Sunday, June 4, 2000
PATIENCE DEFICIT DISORDER
Psalm 1; Galatians 5:22-23

Recently, I met a long-time friend who told me about a personality trait that frequently got her into trouble. She said, “My biggest weakness is that I always want to rush in and fix things too quickly. I see a problem that someone has, and I want to charge in and straighten it out.” Then she added, “I seem to have solutions to everyone’s problems except my own.”

I asked her if she was usually successful in her attempts to help others, and she answered, “That’s the biggest complication of all. I’ve noticed that in my hurry to make everything right, I often make matters worse. I’ve been intrigued with your sermon series on various disorders people have. I’ve decided that I have ‘patience deficit disorder.’ Could you do a sermon on that subject? I’ve been wondering what the Christian faith has to say about it.”

So, dear friend, here it is — a sermon on “Patience Deficit Disorder.” Fortunately, the Christian faith, with its Jewish heritage, has much to offer on the subject. Here is one example: St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

In other words, when you allow God’s Spirit to work in you, when you pay attention to that Spirit, you will begin to develop patience. It’s one of those wonderful gifts of the Spirit. We’ll come back to this and some additional helpful suggestions from the Bible and the life and teachings of Jesus in overcoming Patience Deficit Disorder in a moment, but first, let’s examine some of the symptoms of Patience Deficit Disorder so that you can determine to what extent it is one of your disorders.

People who have “Patience Deficit Disorder” are overly eager. The friend I mentioned earlier described herself as being very impetuous. She is a woman of action. She wants to get things done quickly. She also described herself as a very demanding person. That’s not all bad. There are some people who are too patient, who never take action of any kind. But that’s not the kind of patience the Bible is talking about.

One reason I believe that “Patience Deficit Disorder” is a growing affliction for many people in Western culture is our increasing demand for instant gratification. We have a growing urgency for instant gratification because it is available as a result of the technological and economic changes of the past century. The more it is available, the more we demand it, and the more quickly we want our demands satisfied. Every time a faster computer chip comes on the market, our old one seems so slow. Even fast food is not fast enough for us anymore. Consider how impatient we are in traffic. Road rage is one result.

The danger is that our character can be damaged when we become increasingly demanding people.

Think of some of the ways our “demandingness” expresses itself in the course of a day. We demand that other people satisfy our needs and comfort our fears. We demand that we not be delayed or inconvenienced. We demand that traffic hurry up and accommodate our busy schedules. We demand that our efforts pay off and bear fruit. We demand that people listen to what we have to say. We demand that certain pleasures, especially those long denied, be ours

to enjoy. We demand that our leaders conform to our expectations. We demand that we be continually entertained and not bored.

The list of our demands is limited only by our imagination, pride, and greed. It is a bottomless pit. We can never be totally satisfied with what we have because a new idea, opportunity, want, or desire will always present itself, and we can develop Patience Deficit Disorder in the process.

Note that many of our demands, needs, wants, and hopes are legitimate, but that does not mean that the demands must be satisfied immediately. Some are even virtuous, while others are self-serving. Sometimes, our impatience can be a positive thing. Problems arise, however, when legitimate desires become demands, which we insist be satisfied immediately. Instead of guiding our steps, they can create a stressful and destructive tension between the present moment and the intended future. They can make us rude and inconsiderate, and they can take all the fun out of life for ourselves and others.

Ask yourself — is my demand quotient too high? Do you usually want your demands fulfilled quickly? Do you get upset if they are not? If so, you have developed Patience Deficit Disorder. It helps to remember that the universe was not created for you and for your agenda alone. It was created for love, and as 1 Corinthians reminds us, “love is patient and kind.”

In addition to being overly demanding, you could also have Patience Deficit Disorder if you panic easily when confronted with a new problem. Patient people rarely panic in the same way that people who lack patience do.

I received a telephone call at home on a Sunday afternoon around 3:00 p.m. I had been relaxing and looking forward to a quiet afternoon and evening. The voice on the phone sounded panicked. “Can you come over to our house immediately? It’s an emergency.” I said I would be there in 10 minutes. There was no hint of what the emergency was. When I arrived at the front door, I had no idea what to expect.

The father of the family met me at the door and quickly ushered me into the living room where his wife was waiting. Both of them were nervous and tense. Before I had a chance to ask what the crisis was, the father said, “We’re in a desperate situation. That’s why I called you. I’ve just discovered some marijuana in our son’s bedroom.” The young man in question was 15 years old and was in my confirmation class. The parents had two other children — a daughter, age 12, and another daughter, age 9.

I asked if this was the first indication they had that their son was experimenting with drugs. They replied that they had no other evidence and had not had any reason to suspect anything before. Their son had never been in any kind of trouble. He was an excellent student, active in the church and other extracurricular school activities.

