

Holy Impatience

J. Barry Vaughn. August 21, 2022. Holy Comforter Episcopal Church. Text: Luke 13.10-17.

Patience is a virtue, or so we are told. When we tailgate a slow driver on the interstate, or when the minimum wage employee at a fast food place gets our order wrong, or when we call a government agency and have to press 1 for English and then choose from 1 to 5 for the right department and then between 1 and 9 for the next level and then enter our social security number and our birthday and our mother's maiden name and the birthdates of our children and so on and so on... And if you still have some patience after all that, then I will personally nominate you for sainthood.

I'm especially impatient. You will never convince me that elevators don't speed up if you press the up or down button more than once. When the electronic voice at the other end of the phone asks me to state the purpose of my call in a few words, I always ask for a real human being.

Speaking of patience, consider the woman in today's gospel reading:

Luke tells us that Jesus healed a woman who had been afflicted for eighteen years by a spirit that had left her "bent over and... quite unable to stand up straight."

Sister Miriam Winter, a nun and poet, wrote of this woman, "Surely / You meant / when You lifted / her up / Long ago / To your praise, / Compassionate One, / not one woman / only / but all women / bent / by unbending ways."

Is Sister Miriam correct? When Jesus healed the woman in the synagogue, did he mean to heal "all women, bent by unbending ways"? I'd like to think so.

A few years ago, former *New York Times*' columnist Nicholas Kristof wrote a book entitled, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*. Among other things, Kristof pointed out that "although the world's population continues to grow, the number of women is declining. Already there are 60 to 100 million fewer girls than boys in the world, due to selective abortions, selective infanticide or neglect, and the uneven allocation of basic resources such as food, health care and education to girls. The battering of women results in more injuries requiring medical attention than auto accidents, muggings and rapes combined."

Notice something else about the woman in today's gospel reading: she never speaks. Sadly, this is true of most of the women in the Bible. Someone pointed out that of the 300 recorded prayers in the Old Testament, fewer than a dozen are by women. But do we have any reason to believe that women prayed less often or less fervently than men? Even the Bible leaves women's lives largely invisible and inaudible.

I'd like to lift up this silent, nameless woman as an example of patience, but I'm reluctant to do that. And here's why:

Have you noticed that women are praised for their patience but criticized when they are as loud and sharp-elbowed as men in trying to get their way? Luke does not tell us of anything she said, so we can't know whether she was gentle and patient or shouting at the top of her lungs about how dreadful it was to suffer for eighteen years from a crippling disease.

Patience can be a virtue, but there are times when it can also be a vice.

Now, I'm going to give you a different example of holy impatience, but I will return to the gospel reading later.

In 1963 when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., led a series of demonstrations in downtown Birmingham. King was seeking the integration of public facilities such as lunch counters, drinking fountains, and rest rooms, as well as trying to force the department stores to hire black employees as sales clerks, instead of only hiring them as to work as janitors or in shipping and handling and other behind the scenes jobs.

Today his goals not only seem fair and reasonable, but it's almost impossible to imagine a world in which black people had to demonstrate to be accorded basic civil and human rights. But in 1963, King was regarded by many as a dangerous radical, a extremist who wanted things to change too much and too quickly.

Charles Carpenter, the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Alabama, and six other religious leaders, including Carpenter's bishop suffragan, George Murray, issued a statement asking King to postpone his protest. The religious leaders had a point, and there was some justification for their appeal to King: Birmingham's newly elected mayor, Albert Boutwell, was a moderate on race and there was reason to think that he would work with Birmingham's civic leaders and with King to achieve at least some of the goals that King sought. So, Carpenter and his colleagues urged King to be patient. After all, he was trying to overturn a system that had been in place for generations. What was wrong with waiting just a little longer?

King replied to Carpenter and the other religious leaders in his famous essay, "Letter from Birmingham jail." And King's reply took the wind out of their sails: "For years now I have heard the word 'Wait!' It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.' justice too long delayed is justice denied. We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights."

