sermon for Zion, September 27, 2020

Hymns: 814 – Morning Has Broken; 662 - Those who wait on the Lord;
751 - Forgive Our Sins As We Forgive

Scripture: Hebrews 6:7-12; Colossians 3:12-14

Sermon Title: The Sixteen Signs Pt. 3 – Patience and Tolerance: Signs of the Soul

Hebrews 6:10-12 (NIV)

God is not unjust. He will not forget how hard you have worked for him and how you have shown your love to him by caring for other believers, as you still do. Our great desire is that you will keep on loving others as long as life lasts, in order to make certain that what you hope for will come true. Then you will not become spiritually dull and indifferent. Instead, you will follow the example of those who are going to inherit God's promises because of their faith and patient endurance.

Colossians 3:12-14 (GNT)

You are the people of God; he loved you and chose you for his own. So then, you must clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

Be tolerant with one another and forgive one another whenever any of you has a complaint against someone else. You must forgive one another just as the Lord has forgiven you. And to all these qualities add love, which binds all things together in perfect unity.

Here we are in the second of our four-part series on “The Sixteen Signs” – the sixteen indications Paul lays out in his letter to the Colossians of the Spirit of God at work in our lives and in our church. Here they are again:

Compassion; Kindness; Humility; Meekness;
Patience; Tolerance; Forgiveness; Love;
Peacefulness; Thankfulness; Devotion; Co-operation
Gratitude; Joy; Activity; Outreach

As we heard, “A life that is giving evidence of all these things is a life in which the Spirit of God is busy at work. A church that is giving evidence of all these things is a church in which the Spirit of God is busy at work. These are the signs that can transform our lives and our church with a dynamic force that nothing in all the world could stop.”

Last week we looked at the first four: Compassion; Kindness; Humility; and Meekness. These four words express qualities of a heart that is actively concerned with the well-being of others; qualities of a life devoted to serving others in such a way as to build them up, cheer them on, encourage them, be present with them, and find our own needs met as we give first consideration to the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ, and the needs of our world. Compassion, Kindness, Humility, and Meekness are four primary signs of a heart, and a church, filled with the Spirit of God.

Today we are going to add to our list four more signs, signs which I call “Signs of the Soul” – signs that our soul is in the right place with God, and in which the Spirit of God has shone its healing light. These are signs that have to do with the starting place for a life which benefits others, and blesses us as well. The four signs are Patience, Tolerance, Forgiveness, and Love. Let me read you this passage in “The Passion Translation”, which I think enables us to hear Paul’s words in a new way (Colossians 3:12-14):

Be merciful as you endeavor to understand others, and be compassionate, showing kindness toward all. Be gentle and humble, unoffendable in your patience with others.

Tolerate the weaknesses of those in the family of faith, forgiving one another in the same way you have been graciously forgiven by Jesus Christ. If you find fault with someone, release this same gift of forgiveness to them. For love is supreme and must flow through each of these virtues. Love becomes the mark of true maturity.

Today, we are going to start with Patience, and I’ll also tell you right up front, so as not to test your patience with an overly long sermon, that I am only going to be dealing with the first two, patience and tolerance, and save love and forgiveness for next week. So be patient and tolerant with me, and I’ll get you out on time. You can love and forgive me next week.

OK, then. How many of you would describe yourself as a patient person? Raise your hand if you are. How many of you who raised your hand heard the person beside you snort, or saw them roll their eyes? I think lots of us consider ourselves to be more patient than we really are, just like most of us consider ourselves to be better drivers than we really are. Or more patient drivers than we really are.

Patience, as we know, is a virtue, but what is it exactly? There are three definitions I have come across which I think are quite good. The first defines patience as a capacity for waiting – “the ability to endure waiting or delay, without becoming annoyed or upset.” The second is related to it: “a good-natured tolerance of incompetence or provocation.” And the third is, “to persevere calmly when faced with difficulties.” To keep on pressing on. To endure. When the Bible talks about patience, it often throws the word “endure” right in there, too.

In short, then, patience is a three-sided diamond: patience within ourselves (the ability to not get quickly annoyed or upset); patience with others (putting up with incompetence or provocation) and patience with our situation (endurance).

