

Active Patience in the Lives and Proclamation of Moses and Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Passive Patience in US Culture

US culture often dismisses “patience” as a passive characteristic. Stephen Webb wrote in the *Christian Century*,

In our plugged-in culture, it is the distractions that make our lives so hard, and patience, rather than helping us escape the hustle and bustle, simply prepares us to face more calmly the day’s crowded schedule. But patience needs to be an end, not a means, if it is to become more than a way of coping with the demands of multitasking. The church teaches patience by setting aside Sundays for worship, which should be a restful alternative to the laborious efficiency of the workweek.¹

Webb identifies patience as a characteristic that helps one feel more calm and restful. This assertion describes the US cultural usage of the term. Similarly, Merriam-Webster defines patience as the capacity “to bear pains or trials calmly or without complaint.”² The dictionary provides this illustration: “I don’t have the *patience* to wait in line for hours just to buy a ticket.”³ This meaning of patience as calm, restful, and waiting prevails in US culture, but it differs drastically from the Pauline view in Galatians 5.

Active Patience in Galatians

In Galatians 5, Paul includes patience as a fruit of the Spirit, not as an individual and calm attribute, but as an active force in community. Patience (μακροθυμία) literally means long-passion or longsuffering, as the King James Version translates it. Long-passion is not passive, calm, restful, or for oneself. Long-passion or patience behaves actively and generatively for the life of the world. It bears active and community-oriented characteristics.

Patience Serves Community

Patience serves the whole community. Individuals do not own patience, but instead, the Spirit generates patience and works to manifest this patience in and for the community. The rhetorical function of Galatians 5 differs from other Pauline lists of spiritual gifts (Rom 12:6-8, I Cor. 12:7-11). Galatians 5 highlights the community-building effects of the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit causes and then effects changes in the community. With the fruit of patience, the Galatians community is increasingly guided by the Spirit and moves away from competition among themselves.

Patience as an Active Practice

Patience is an active practice. The Spirit is not passive nor does the Spirit guide communities to passivity. The Spirit’s patience is an active, long-tempered gift that

bears with people in their weaknesses, without resorting to retaliation. It buoys others up so that they themselves can move forward. As an active practice, patience does not flee in the face of urgency and conflict. On the contrary, patience is precisely the fruit needed under these conditions. True patience exhibits itself most clearly under duress. Moses and Martin Luther King, Jr. provide two models of active patience harnessed for their communities.

Active Patience for the Community: Moses

Moses clearly behaved impatiently at times. He flared with anger at the forced labor of the Hebrew people and retaliated, killing an Egyptian soldier.⁴ He hastily called the Israelites “you rebels” and struck the rock in frustration.⁵ Yet, Moses grew into a leader who left an exemplary legacy of patience. How this occurred offers some guidance and hope for those who can easily recount impatient behaviors that mark their past.

Moses grew as a patient leader between the time he hastily struck the rock, which resulted in God telling Moses he would not enter the Promised Land, and the time he looked out upon the Promised Land before he died. It took Moses his entire lifetime to develop patience. He did so among and for the Israelites, and the book of Hebrews remembers him as a leader who persevered.⁶

Moses’s patience enabled him to see the journey of the Israelites as larger than himself. He led as one who valued his community, reaching the Promised Land even when he would not personally attain this goal. His patience imbued him with a long vision that served the community of the Israelites. Moses also enacted patience on behalf of the community by supporting the succeeding generation of leaders. He did not just wait passively for others to take initiative. Moses took the matter up with God and advocated for a leader who could succeed him.

Moses spoke to the Lord, saying, “Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint someone over the congregation who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep without a shepherd.” So the Lord said to Moses, “Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay your hand upon him; have him stand before Eleazar the priest and all the congregation, and commission him in their sight.” (Numbers 27:15-19)

Out of concern for the community, that they “not be like sheep without a shepherd,” Moses prepared for his successor. He invoked God to appoint someone, pointed out key job responsibilities, laid hands upon Joshua, and provided for his commissioning in front of the people. Moses’ actions exemplify patience because they model remaining steadfast in the midst of a difficult transition. His actions employ patience on behalf of the community because they provide for the ongoing wellbeing of the Israelites.

