



July 19, 2020 - Tolerance & Patience

Given by Rev. Mattei

Isaiah 44:6-8; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30

Personal resources such as an education, an able body, our emotional resilience and financial stability allow us to feel confident, secure, and independent. What we have been able to make of ourselves gains us respectability with people. Looking back, all of us could come up with a long list of accomplishments we feel proud about.

But looking closely, we know we are debtors to those with whom we have crossed paths. We are who we are because of the people we have had in our life, both the ones we have been blessed to know and spend time with, and those with whom we had difficulties but have marked us all the same.

Because of that, we can confidently say that our life is not simply *our* life. As much as we would like to celebrate our independence and be free to do as we like, our decisions *have* an impact on others. I am free to choose to follow the advice of my doctor or not, but when I get sick it's not only my body that suffers: other people's lives, people I love and people who are strangers to me, get affected. We have seen this reality magnified by Covid19. This is certainly what the current pandemic is teaching us: we are all connected. We catch diseases as individuals who are part of families, and families who are part of cities, and cities that are part of states and nations. We have the potential of infecting the whole human race.

Our interconnectedness is not limited to the physical realm. Emotionally, mentally, and spiritually we are part of one another. Consequently, my sin does not simply stain *my* soul; it also compromises my relationships and expands to wider circles not just horizontally but also vertically through the following generations. One can connect personal threads, positive and negative, even to ancestors up the family tree. The sins of the fathers *are* visited through the generations as are the blessings.¹

Sin, then, is like an infection that spreads throughout the whole body. It can spread throughout the family system. This can happen in a single-family unit or it can happen in a larger family such as a nation.

¹ Exodus 34:7; Deut. 5:9-10. Also, Edwin Friedman, Gary Emanuel et al., *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*.



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In 2005, Pr. Brian McLaren was recognized by Time Magazine as one of the 25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America. Reflecting on the human network of mutual influence, this is what he has to say:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N3SUyoDfG-Q&list=PLiBbqGAOPnXMeKh7QaqCf9HU5ShaAEzeH&index=17&utm_source=cm&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=dm&utm_content=reference

Prevention work is necessary to keep a physical or a social body healthy and disease free. But when that does not happen, the next smart thing to do is to identify the origin of the disease and change the premises that allow the disease to emerge and spread. The worst thing we can do is to remain in denial of the disease and ignore its debilitating and at times deadly consequences.

As we all know, it can be lifesaving to be able to catch a disease in time and plan the proper intervention. Sometimes, the prognosis is clear, and a decisive treatment can be taken. Sometimes, it is a trial and error process and steps are tentative. Through it all, one may experience fear, uncertainty, discouragement, and anxiety.

The same can be said of sin. It is a blessing when by the grace of God, we can see it operating in us and around us. When that happens, we are given the opportunity to repent and to make amends. If, instead, we fight it or deny it and make all sorts of excuses for ourselves, we do not give God much to work with. When sin is internalized, we are too close to it to be able to see it clearly. It is like being blind to it until its consequences on ourselves and others become evident and are revealed to us. That is when we realize that God does not give up on us. Because of that, we practice contrition and are washed anew. Forgiven, we now know joy and learn to live in the fear of the Lord.

God's patience is evident in today's parable. Even though the servants doubt the goodness of the seed if not the master's sanity or competency, the master himself is aware that it is with evil intent that the harmful weed has been sown unbeknown to all.



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There is a basic duality, an either/or approach, that the master does not accept. True enough, the parable is about two types of seed, wheat and weed. Some commentaries report that most likely the weed Matthew is talking about is darnel, a noxious weed that can be an intoxicant in small doses. In a big enough dose, this grass can kill a person, and farmers would have to take care to separate it out from their true harvest.

Darnel closely resembles wheat. Moreover, their roots are intertwined below the ground. Rooting out the weeds would uproot the wheat as well, doing more damage to the crop than leaving the weeds alone. The difference between the two is evident only when the plants mature, and the ears appear. The ears of the real wheat are heavy and will droop, while the ears of the darnel stand up straight.

The dualism of this text is troubling. It seems to imply that there are two kinds of people in the world: children of the kingdom and children of the evil one, wheat and weeds, and their destiny seems to be fixed. But Jesus knows that human life is more complex than that.

