

Pastor Kevin Garman

Theme: Perseverance and Patience

Scripture: Ephesians 4:1-15

August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021

Last week, we talked about the story of John Muir and how his love for nature and the wildness of God fed his soul throughout his life, as he constantly chased after the next adventure or thrilling encounter to seek out in order to experience the newness of life. This week we reflect on the themes of perseverance and patience as I share my journeys across the month of July. In fact, as we get used to the rhythms of our church year again, our reflections in the month of August will be a little light, a little more personal as we reflect on my travels throughout Montana and the Mountain West in general. This series will last through the month of August with weekly posts of pictures and videos on our Facebook page, and a printed copy of my journals, notes, and pictures of my trip each Sunday sitting in the back near the bulletins.

However, today's reflection focuses on perseverance and patience as we look to my adventures in Bozeman, MT for our reflection on perseverance and the fourth chapter of Ephesians for our reflection on patience. Our question for today is how do we develop our spiritual gifts in our everyday lives to grow in our life journey with Christ?

It was July 4<sup>th</sup>, the day I marked on my calendar as the day I just had to make it to. I was burnt out, exhausted mentally and emotionally, because since my return to Florida after Easter, it seemed as if work was constantly screaming for my attention with some new, challenging situation every week in the month of May and June. "It was summer! Things are supposed to be slowing down!" I kept telling myself as I begrudgingly completed to do lists and packed all my luggage and gear for my trip, but none of that mattered anymore because I had made it to that marked day on my calendar. Now all I had to do was prepare for my departure on Tuesday July 6<sup>th</sup>.

This trip had changed about hundred times it seemed like. At first, this was going to be a vacation to see friends in Virginia and Asheville, as I flew back to the East Coast to visit with friends from grad school and my fraternity brothers. But then I thought

about beaches and how easy and relaxing it would be as fully vaccinated to just go visit family and dip my toes in the sand again. Then the trip changed into an exclusive trip solely to Asheville to visit some dear friends in ministry in the Metro district of the West North Carolina Conference. As you can see, I didn't know what I wanted this time of rest and relaxation away from two services in July would look like. So I changed everything one more time and said, "Let's plan a trip for me. A trip where I don't have to be tied down by someone's schedule. A trip where I can just rest and rejuvenate." So I figured it out.

This would be a two-tier, two-week vacation. First, I would go on a tour ride throughout Montana, primarily Central Montana as my journey first began in Bozeman, MT to do some hiking and camping. Then the following day, heading directly north, I would stop at the state capital of Helena to do some sight-seeing and travel to Great Falls the next day to stop at some state parks. Lastly, I would stop in Havre to visit my girlfriend and relax for a quiet weekend before returning home for a couple days, because then I would conclude my trip the following week with a drive down to Denver and hangout with friends whom I had had little chance to visit with the past few visits. However, the day had finally come and now it was time to embark on my summer vacation!

My drive to Bozeman was pretty uneventful if I remember correctly. The Rimrocks of Billings loomed over me as I stopped for a Popeye's spicy hot chicken sandwich for supper and the peaceful drive and rhythm of the road put me on the beat and time of vacation mode as I approached the Gallatin Gateway. Although the drive there was simple enough, I did not think I would encounter the amount of campers I did when I arrived in Bozeman that evening. Every campground was filled. I began searching apps, looking at map notes I had made in various books about camping in Montana, and I looked at the Montana state map Ron & Joan Haugeberg had given me when I first arrived to try and find a suitable camping spot. I drove up a forest road in middle of nowhere only to find even the primitive camping spots were filled for this week. What to do now?

One of the blessings and the curse of our modern day, Neo-liberal society is the creation of Walmart. I pretty much hate everything about Walmart, even though they are quite essential in many communities, but the Walmart parking lot was my savior this night, because all the campgrounds were full, all the camping spots I had plotted out were full, and I just needed some rest to gather the strength to hike Storm Castle Peak the next morning. I cracked the windows, I found my awkward sleeping position with my feet in the front seat and my body in the back with all my gear, food, and luggage. I

was on vacation and that was good enough for me regardless of where and how I was sleeping tonight.

I was the first hiker to make the summit to the peak of Storm Castle this morning, and I knew this because I must have run into thirty spider webs strewn across the trail as each step brought me closer the majestic mountain peaks people have told me Montana has to offer. One of my favorite things about mountains and hiking in general is the reminder of how small you are in the grand schemes of the universe. To some, this may seem terrifying to think about, but to me, this releases a great amount of pressure and stress in my life. This is not to say my life is meaningless, quite the contrary! It means each moment is precious and must be appreciated in that snapshot of time in which you are experiencing it. However, that is an easy lesson to learn standing on top of a mountain peak with nothing but mountains beyond mountains on the horizon as the sun peeks just over the crest of the tree-line.

This is an easy lesson to learn when you are meditating on the mountain peak with the chorus of the morning hymns from the songbirds. This is an easy moment to be present with as the Earth gives me the reminder to breath in, breathe out as her mighty gusts of wind deafen any chance of me recording any meaningful video to record this delightful grandeur. This is an easy lesson to learn as your soul is being restored and healed. This quote from John Muir never rang truer in my life, *“The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness.”*

The day was young though, so I was off on my next adventure to the Museum of the Rockies where I explored the numerous fossils found throughout the state. However, my day and trip took quite a different turn from this point on. The Roost, the Southern style restaurant I had been looking forward to all day, it was closed for a few extra days following the 4<sup>th</sup> of July holiday. I ate elsewhere and went to type in my next destination, which was Montana Grizzly Encounter where I could carefully view these apex predators with a trainer and or at a distance, but they had not posted on their website that they were closed as well. I wasn't going to let this get me down though. I decided let's find a camping spot so I can go ahead and setup my tent for this evening, however, once again, I could find now camping spot at any of the nearby campgrounds as these were all first come, first serve camping locations. So I did what any rational person would do and drove to Missoula, MT seeking out a camping destination for the evening. We will talk about my adventures in Missoula, and much more, next week.