When I was teaching at Samford University in Birmingham, one of my courses was on the history of religion in America. I invited Rabbi Milton Graffman to

come and talk to my students, because Rabbi Graffmann had been one of the religious leaders, who, along with Bishop Carpenter, had signed the letter urging King to wait. Rabbi Graffman was a good and wise man. He led Birmingham's largest synagogue for thirty years, and the explanation he gave my students for why he had urged King to wait was very persuasive. But after Rabbi Graffman left, I asked my students who had been right – Dr. King or Rabbi Graffman. My students were all white, middle-class kids, but they all said that King had been right and Graffman had been wrong. They said that if King had waited, things would never have changed.

When I was a freshman in college, I was fascinated by the vast collection of causes that my fellow students were involved in. Now keep in mind that this was way back in 1974, when dinosaurs roamed the land and the earth was cooling. The causes then were somewhat different from the causes today. Outside the freshman dining hall there would be a table where our fellow students would ask us to sign up for a fast to raise awareness of world hunger. Another would urge us to support the boycott of businesses that upheld South Africa's apartheid system. And yet another would ask us to sign a petition to eliminate nuclear weapons.

A few of my more conservative classmates became disgusted with the daily array of liberal causes they encountered and formed a group called "Students for a perfect world now" and from time to time they would also set up a table outside the dining hall. Although concern about world hunger, eliminating South Africa's apartheid system, and reducing the number of nuclear weapons seem like reasonable goals, I guess the organizers of "Students for a perfect world now" had a point. The world is not now, never has been, and never will be perfect.

But sometimes what seems like wild-eyed idealism in one generation can seem like simple decency in the next generation. We take for granted the goals that King sought in 1963, but Bishop Carpenter and Birmingham's other religious leaders urged him to wait just a little longer.

In today's gospel reading Jesus is so moved by the silent and nameless woman's condition that he spoke to her, laid his hands on her, and healed her without even being asked to do so. And when Jesus healed the woman, a leader of the synagogue blew up at him. Much like the religious leaders in Birmingham in 1963 the leader of the synagogue wanted Jesus to wait; he wanted Jesus and the crippled woman to be patient. After all, she had been crippled for eighteen years. Why couldn't she be patient? Why couldn't she wait just a few more hours until the end of the Sabbath? You see, the Sabbath code allowed for the saving of life on the Sabbath but not for healing a non-life-threatening illness.

In a way, the leader of the synagogue was correct. Surely it was not asking too much for Jesus to observe the Sabbath code and do no unnecessary work on the holy day. Was it asking too much for the unnamed woman who had suffered for eighteen years to suffer for only a few more hours?

Perhaps Dr. King could also have heeded Birmingham's religious leaders in 1963 and postponed his demonstrations. Surely black people who had waited three hundred years for the end of slavery and then waited another century for basic human rights could wait just a little longer.

But sometimes patience becomes pathological. There comes a time when we have been patient enough; when justice delayed really does become justice denied. Sometimes it is right and good and perhaps even holy to be impatient with injustice, to feel a righteous anger with the evil in the world.

Jesus told the leader of the synagogue that the woman had suffered long enough. The end of the Sabbath was only a few hours away, but even that was too long for Jesus. God's desire is for us to live whole and abundant lives now.

It is never wrong to be impatient with injustice, with systems that keep the poor in poverty, that prevent people who look different from getting an education and a job, that force women to stay silent and unnoticed, that keep people who love differently from getting married. Sometimes patience is a vice and impatience is a virtue.

I still smile when I remember "Students for a perfect world now." My classmates had a good point. The evils and injustices of the world cannot be corrected in a single grand gesture. It takes time and hard work and maybe even a little (or a lot of) patience and today's gains can be wiped out in a moment. History rarely moves in a straight line, and it is usually a matter of two steps forward, then one step backward.

But my fellow freshmen did not quite get it right. A perfect world now is never possible, but a better world is always possible. Let us commit ourselves anew to a holy impatience and a righteous anger when we see injustice and cruelty, and let us all re-commit ourselves to listening to those who have been silenced and live in the shadows of the world.

A perfect world is not in the power of humans to accomplish. But what we can do is commit ourselves to the small steps and little improvements that can change the world and bring God's kingdom to pass.