I suspect there are a couple of reasons why Jesus uses this parable. First of all, to paradoxically tell his disciples to avoid an “us vs. them” mentality and, therefore, not to be judgmental of one another.² The disciples are not to get involved in the business of separating the weed from the wheat: that is God’s prerogative. Secondly, Jesus wants to teach not so much tolerance as patience. Issues are never clear cut and the lines are blurred. We easily get impatient with one another. God, on the other hand, has all eternity to turn people around, even, in my view, after death.

So, perhaps we should not press the logic of the parable too literally. In the real world we know, weeds do not become wheat. Yet, Matthew's story holds out hope even for those who stumble. So, it is a cautionary tale, as well as one intended to offer encouragement. After all, how do we know which is which? Suspension of judgment buys us time to reflect, with honesty and compassion, on whether we ourselves behave as wheat or weeds. Most probably, we are both at different times.

² Matthew 7:1



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This realization supports the call to self-reflection and humble discernment. Instead of being too quick in defending ourselves and blaming others, the call is to show restraint, self-discipline, and humility.

Tolerating weeds is frustrating - especially the weeds within ourselves. How can we (as the church) help support one another in tending the garden without getting choked by the weeds? Prayer is the first thing to do. Then, we can engage in mutual truth telling without becoming disrespectful. Humility in our truth telling prevents us from judging and condemning and puts us in another's shoes.

Honest truth telling starts with listening. Honesty is important all around. We need to be honest when listening for the voice of God and not so much to our own voice (that would simply be an echo chamber): God's voice may be challenging. What God wants is to dislodge us from our personal certainties and comfortable ways. Conversely, our own voice can be soothing and reinforcing of our own entrenched positions.

Honest curiosity needs to be employed even when listening to one another. It is not a matter of having the last word and winning the argument. It is a matter of paying attention: any situation has the potential of teaching us something new about a topic, about ourselves, and about the other. It has the potential of teaching us how to deepen our discipleship and stretch our love of both neighbor and enemy.

But Jesus was talking more than tolerance. He was inviting people to exercise patience. Tolerance is called for when change cannot happen. One tolerates a nuisance, an adversity, an illness. With tolerance, we learn to put up with something we wish would go away; we coexist grudgingly, knowing we cannot have it our way; we go about our business striving to avoid any unpleasant interaction or involvement with a despised situation. In the same vein, one can become tolerant to pain or to certain drugs. With tolerance, we may also be able to eventually accept and, in the best of cases, even learn to appreciate that others are different and have different experiences or views of reality.

With patience, Jesus intends to train us to look at the larger picture and God's final purpose. With tolerance we are incited to make the best of it. This is the core message



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of any slave master: be content, you will be rewarded in heaven. This is when religion becomes opium to the masses and a pie in the sky.

Patience, instead, is tolerance with a goal in mind. In an adverse situation, patience encourages us to endure, to hold on to hope and keep the course. Patience tells us that the present situation is not life giving as envisioned by God and we need to keep the faith, moving forward faithfully and courageously until the time is mature and the place is fertile to receive the kingdom of God. This is why we pray, "Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done."

Patience is a reminder to persist.³ One does not and cannot tolerate what is death inducing. One needs to oppose evil.⁴ But there is no violence in patience, only a firm resolution in the knowledge that one day we will see the full manifestation of God's righteous Kingdom. It is not a call to tolerant resignation. It is a call to patient endurance.

We are called to tolerate those around us we disagree with and possibly learn from them. Obviously, always maintaining respect and enforcing Christian love. We, however, may not tolerate the evil of injustice that brings suffering and death. For that, we need wisdom, prudence, temperance, and steadfast endurance "in Jesus Christ"⁵ and "to the end".⁶ The Kingdom of God may not be totally visible right now, but we are already called to labor in it.

May we remain faithful to our God and ask for the gift of patience. Amen.

³ Galatians 5:22-23; Hebrews 12:1; James 1:2-4; 5:10-11

⁴ 1 Thessalonians 5:14

⁵ Revelation 1:9

⁶ Hebrews 3:14