Moses exhibited patience as an active practice. For Moses, formation into the Spirit’s patience took a lifetime. The entire book of Deuteronomy falls between the rock strike at Meribah and Moses’ view of the Promised Land from Mount Nebo. Moses does not become apathetic or passive due to his personal loss of access to the

Promised Land. Rather, Moses perseveres and remains actively engaged throughout their journey.

Moses received multiple opportunities to rehearse patience throughout his lifetime, and he responded by continuing to contribute actively to his community. God repeatedly tells Moses to ascend the mount to see the land he will not enter (e.g., Num. 27:12, Deut. 3:27, Deut. 32:49). Moses responds neither in anger nor defeat; he responds by continuing active preparation of the Israelite people for their new home.

Moses also got repeated chances to practice patience as he walked with the Israelites. He bore with the Israelites in their weakness. Instead of retaliating, he rehearsed the covenantal relationship and ordinances again and again. In Deuteronomy 4 Moses spoke, “So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe....” In chapter 5 he gave the 10 Commandments and in 6 the Shema, “Hear, O Israel.” In 32 he sang to the Israelites the words they would need to pass on to their children so that “they may diligently observe all the words of this law.” In 33 he blessed the Tribes. Despite the pain of his own non-entry, Moses rehearsed the law in multiple forms to the assembly. Moses’ patience grew through multiple iterations while he actively practiced it in community.

Active Patience for the Community: Martin Luther King, Jr.

Martin Luther King, Jr. employed patience on behalf of the larger community by cultivating others’ talents instead of relying solely on his own. He surrounded himself with other committed and capable Civil Rights leaders. Ralph David Abernathy, Sr. was a close confidant of Dr. King. The two conferred with one another on major and minor decisions and provided encouragement as well as correction. King depended on Abernathy, among others, enabling each to lead from his own strengths.

The different styles of Abernathy and King combined to create an effective and inspiring message at the boycott’s weekly mass meetings. While King emphasized the philosophical implications of nonviolence and the movement, Abernathy helped energize the people into positive action. “Now,” he would tell the audience following King’s address, “let me tell you what that means for tomorrow morning.”⁷

Although Martin Luther King, Jr. led with charisma, he surrounded himself with competent co-leaders. He led out of his strengths and looked to others like Abernathy to likewise contribute their best leadership. He invested in this wider circle of leaders, cultivating their skills and inviting them to manage various parts of the movement. King showed forth patience as a communal practice by surrounding himself with collaborators.

King exemplified patience as a communal practice by deliberating in community about the effects that a Civil Rights action may have on the whole system. On April 12, 1963, King read a local newspaper in a Birmingham jail cell where he was being held because of desegregation demonstrations. In it eight Alabama clergymen advised people to withdraw support from Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights actions in Birmingham. They wrote, “We recognize the natural impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in being realized. But we are convinced that these

demonstrations are unwise and untimely.”⁸ In a response four days later, King wrote his “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” in which he says,

If I have said anything in this letter that overstates the truth and indicates an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything that understates the truth and indicates my having a patience that allows me to settle for anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me.⁹

For King, patience born of the fruit of the Spirit could not settle for injustice. Therefore, King rejects the so-called patience demanded in the clergymen’s statement. He portrays it as incommensurate with the patience of the Spirit and exposes it as a racist maintenance of systemic oppression.

King reflected on the action in Birmingham in his book *Why We Can’t Wait*. The group of Civil Rights leaders had deliberated when they received the court injunction that would have prevented the Civil Rights Movement demonstrations until after the activists argued their point in court. The group discerned to move forward with the demonstration as planned.

The time had now come for us to counter their legal maneuver with a strategy of our own. Two days later, we did an audacious thing, something we had never done in any other crusade. We disobeyed a court order. We did not take this radical step without prolonged and prayerful consideration. Planned, deliberate civil disobedience had been discussed as far back as the meeting at Harry Belafonte’s apartment in March. There, in consultation with some of the closest friends of the movement, we had decided that if an injunction was issued to thwart our demonstrators, it would be our duty to violate it.¹⁰

What eight white clergymen had named as impatience was far from an impulsive decision. Civil Rights leaders had discussed it multiple times and came to a conclusion together. King reframed the decision as necessary patience, that is, *active patience* that moves tenaciously forward for the good of the community.

