

## **Wait For It!**

### **Acts 1:6-14**

There is an old saying that posits, “Patience is a virtue.” If that is really true, then I stand before you as a very non-virtuous person. Patience is not my strong suit. I will admit that I am more patient now than I was when I was younger. Yet, I still can become impatient. Whereas many years ago I would lose patience with just about anything, now I try to pick and choose what deserves my impatience. I’m not always successful in doing so.

I inherited many good traits from my Father – love of books (Dad was a reader and fiction writer), upholding the freedom of the press (Dad was a newspaperman), being outdoors, camping and fishing, among so many others. My Dad was an extraordinarily patient man. That was one trait he didn’t pass along to me. Where, oh where, is the patience gene when you really need it?

Dad learned early about my impatience. He worked hard to teach me to fish. I quickly learned how to rig the pole, bait the hook, and cast. If God had created fish with the instinct to just jump onto my hook and stay there I would have been one happy camper. Dad tried to coax me to be patient. Back then we fished with a bobber. I’d cast out my line. Nice long arc. Plop in the water. And I would stare at the bobber. At the first hint of the slightest movement of that plastic detection device I would haul up on the line like I was trying to land Moby Dick.

Quietly, gently, and very patiently, my Dad would explain to me that the first movement of the bobber was the fish nudging it. I had to wait until the fish hit the bait, then I could set the hook with a quick, short jerk of the pole. Easy enough for him to say! I will forever remember my Dad sitting next to me, coaching me. We’d both intently watch my bobber. At that first slight movement Dad would say, “Wait for it. Wait for it. Now!” At first I was a little slow on the uptake. In the time it took Dad to say “Now!” it was too late. Then he told me I would have to decide when to try and set the hook. But for a while longer he would whisper, “Wait for it. Wait for it.” The day I caught my first fish was a day of triumph. Not only had I prevailed over a wily fish, but for a little while at least, I had become patient.

Our passage from Acts is the capstone of Jesus’ time on earth. He had been crucified, dead, and buried. He was bodily resurrected from the dead on Easter morning. Then came many appearances to the disciples and others over a period of several weeks. But now he left. As the disciples watched, Jesus ascended into heaven. For the first time since Jesus called them to follow him, the disciples were now on their own. Given their penchant for running hot and cold, it was questionable as to what could be expected of them.

Even now the disciples weren’t anywhere close to having the big picture. They understood the dead and resurrected part, but that was about it. When he came before them this last time, what did they ask? “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” They were still looking for a political solution. They still wanted a kingdom that hearkened back to King David’s day. They did not yet have any meaningful concept of the Holy Spirit, even though Jesus had told them they would be baptized with the Spirit in the near future.

Immediately after the ascension there wasn’t anything the disciples could do except wait, and waiting requires patience. Sometimes waiting can be the hardest thing to do. Doing nothing is challenging and tests our patience. Yet there are times when it is the only thing we can do. There are many things we can work for, like making a living. And there are some things we can only wait for, like the first signs of spring. Life is an undulating flow of activity and passivity. All of us are experts in activity; most of us are novices at passivity – that state of mind and mood in which the soul is receptive to power from the Divine.

This is where the disciples found themselves. We aren’t told what their mood was like. Were they calm, cool, and collected? Somehow, I can’t picture it, especially with regard to impetuous Peter. Were they apprehensive and nervous, perhaps feeling a little lost? Probably.

The disciples did two critically important things during this time of uncertainty. First, they gathered together in one place. Not just the disciples, but also the women, and Jesus' mother and his brothers. They all gathered in community. They came together to wait for it. Of course, "it" was the Holy Spirit. The other important thing they did while they waited was pray. When they were the most confused and anxious, they gathered in community and they prayed. When you think about it, prayer is a really good idea when you don't know what to do next.

I would submit that what the disciples did after the ascension, fellowship and prayer, is also the formula for a vital church. These are the two elements that give the church its power. Fellowship and prayer combine the horizontal and vertical dimensions in life. We could strip away everything else that characterizes the church, but as long as these two remain, the church would continue to be a viable force for good in the world.

Fellowship: A Sunday school teacher asked his class to define fellowship. One bright youngster blurted out, "It's two guys in a ship!" That's actually not too bad. The church has often been likened to a ship sailing through the waters of time and space. Fellowship, though, refers to more than the fact that we are all passengers. It refers to the quality of our interaction, of caring, of looking out for one another. Methodist missionary E. Stanley Jones never tired of saying, "Everyone who belongs to Christ belongs to everyone who belongs to Christ." That's what the fellowship of the church is, and it extends far beyond the walls of any local church.

Prayer: For several years now Christianity has been growing the fastest in South Korea. United Methodist Bishop Richard Wilke, in his study of church growth, tried to interrogate a South Korean United Methodist minister about the marvelous growth of all the Christian churches in his country. Wilke asked him about class meetings, biblical teaching, small group development, etc. Finally the Korean pastor threw up his hands in frustration and said, "You Americans are all alike. You want to know about our programs. You never ask about our prayers."

We wait for many things. We wait for the baby to arrive, for the promotion to come through, for loan approval to buy that first home, for the acceptance letter to come from the college of our choice. While we wait we hold onto the fellowship of our families and friends. Waiting requires patience. It is also a good opportunity to pray and give ourselves over to God's will and way.

As a church, we also wait for it, the Holy Spirit. We wait for the Spirit to ignite us as a fellowship of faith, to inspire us to reach up and out to engage in meaningful ministry. We stay together in fellowship and we pray for the guidance we need to move forward. I believe the Spirit is working with us to do just that as we are engaged in our visioning for the future. It requires patience and intentionality. It requires openness to hearing God's will for us. We, as a church, are seeking to do so to the best of our ability.

Next Sunday is Pentecost and we will celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit to the disciples and women who had gathered in fellowship and prayer, waiting for it. We also will gather in fellowship and prayer, waiting for it, the Holy Spirit, to move us to a deeper relationship with Christ, and a broader impact on the world around us. Wait for it! Wait for it! Amen? Amen.

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 5 June 2011  
[Ascension Sunday]