

## PATIENCE

Learning patience is hard. Whether it's teaching our kids to wait for this or that treat or toy, or struggling ourselves to remain at peace when the turmoil of family feuds, job insecurity or health scares, roil the waters of our lives.

My friend Moise always says that his fellow Tahitians want to get rich over night. That's how he explains the \$15 pint of Hagan Daz ice cream in the grocery store and the \$200 a day it costs to rent a car down there.

Patience, the lack of it, and patience, at its finest hour, is at the heart of today's readings.

In Genesis, God gives to our parents, Adam and Eve, every good thing. They are free in the garden of harmony to eat, to work, to participate in God's good creation.

No time clocks to punch. No mortgage to pay. No arguing between husband and wife.

Adam and Eve's freedom is rooted in, is dependent upon, living in harmony with the Good.

God's creation is Good.

God determines the Good.

God is the ground of the Good.

To put it plainly, what God says is Good is Good because God says it is Good.

For that reason, the only tree in the entire garden that is off limits is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

I know you've heard this story a million times. But keep your eyes from glazing over just for a moment.

For most of us, what we get out of it is that God doesn't want Adam and Eve to know anything.

Maybe he even wanted them to be stupid.

But that's not what the story is about at all.

The forbidden thing isn't knowledge; it's the knowledge of something quite specific. It's the knowledge of good and evil.

And, it isn't even that. They know the Good because that's all there is in the garden. There is no evil because God never wills evil into existence.

No.

The point of the "no trespassing" sign hanging on the branch of that tree, is to say to Adam and Eve: "God decides what is good and evil, not you." That's the point of it.

The harm that comes from eating that fruit is not that Adam and Eve get smart, it's that they get the power to define what is good and what is evil.

What they discover, and what we find out, is that our definitions are totally different from God's. Remember "my ways are not your ways, says the Lord?" Well, that got its start in today's events in the garden.

And so we have our last two presidents insisting on going after the "evil-doers" over there, while those on the receiving end are just as adamant about destroying the "Great Satan" over here.

“The Good,” as humanity often defines it, is whatever serves our own particular interests; and what opposes those interests is evil.

See what we get when human beings, and not God, define good and evil?

We get noise. We get vitriol. We get confusion and destruction.

So much for the bite taken this day by our mother and father in the garden.

But, we were talking about patience, weren't we?

The lack of patience is, of course, all over this story. The fruit is a delight to the eye, it looks tasty, and who doesn't want wisdom, right away?!

The story of Genesis is not intended to be history. It is intended to disclose the truth of our situation.

This is the truth: We are truly free only when we hold fast to the Good that God defines for us.

That Good means committing to relationships of mutual self-giving with one another and with God; not just, or even especially in our immediate families, but in our wider communities.

It is only in relationships of mutual self-giving; giving and receiving kindness, gentleness, forgiveness, all made possible because of trust in one another, in God, that we find our way, our hopes, our peace.

Those kinds of relationships don't happen over night. They grow from an expanding love, from relationships that are reinvented over time as love responds to love.

It can't be had "right now"; any more than the papaya seed on the ground can be a fruit ready to eat at breakfast. First, it must grow. And that means patience.

Knowledge of good and evil might have been given to us over time, as our relationship with God matured. But our parents, like we their children, just couldn't wait.

So they and we find ourselves naked, out of harmony with God, and unwelcome in the garden of harmony, because we now compete with God in saying what is good, and what is evil.

It is from this dark wood that Jesus comes to save us.

"God with us" takes us by the hand and lives, before our very eyes, the Way of God.

Through Jesus, God again defines the Good, and patiently lives the Good, even to death, death on the cross, so that we might come to see, to understand, to follow.

In the desert with the Tempter, Jesus waits patiently for food.

Though famished, he says "no" to self-help, to self-reliance; to the independence he must declare if he chooses to turn stones into bread.

He waits patiently for God's abundance, trusting his needs will be met, in God's own time.

He says "no" to power and wealth, teaching us that God's kingdom of self-giving love cannot be bought with money or imposed at the end of a lance or a gun.

The good as God defines it is not complicated.

It means rejecting idols of every kind: whether the idol is made of a stone carving or a bank account; whether it is worshipping the sun in the sky or one's military prowess.

"Worship" and "trust" mean exactly the same thing. And God the creator insists we trust only him.

Why?

Because we are creatures made by God; made in the image of God. Only God can meet our needs, only God can realize our dreams, only God can bring our hopes into being.

The Good means loving one another and rejecting violence of all kinds. The Good means dying myself rather than killing another.

The good means sharing what we have, freely and generously, since all we have is gift from God in the first place.

Of course we fall short on all of these.

A glance at today's headlines says we trust in guns, not in God.

We trust too often in our own independence rather than in God's gift of freedom.

Our churches are even accessories to this travesty. A pastor tells the story of removing the church flag from the sanctuary and putting it in storage. No one noticed, or cared.

A few weeks later, he moved the American flag from the sanctuary to the Narthex, and was nearly fired!

Some churches on this very Sunday morning are preaching that Jesus doesn't mean what he says about riches, about the poor, about the way of non-violence.

"Let's just focus on the Risen Jesus," they say. "That Jesus" they say "wants you to be rich!"

They want a Jesus who looks just like us, instead of bending ourselves to look like the Jesus who came among us, to teach us what it means to be human.

This first Sunday of Lent, this day when we also welcome a new one into our community of faith, perhaps we can really hear the Good as God intends it.

We need look only to one place: to Jesus: to his work, to his words, to his life, and to his death.

Our version of good and evil is as shifting as the sands. It is as splintered as we are from one another.

The Good of God is stable, it is sure, it is certain.

I leave you with this story:

"Lloyd Douglas, author of *The Rose* and other novels, lived in a boarding house when he was a university student. On the first floor is a retired music teacher, confined by illness to his apartment. Every morning Douglas goes down the steps, opens the old man's door and asks, "Well, what's the good news?" And every morning, the old man picks up his tuning fork, taps it on the side of his wheelchair and says: "That's middle C! It was middle C *yesterday*; it will be middle C *tomorrow*; it will be middle C a ***thousand years from now***. The tenor upstairs sings flat, the piano across the hall is out of tune, but, my friend, ***that is middle C!***"

"The old man had embraced a constant reality on which he could depend, an unchanging truth to which he could cling. Jesus Christ is our tuning fork, patiently ringing out middle C in a noisy world of competing truths; his pitch defines what is real and sets every other note in its proper place. If we wish to hear the music of heaven, let us listen to Jesus!" McCullough, *The Trivialization of God*, 66 (modified).

And in listening, perhaps we will develop patience.

The patience that allows relationships to ripen, with each other, with God.

Such patience is rewarded with love, the love that leans into the nearer presence of God.

This is our life. And in a moment, it shall be the life of young Kjirsten too.

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