Let me admit to you, I’m not batting the trifecta, here. I’m not patient with myself. That’s why I gave up golf, way back in my teens. I would make, as most golfers do, one good shot followed by two bad shots. The good feeling derived from the good shot was always

outweighed by the burning frustration of the bad shot. One big slice or hook, and I was ready to wrap my club around a tree, or around the head of whomever I was playing with. I couldn't take it. And then one day, I was very near the end of 18 holes, and I had an excellent chance of shooting just one over par, and on the seventeenth, I triple-bogeyed. Kept hitting that stupid windmill blade. That's it for me and golf.

My lack of personal patience translates into my ministry as well. I want things I do to work perfectly, to sound perfect. I want my sermons to be theologically and grammatically perfect. I want to look perfect – and with that, you can see right away where I am going to run into trouble. And the trouble is, when I am impatient with myself, I tend to be less patient with others too.

This is where this definition of patience as “putting up with incompetence or provocation” is really great. Let's face it: lots of people drive us crazy. Lots of other folks do things or say things or act in a way we find annoying. Lots of people have taste in music or style we don't share, or different speeds at which they go about things, or different levels of commitment than us. And our reaction is to lose patience, to criticise them, to think less of them, to avoid them, to write them off. And it could be that someone who really annoys you is sitting right in this building today. Or standing behind the pulpit.

Oh, come on, admit it. Even though we are one church family, the brothers and the sisters of Jesus Christ, we don't always agree or get along or think the same way. Music is a good example. Some of you enjoy worship choruses and guitars and such. Others of you just endure it. Some of you enjoy a good old hymn. Others can't wait for it to end. In order to get along, in order to co-exist in the same building, we need to be patient with one another. We need to put up with one another. We need to wait for our turn. We need to do more than that – we need to be able to get beyond those things which separate us, and focus on the commonality we have in being imperfect sinners, loved and forgiven by a perfect God. All of us. Every one.

Remember, when someone is driving you around the bend, check to see if you're actually the one at the wheel. Because each of us are annoying, in our own special little way. I know I am, and if you don't believe me, there's someone I can introduce you to who has 38 years of experience in being annoyed by me. But she's patient, thank God, and stays married to me nonetheless.

Why should we be patient with one another? Why not just write that annoying person off? Well, here's a big reason: God has been, is being, and will continue to be patient with us. And if God wasn't, we wouldn't have a hope in Hell. We constantly need to recognise the fact that we are all different, all imperfect, all in constant need of forgiveness, and extend to one another – and especially to me! – even just 1-100th of the patience God shows to us, each and every moment of each and every day. It is my awareness of how patient God is with oh-so-

imperfect me that gives me the patience to deal with oh-so-imperfect others. You know who you are!

You want some good examples of patience? Check out Jesus' interactions with the disciples. See how often they ever get it right – not very. But Jesus sticks with them all – even Peter, who sometimes seems to wear Jesus' patience very thin indeed. Jesus even maintains patience with – surprisingly - Judas. And - surprisingly – even with me.

I'm not finished with patience – there's one more vital aspect to cover – but I'm going to jump right ahead to “tolerance”, the second quality on today's list because it is so closely aligned with this point. Tolerance quite literally means the amount of looseness in the way something fits. Something built with tight tolerance means there's no wiggle room whatsoever; something built allowing for greater tolerance allows quite a bit of flexibility. When we're intolerant, we're not allowing another person any room to be different than us whatsoever. If they're not like us, if they don't think just like us and act just like us and share our way of thinking, we don't want them around, and we certainly don't want to be around them. When we are tolerant, we're somewhat more flexible – we can deal with people dissimilar to us and still extend to them the patience, kindness and courtesies we can reasonably expect from others.

Jesus was working within a society very short on tolerance. The Pharisees about whom we so often read were intolerant to the extreme – they wouldn't share food, personal space, physical proximity, or even eye contact with people different than they. And it drove them crazy when Jesus went out of his way to express love, care and concern for those hated by the Pharisees – sinners, for instance, or tax collectors, or Romans, or foreigners, or Samaritans, or – well, just about anyone other than another Pharisee. Jesus both exemplified and encouraged tolerance of others from differing backgrounds, differing beliefs. But he never compromised his message – that all of us are in need of the forgiveness and love of God.