However, the father was in a state of panic. He talked about quitting his job and having his wife quit her job so they could move out of Lincoln to a much smaller town where, maybe, drugs would not be so readily available. He sounded as if his whole world had come apart. I realized that my main task that afternoon would be to help the parents avoid further panic and to prevent making matters worse.

After about an hour, the four of us — the father, mother, son, and I — were able to talk calmly together. As I listened, I became more convinced that the young man had only been involved

in some mild drug experimentation. The family agreed to enter family counseling so that they could all begin to communicate with each other in better ways. That's what happened. Some years later, the family moved to another, even larger city, but not because of family problems. The young man has since graduated from college and is doing well in his chosen profession. About a year ago, I received a letter from the father thanking me for helping them avoid serious mistakes in their panic. He said he was learning to be more patient in his approach to solving problems. Panic rarely solves any problem, but it usually makes things worse.

What does our Christian faith have to say about dealing with Patience Deficit Disorder? How can it be prevented, and if you have it, what can you do to overcome it?

In the Bible, almost always, when there is a listing of Christian character traits, patience is included. I already mentioned what Paul had to say in his letter to the Galatians: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." In another letter, Paul wrote, "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."

Patience is a Christian behavior pattern. Henry Beecher once said, "There is no such thing as preaching patience into people unless the sermon is so long that they have to practice it while they listen."

In order to develop patience, you need to be willing to trust others and yourself enough to believe that what is done well and with good intention can be let go. Too often, we stew over the results because they do not occur on our timetable. We cannot wait for things to grow and ripen. We want to hurry things up.

When you delegate, you must trust the one to whom it has been delegated. Jesus said it another way: "Do not be anxious (impatient) about your life." Then he added, "And which of you by being anxious (impatient) can add one cubit to his or her span of life?" He continued, "Do not be anxious (impatient) about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day."

True patience is based on trust in God. That doesn't make it easy. It is sometimes difficult to trust in God. The Bible reminds us to "Wait on God." But sometimes God's ways seem so slow.

Jesus told two parables to illustrate this. The first is the parable of the sower. The sower goes out to sow. Some seed falls on the path, and the birds eat it. Some fall on rocky soil and wither away. Some fall among the thorns and weeds and are choked out. But other seeds fall on good soil, bring forth grain, and are multiplied greatly.

This is a parable of patience. It is saying, among other things, that if you sow the seed faithfully, if you do the job well, and then trust God, you will succeed. Being impatient for the seed to grow will not make it grow any faster.

The second parable of patience is about a man who sowed good seed in his field. But somehow weeds also began to grow. So when the wheat came up, weeds appeared as well. The servants wanted to rush out and pull up the weeds. But the owner said, "No, be patient. If you do that too soon, you will more than likely destroy some of the wheat. Let them both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time, I will tell the reapers to gather the weeds first and destroy them, and then harvest the wheat and put it into the barn."

This is not an excuse for avoiding responsibility. It's a story of patience and timing. Too often, we get impatient with God and God's ways and want to pull out the weeds among us prematurely. In our impatience, we can easily damage some of the good wheat as we try to destroy the weeds. Sometimes, too, we have to wait until they both grow so that we can tell the difference.

Many times, it's good common sense not to be too hasty and impatient in our actions. A famous trial lawyer gives the following advice to people who rush into his office wanting to sue someone for slander or libel. He tells them: "If you cross the street on a rainy day and an inconsiderate driver causes his car to spatter mud on you, don't try to wipe it off immediately. You will only spread it all over your clothes. Wait a few hours until the mud dries, and you can brush it off easily."

Patience and a sense of timing go together. The Bible says, "For everything, there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven. There is a time to break down and a time to build up; a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance; a time to keep silence and a time to speak."

Learning when to act and when to wait is all part of patience. Being able to distinguish between the "givens" in life — those things that cannot be changed — and the "options," those things that can be changed, is a big part of learning patience.

The timetables of God often seem exceedingly long. Therefore, many times, it takes a lot of patience to leave in God's hands those things we cannot change. Again, I want to emphasize that this is never an excuse for indifference to evil. It is a recognition that we are human beings and God is God. It can set us above some of the frayed nerves of impatience. It provides a long-range view of history, which we desperately need alongside today's headlines. It assures us that the victories and defeats of today are not the final score in the human story. The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine.

Patience has its roots in the providence of God. Jesus could be patient because he knew that ultimately, God is in control and that God is love.

Psalm 1 in the Old Testament is about the benefits of trusting in God's providence. Here's my paraphrase of part of it as it applies to Patience Deficit Disorder: "Happy are those who are not impatient, but their delight is in the providence of God. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper. The impatient are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away." Amen.