***Unity of the body of Christ***

*4 Therefore, as a prisoner for the Lord, I encourage you to live as people worthy of the call you received from God. 2 Conduct yourselves with all humility, gentleness, and patience. Accept each other with love, 3 and make an effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit with the peace that ties you together. 4 You are one body and one spirit, just as God also called you in one hope. 5 There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 and one God and Father of all, who is over all, through all, and in all.*

*7 God has given his grace to each one of us measured out by the gift that is given by Christ. 8 That's why scripture says, When he climbed up to the heights, he captured prisoners, and he gave gifts to people.<sup>[a]</sup>*

*9 What does the phrase "he climbed up" mean if it doesn't mean that he had first gone down into the lower regions, the earth? 10 The one who went down is the same one who climbed up above all the heavens so that he might fill everything.*

*11 He gave some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers. 12 His purpose was to equip God's people for the work of serving and building up the body of Christ 13 until we all reach the unity of faith and knowledge of God's Son. God's goal is for us to become mature adults—to be fully grown, measured by the standard of the fullness of Christ. 14 As a result, we aren't supposed to be infants any longer who can be tossed and blown around by every wind that comes from teaching with deceitful scheming and the tricks people play to deliberately mislead others. 15 Instead, by speaking the truth with love, let's grow in every way into Christ,*

The fourth chapter begins by what appears to be a powerful sermon on living as a Christian in a difficult, even hostile world. In the first verse there, we see Paul offering a plea, begging us to live a life worthy of God's calling for our lives. An interesting opening line, don't you think? *Paul* begins his exhortation, his plea ("I beg you") with an admission that he is a prisoner. He is living in this present moment liberated from his past and given the freedom to live in the here, and now. Following this plea is an invitation from God as invites us into a new way of living and being. This is the life God wants us to live. A life from the bondage of our past and a life free to experience life in its fullest. This is not a goal we reach or a level we surpass. This is a gift. Salvation, new life, new freedom, forgiveness is a gift. Our job is to realize the gift and live it. Live, he says, as though you were loved because you are. Live as though you were forgiven because you have been. Live as though you are more valuable than you can imagine because you have been given a gift beyond price. "Lead a life worthy of the calling."

That's how *Paul* starts part two of the Epistle, the exhortation part. Remember? Part one tells us everything we do is a response. This call to live in certain ways works only if we understand that we aren't doing it to receive the grace that comes from God. It

becomes possible only if we understand that we aren't doing it to earn God's love, Christ's sacrifice, the gift called salvation. All that we do as Christians, as followers, comes only after we are set free to love.

This second section, which might sound a lot like the first section, Paul tells us: the ability to live the life to which we are called comes from Christ and not from us. Our natural state is one of limitation, one of captivity to our self-centered view of the world and our place in it. But now we are free to be all that Christ calls us to be. We are free to be humble and gentle and patient and loving; we are free to live in peace because the captivity of our nature has been made captive in Christ. Therefore, we can begin to approach leading a life worthy of this capturing, this calling to the good news.

What does that life look like? Humility and gentleness, with patience, living with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. That's what such a life embodies. Now there is too much here to deal with all at once, but there are two lessons I glean from this passage of Ephesians.

First, the purpose of patience is not just a way to help us deal with stressful, challenging situations. And in today's culture, the question "what's in it for me" is always in the forefront. But *Paul* doesn't present patience as a way to only deal with difficult circumstances or the frustrations I described in my Bozeman story, however, patience, as with any gift of the Spirit, is to build up the Body of Christ and equip his disciples with the best tools and resources to experience life. We exercise our patience when we live and interact with others. Inherent in this description is the understanding that dealing with people is not an easy thing to do! So, *Paul* is preparing us by making sure we are equipped to handle our community. We need patience; but we need a patient love that allows us to be present with one another. Present in our joy and our suffering together. Patience, just like Christ, is relational.

Second, the goal of patience is unity. Our faith is unity, argues *Paul*: One Lord, one faith, one baptism . . . Our Christian living is not a way to measure up or to plot points of progress on a chart, but a way to build community. We are patient with one another, not simply to tolerate others, but to love them. The paradox here is that it is love that begets patience. And we learn to love those difficult to love by practicing patience.

We all have different gifts in the body of Christ, but patience here doesn't mean sit on our hands and wait for the world to change for the better. Wait, in this context, means work. "The gifts he gave," it says. What a gift to build up the body! What a gift it is to use our talents in music to praise God in worship and connect our neighbors to God in a different way. What a gift it is to use my love for my neighbors and my community to be a part of the community outreach ministries and devote my time, energy, money, and service. What a gift it is to use my leadership to lead and form committees and help organize the movements and ideas that will change our church and our discipleship.

What a gift it is to use my patience to sit with a friend or a loved one who is going through a troubling time.

Patience seems to mean sitting back and waiting. Well, not for *Paul*. Patience is claiming the larger vision and the longer hope, even as we put in the work of the Kingdom of God today. It is trusting that by God's Spirit we are not far from the Kingdom and that what we do shares this vision and this hope. We trust that the vision is real, that the kingdom is real. We hold on to that hope by living a life worthy of the gospel. It is a sign of our hope by how we choose to live each and every day of our lives. It is a sign of our hope, our patience in that hope, when we welcome, when we cross the boundaries of hatred and division around us. When we seek to shape the living image of the church into something approaching the kingdom of God, we are leading a life worthy of the gospel. Amen.