Sunday, August 22, 1982
PATIENCE

If we are Christians, then supposedly there are some qualities in our living, some virtues, some changes in behavior which are the result of our faith. Often, we hear people ask — "What difference does my faith make anyway?" Or how is my Christian faith related to my routine living, to my job as a garage mechanic, or bookkeeper, or secretary, or manager, or salesman, or lawyer, or teacher, or parent?

There are some very down to earth ways in which our faith is related to everything we do and to all people we meet. The Bible says — "You shall know them by their fruits."

So, this morning we want to look at one of these virtues, one of the fruits of our faith — PATIENCE. In the New Testament, almost always where there is a listing of Christian behavior patterns, of the fruits of our faith, "patience" is included. Our scripture lessons for this morning illustrate this. Listen again, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, PATIENCE, kindness, goodness and faithfulness." "I, therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with PATIENCE, forbearing one another in love." "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness and PATIENCE."

Patience, a Christian behavior pattern! Henry Ward Beecher once said, "There is no such thing as preaching patience into people, unless the sermon be so long that they have to practice it while they listen." I suppose some Christians have learned patience that way, but that is not my intention this morning.

1. First, though, exactly what do we mean by Patience? The virtue of patience can be found in dealing with the little irritations of life as well as the big. There is the virtue of patience with things like stubborn keys and bathtub rings, and slamming doors, things like dead batteries and traffic jams. And there is the patience in dealing with the weaknesses of members of our families, the forgetfulness of the husband, or his putting off fixing the broken toy or some other chore. There is the patience involved in dealing with others where we work — employees, employers, and customers.

Patience includes learning to live each moment for that moment, each hour, each day, whereas impatience is that attitude which is always trying to hurry time along — when we say, "I can hardly wait until tomorrow, or a week from now, or a year." We have to wait — it is in the nature of our existence and Christian patience is that quality which helps us to live in the present. Patience is a virtue most obvious when absent; yet often not appreciated when present.

There is the patience involved in being parents; allowing our children to grow and mature at their own pace; putting up with the many things that go along with childhood. Some parents are so impatient that they can hardly wait for their children to grow up and in this extreme anticipation miss many of the joys of the children in each of their stages of growing up.

There is also the Christian patience which is required in many of the crises of life. Illness comes along and we hopefully learn to patiently wait for healing to occur_. Healing often takes its own time. Patience is involved as we are confined to a hospital bed for two weeks, or four

weeks or longer while a broken bone heals, or a damaged heart valve heals. It's easy to become impatient with the healing process.

Those who care for the sick, and particularly the family and relatives of those who are ill, also learn the meaning of patience as they put up with constant complaints and endless routine. Here is where we learn the meaning of the Biblical statement that "love is patient and kind."

Yet, lest we misunderstand the meaning of patience, it is more than mere temperament; it is more than just an automatic response to irritation. It is more than just "being able to put up with something." It is not quite as simple as it sometimes seems.

When is one to be patient, and when does patience move silently across the sometimes-narrow line between a virtue and a weakness? A neighbor seems to delight in sending all the children over to play at your house. When does patience here change you from a saint to a sucker? Those of you who read "Dear Abby" see such questions being raised all the time.

Or our children live up to their descriptions as children and insist on injecting themselves into the conversation at inappropriate times. When does the patience of the wise parent become harmful though well-intended indulgence? And we can think of many other situations in all aspects of our life.

Surely part of the answer is that patience is not simply a kind of over tolerant indulgence. There is a kind of firmness of resolve, an integrity which is a part of a Christian's patience. In fact, there is a time for patience but also a time for impatience.

In the play and movie, the MIRACLE WORKER, the story of Helen Keller and her teacher Annie Sullivan, there is a long scene in which Miss Sullivan displays a kind of firm Christian patience. It is the scene where she decides to teach the wild child to sit at the table in a mannerly fashion with a napkin on her lap. This goes on for about a half a day in actual time, and for about 15 minutes in the play. Annie Sullivan never gets violently angry, but neither does she overindulge. She walks the narrow line which makes patience a virtue instead of a weakness. Again and again, she puts the napkin on the child's lap and the knife and fork in her hand. This is the kind of patience we Christians associate with God.

To go a step further in our understanding of patience, we can also say that we are called to be patient with the weaknesses of people, but impatient with deliberate and willful practices which hurt others. Again, there is a time to be patient and a time to be impatient.

We can see this distinction in the life of Jesus as he dealt with people. He met faltering, doubting, delinquent men and women with a patience which was quite astounding. The adulteress, the ostracized tax collector, the leper, the children who forced themselves through the crowd, the convicted thief, even the disciple Peter who denied him and Judas who betrayed him — these and more he met with apparently unlimited patience.

Yet it was not an overindulgent patience, but a firm patience. Patience can seek the reformation of the irritant, as Jesus sought to reclaim those he met. Again, we are called to be patient with the weaknesses of people, but impatient with deliberate and willful practices which hurt others.

Thus, we also find Jesus being sometimes quickly indignant and severe in his response to people. There is little patience in the outer court of the temple with those who took advantage of difference in currency and the system of animal sacrifice.

Those who would mislead the young are met with the chilling judgment that they would be better off at the bottom of a lake with a millstone around their necks.

Sometime in the future we'll have a sermon on "Impatience" and when it is necessary. The problem with many of us is that we are impatient with some of the little things and with people with whom we should be patient, but we are at the same time all too patient with social injustice and the willful and deliberate acts which hurt people.

2. But why is it difficult to be patient with others, with ourselves and with God?

A. First of all we may find it difficult to be patient because in our time the emphasis is on speed and not on waiting. The mood of our time is aptly described by one of the television commercials which advertises a pill for headache relief and other pain and distresses. We are told that it works FAST, FAST, FAST!

We live in a world of speed, where waiting on the Lord or anyone else is difficult for us. Success in our time is often identified with feverish haste. We make a fetish out of our hectic activity. We admire the person who is always dashing off to keep an appointment and assume that he or she must be successful. Recently I saw card which said, "Blessed is he that goeth around in circles, for he shall become a big wheel."

I also read of a man who one morning used two shaving brushes instead of one and saved 17 seconds. Next morning, he used two razors instead of one and saved additional seconds. On the third morning, however, he lost two minutes patching up his chin which had been sliced by the second razor. Sometimes it is an illusion to believe that the faster we move the more we accomplish.

But the problem is deeper than this with our impatience and busyness. True Christian patience has to do with trust in others and in God, with being able to distinguish between the "givens" in life and the options, that is with what can be changed and what cannot be changed, and with a sense of patience.