

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“Our Partnership with God”

How is your level of patience these days? If someone asked me that question I think I would say, “Well, it depends.” It depends on the circumstance. It depends on who or what requires patience. It’s the season of Lent, so a little confession is good for the soul. I confess that I’ve discovered over the years I’m not a very patient driver, and I’ve admitted this publicly before. I mutter things to myself when someone cuts me off or when I’m stuck behind someone going too slow or when the passing lane, that is supposed to be used for passing, is used by some drivers to just cruise along, oblivious to the line of traffic backed up behind them. Nope! My patience wears thin when I’m on the road. I’d like to think I’m more patient with those I love. Since I’m being confessional, let me say I’m sure I could be and probably should be more patient with those closest to me, so I do my best to check my reaction and remember that nobody is perfect and, after all, I do hope my loved ones are patient with me. So, when it comes to the people I’m around most often, my colleagues, friends, my family, and my spouse, I do my best to stock up on my patience. Being patient with others goes a long way in making life more pleasant and more fulfilling. What about you? How patient are you, and what about your patience with God? Let’s think about that. How much patience do we have in our relationships with God? We ask for things. We pray for God to act in our lives and in our world. One of the reasons we are living this life of faith is because we recognize we have needs that we can not fulfill on our own. If we didn’t need God maybe we would not choose to live a life with God. But the fact is we’re together in our worship today because we turn to God and expect God to make a difference in us and in our world. This is a relationship we’re talking about: the creator and the created; the one who gives life and those who receive life. So, we are in relationship with God and like any relationship there are expectations and the meeting of needs that make the relationship work. For this reason, patience is an important component in the way we relate to God. How is that going for us?

In my ministry, I’ve walked alongside those who find themselves facing a spiritual crisis. It’s not unusual for those moments of crisis to connect to disappointment with God. When we experience this kind of spiritual struggle we don’t usually think about it in terms of our diminishing patience with God but it’s there. “I don’t understand,” we might say. “I asked God to do something but God must not be listening,” or, “There’s no use praying anymore. It doesn’t do any good.” Sometimes our faith just wears down. Sometimes we question if staying connected to God really matters. So, when I ask how it’s going with your patience toward God it is to acknowledge that some of us may feel our faith growing thin from time to time. What are we supposed to do?

The closing words of Psalm 27 read like this, “Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!” (Ps 27:14) Waiting for God is important in our relationship with God. The Old Testament story we’ve heard today about Abram and his wife, Sarai, is all about waiting on God. In keeping with our theme, Abram had a significant relationship with God. That relationship was not all smooth and cozy. Earlier in Abram’s story, God calls him to establish his home in the territory that will be the land for God’s people. God tells Abram that his life will be blessed and more than this, that blessing will extend to the peoples of the earth. This all sounds great except Abram knows that for that to take place he will need children and grandchildren, and in his advancing years that has not happened. Abram waits and no child is born. Along the way, God reinforces the promise. “Abram, you’ll be blessed. Your generations will be more than the stars you count in the heavens.” Abram waits, and he waits some more, and the only thing that happens is he and Sarai keep getting older and older. When he reaches the age of 99, Abram is resigned to the fact that God’s words of promise ring hollow and the blessing will never happen. And this is when God speaks again, affirming God’s plan one more time. But this time, God’s message goes deeper. This time, God attaches the promise to the relationship. God’s blessing will come through Abram’s partnership with God. It is worth hearing this part of the scripture passage again. God says to the old man, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” (Gen. 17: 1-2) This is subtle but it is significant. Abram will be blessed by God and the blessing will flow from a relationship of covenant. We’re never too old or never too lost to be beyond the place where God wants to be in partnership with us. God will be faithful but Abram is called to be faithful, too. Here’s another way to think about it. God will act in Abram’s life, this is certain, but that doesn’t mean Abram just waits around for God to make it happen. God’s action flows from the relationship. Abram’s blessing flows from that relationship, too. By way of the covenant, God and Abram make a commitment to be in partnership with God’s purpose in the world. What does this mean for us? Waiting on the Lord isn’t just a matter of hanging around until God finally gets it all together. Waiting on the Lord is not just passively sitting on the sidelines and hoping a blessing will come someday. Waiting on God is deepening our readiness to be in faithful partnership with God when the blessing starts to flow.

All of this comes home for Abram when God changes his name. You are now “Abraham,” says God, which in Hebrew means “father of many.” Don’t you see? From this point forward, Abraham’s identity is a testimony to his faithful partnership with God. In the faith we live we all have our personal names, Larry, Katya, Jim, Mary, and so on. In the faith, we are also given a name that identifies the relationship we have with Christ. We are called Christian. This means we say “yes” to living lives that are faithful to the way of Christ. We don’t just wait for Jesus to do it all. Being Christian doesn’t mean we can relax because Jesus takes care of everything. We are called Christian because we make a commitment to be partners with Jesus in extending his love into the world.

Through Lent we are led to the cross. That’s where Jesus lays it all down for us. But we are called to pick up our cross and follow him. This is where we lay it down for him. Fellow Christians, it’s time to be who we are called to be, those who live in commitment and covenant with the Lord. Amen.