Martin Luther King, Jr. exhibited patience as an active practice by working step by step toward justice and reconciliation. The “Commitment Card” that each volunteer filled out emphasized this work. This card necessitated volunteers to consent to ten statements that became affectionately referred to as the 10 Commandments of the Birmingham movement. Number 1 read, “Meditate daily on the teachings and life of Jesus,” and #2 followed with “Remember always that the nonviolent movement in Birmingham seeks justice and reconciliation—not victory.”¹¹ These “commandments” require patience. They are daily commitments minimally concerned with short-term wins but devoted to long-term, systemic change. Seeking the long-term changes of justice and reconciliation instead of the elation of victory required enacted patience.

King demonstrated that patience is an active process when he turned others toward each other in a shared vision. In his final speech “I Have Been to the Mountaintop,” he proclaimed,

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. ... And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!¹²

King condones anticipatory grief by saying "I may not get there with you" to an assembly who knew several threats had been made against his life. He displaces his own centrality by acknowledging that he will not always be there. King makes an overt reference to Moses when he talks about seeing the Promised Land and knowing that even if he does not reach it, the movement will. He drew a parallel between the Israelites who reached the Promised Land and the Civil Rights supporters. Not only will supporters of the movement reach their goal; they will thrive and be blessed to be a blessing. King removes himself from the center and turns people toward one another in support and continued movement toward the goal. Through active patience, he equips others to persevere.

The View from the Mountaintop

Moses' mountain view resulted from active patience employed for his community. He treated the Israelite's journey as a movement larger than his lifetime, and he supported the leadership that would succeed him. He gave patience time to form even while he repeatedly rehearsed it. Active patience granted Martin Luther King, Jr. his own mountain view. He surrounded himself with collaborators and deliberated with many on the effects of Civil Rights actions. He worked toward justice and reconciliation instead of victory, and he turned people toward one another by sharing the vision. Patience allowed Moses and King to proclaim God's word for the people with endurance through adversity.

Contrary to Webb's understanding of patience as an end, patience is mostly enacted tenacity for life's journey. Life's journey both forms patience and requires patience. Active patience equips the preacher with the tenacity necessary for the uphill climb. Tenacity enough to hold one's community together during adversity. Tenacity enough to stay the course in the mission God grants a community of faith.

The actual moment when one glimpses the Promised Land requires little patience. At the same time, that vision of the Promised Land is crucial for active patience. Once glimpsed, Moses and MLK never lost the vision of where the people were headed. In patience, they imbued others with this vision and equipped others to carry it forward. A clear vision of the *telos* provides energy to maintain active patience. For a preacher, the vision helps maintain the patience to endure in the midst of life's messiness; it provides a mainstay when settling for something less would be easier.

In many ways, a preacher inhabits an office with a mountain view. How do you proclaim what you see when you look over into the Promised Land toward which your community journeys? How do you, as preacher, form yourself in the practices of patience? The lives of Moses and Martin Luther King, Jr. suggest some starting points:

Practices of patience that serve the whole community:

1. Treat the mission as larger than your lifespan.

2. Support the leadership that succeeds you.
3. Surround yourself with collaborators.
4. Deliberate in community over the effects of actions.

Practices of active patience:

1. Anticipate patience requiring an extended formation time.
2. Rehearse patience repeatedly.
3. Work toward justice and reconciliation instead of victory.
4. Turn others toward one another by sharing the vision.

In Galatians 5, the Holy Spirit gives a particular brand of patience: it is active and it benefits the entire community. While patience may not always feel calm and tranquil, the Spirit's patience does enable a community to face its greatest challenges and keep moving forward. You have glimpsed a vision of God's mission. Active patience will enable you to persevere in your pursuit of that vision for the good of your community.

Notes

- 1 Stephen H. Webb, "Slow Church: Cultivating Community in the Patient Way of Jesus" in *The ChristianCentury*, Vol. 131, Issue 15, July 23, 2014.
- 2 <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/patient> accessed 1.7.2016.
- 3 <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/patience> accessed 1.7.2016.
- 4 Exodus 2:11ff.
- 5 Numbers 20.
- 6 Hebrews 11.
- 7 http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_abernathy_ralph_david_1926_1990/ accessed 1.7.2016.
- 8 *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King, Jr., Eight White Religious Leaders, and the "Letter from Birmingham Jail"* (LSU Press, 2001), 235.
- 9 *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Signet, 2000), 100.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 68.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 61.
- 12 Martin Luther King, "I See the Promised Land," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington, Reprint edition (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2003), 286.