And that's an important aspect of tolerance that is often misunderstood. It is this: Tolerance doesn't mean abandoning your belief system. This is important, and I'm going to say it again: Tolerance doesn't mean abandoning your belief system or compromising your core beliefs. It means abandoning your prejudices, so that you can express your faith in loving and compassionate ways to all. Our tolerance of people different than us earns us the right to share our faith with them, and so bring them the Good News of Jesus Christ. Again, if you take anything home with you today, take this: Tolerance doesn't mean abandoning your belief system or compromising your core beliefs. It means abandoning your prejudices.

Ok, back to patience. The final kind of patience is the kind that the New Testament really runs with: perseverance in the face of difficulty. And difficult is what it was to be a Christian, back when Paul wrote these words.

In Paul's day, to be a Christian meant running completely against the grain of your family's expectation, your faith's tradition, and your society's direction. To be a Christian meant to be something new, and that new thing was regarded as a deviation, and often a threat, to the old. In terms of your family, it often meant being misunderstood, shoved aside, or even cut off altogether. In terms of your faith, it meant rejecting the tradition of hundreds, even thousands of years, and claiming that the truth is to be found elsewhere. In terms of your society, it meant thinking differently than the way others think, acting differently, expressing different allegiances, different priorities, and of course, a different God. And so Christians were often isolated, often persecuted, often excluded from the family, faith and society in which they had grown.

Which often meant being out of a job, out of food, out of a place to live – and maybe even out of time, as the authorities turned dangerously, even fatally, hostile.

We can be thankful that things are not that way anymore today. Not here anyway. Yet. So why do we need patient endurance? Well, for almost the opposite reason altogether: We need patience to stick to the task not in the face of persecution, but in the face of apathy.

Unlike in Paul's day, we don't see ourselves in a life-or-death struggle, here. We don't seem to regard what goes on in church – or what doesn't go on – as of much vital importance. If something needs doing, hopefully someone will do it, but if they don't, and it doesn't get done, that's fine too. Our society could hardly care less about what goes on in churches, unless there's one of two things involved to make it interesting: sex or a lawsuit. We seem to be in a church climate in North America in which urgency is absent. We have replaced patience – a lack of panic in the face of a difficult situation or task – with apathy – a lack of concern as to whether the situation is improved, or the task accomplished.

I'm going to take you back for a moment to last week's sermon on compassion and kindness. Compassion and kindness are real only when they are active. Compassion and kindness that are passive, that don't really do anything or interact with another person, are just, at best, a vaguely benign sentiment. Unless we put them to use interacting with another person – ACTS of compassion, ACTS of kindness – they are utterly useless.

The same is true of patience. How can patience be active? Well, recall that when the New Testament talks about patience, it most often links it up with "endurance."

(Luke 8:15) ...These are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance.

(Hebrews 6:10-12) God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We

do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patient endurance inherit what has been promised.

Patience, you see, is linked up with endurance, with carrying on in a difficult task, with diligence to the very end. Patient endurance can be best defined as “not giving up.” And “not giving up” is a pretty good definition for “patience,” isn’t it? Sticking with a task that needs doing, that needs finishing, no matter how it might be making you crazy. Or no matter how annoying you may be finding the people with whom you are working. This is patience at its best – sticking with it, not giving up, doing what needs doing, sometimes over and again, until it is done, and done right. Patience as an active, not a passive thing. Because inactive patience can often best be called “giving up.”

A patient soul, then, in which the Spirit is active, is a soul able to wait for something without getting annoyed or upset; is able to put up with the imperfections of others – like me, like you - even as God puts up with us; is tolerantly able to rise above the differences between us in culture, preference and style, and not be ruled by prejudice; and is able to continue to dedicate itself actively to the task at hand, not giving up despite the “Who Cares?” attitude pervading our Western world.

When we are able to be patient within our families, our workplaces, our community, then we will be better parents, children, spouses – better coworkers, neighbours, friends – better able to point people to God, who has made the difference in our lives by being patient with us. And when we are able to be patient within our churches, one with another, working together despite our differences, weathering the ups and downs of life together, sticking to the tasks that need doing, then will we be a church in which the Spirit of God is busy at work, our patience and tolerance another sign that can transform our lives and our church with a dynamic force that nothing in all the world could stop.

Thanks be to God for sticking with us, beside us, surrounding us with his love; for never giving up on us, and for never letting us go. Amen.