



A SLOW COOKED MEAL

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When was the last time you ordered off a kids' menu at a restaurant? Kids menus are the best. Not only are they usually cheaper, they've got more fun sounding meals to choose from. Astro dogs. Cheesy Mac N Cheesy. Very Berry waffles. Chick Chick Chicken Fingers. That's not a menu – that's a party.

And since restaurants don't want you to be thinking about how long it's taking to get your food, they provide you with all these activities on the kids menu. There are pictures to color, dot-to-dot, tic tac toe, and of course -- a maze.

How many of you like mazes? How many of you like to do mazes BACKWARDS? You know – starting at the end and drawing the line the other way. That's me. Sometimes mazes take too long to figure out, so I start at the end. I know it's cheating, but usually when I do that, you go, "I can't believe I couldn't see that. That was easy."

I had a bit of a maze to figure out this week. We've been going through the fruit of the Spirit Paul talks about in Galatians. Let's read our verses together again:

Galatians 5:22-23

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

We're on that fourth word in the list: Patence. Right away I had some ideas of where I wanted to go. But then I remembered this morning isn't ONLY about patience. We'll be ending the service today with communion. And that's when it started to feel like a maze. I thought, "How in the world am I supposed to find a natural transition from talking about patience to the Lord's Supper?" There didn't seem to be an obvious path to get from point A to point B. I wasn't seeing it.

So I did what I always do with mazes. I cheated. I started from the end and went backwards. And when I did, I went "Of course! Why couldn't I see that before?" And there wasn't just one way – there were all kinds of ways to connect them. Because as it turns out, patience and communion are bound together so tightly they're inseparable.

You'll notice this morning that we have a little different set up for communion to accommodate our new seating. Instead of the blocks on the side, we now have two tables that are more central. The blocks were great. They worked well. But I like the tables. Tables say dinner. Tables remind me that this is a meal we're sharing. The early disciples called it a love feast, and they would break bread together in the context of a larger meal.

I think it's fitting for this morning that I am literally standing with a table on either side of me. I am surrounded by communion! I am centered in the Lord's Supper, and I can't think of any better place to be for a sermon on patience.

Do you ever use a crock pot to cook dinner? They're great because you can throw in your meal before you leave the house for work, come home 8 hours later and find your pot roast or pork or chicken or whatever piping hot and ready to eat. There's something about the flavor and tenderness of meat that's been cooking all day that you can't get in a microwave. Slow cookers take time and patience, but the results are worth it.

The Lord's Supper is a slow cooked meal, because it is born out of patience. In all my years of taking communion, I've never considered that aspect of it before, and I'm excited to explore it with you this morning. Let's go to Matthew for our text and see what he tells us about that meal that started it all.

Matthew 26:17-30

On the first of the Days of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and said, "Where do you want us to prepare your Passover meal?"

He said, "Enter the city. Go up to a certain man and say, 'The Teacher says, My time is near. I and my disciples plan to celebrate the Passover meal at your house.'" The disciples followed Jesus' instructions to the letter, and prepared the Passover meal.

This conversation could only have happened in a group of men. Here it is, the morning of a big holiday, and they don't know what the plan is for dinner. I don't want to be stereotypical, but I have a hard time imagining too many women waking up Thanksgiving morning and saying, "Where do you want to go to eat tonight?" They'd have the Turkey thawed and the potatoes peeled.

Fortunately, Jesus has an answer for them. This is more than just another holiday for him, and he has thought about it a great deal. All four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John -- record events from that final meal Jesus shared with his apostles. We typically refer to it as the Last Supper, but it was also the First Supper – the start of the communion tradition that has continued among Jesus' followers clear till now.

As the disciples are wondering what to do, Jesus instructs them to tell the owner of the house something unusual. He wants them to say, "The Teacher says, My time is near." My time is near. The completely brutal end to my life is so close I can feel it. The most unspeakable pain is waiting for me.

What do you do when you know something bad is coming? I have two responses. My first is the band aid response. You know – rip it off as quick as you can so it won't hurt as bad. Just get it over with. I can't stand the thought of something looming ahead, so I try to speed up the process. I'm terrible about letting things play out.

If that doesn't work, sometimes I try the opposite. I go for the "delay and avoid" tactic. Put off that confrontation. Pretend it doesn't exist. Procrastinate as long as possible.

Jesus knows the end is coming. But he doesn't choose either of those options. Look again at his instructions for the disciples to say:

The Teacher says, "My time is near. I and my disciples plan to celebrate the Passover meal at your house."

Celebrate. He's going to celebrate and have a feast with his friends. How he even had an appetite at that point I'll never understand. It's humbling just to think about it. Here's Jesus, knowing he's about to die and still taking time to make sure Passover details are in place. Getting ready to enjoy himself. That's the character of patience. Rather than obsessing about what's coming, **patience lives in the time before the time.**

Jesus said that "his time" was ahead, but he had a choice about how to spend the time leading up to "his time". He could get completely preoccupied with the future. He could rush to get it over with, hand himself in to the authorities. He could run away from it – find a hiding spot to try to delay the inevitable.

But either of those choices would be acting as though the present time was unimportant. Today would be wasted, stepped all over to force a different tomorrow. Patience is learning to enter into the moment and celebrating the feast of God's goodness. It's learning to not spend your life anxious about some time down the road and instead live the life that's right in front of you.

Patience doesn't just apply to the bad times looming up ahead. Good times we're looking forward to can also consume us. Like the old trick used with donkeys, we can become fixated on that carrot dangling just out of reach, to the point where we don't see anything that's going on around us right now. In our hurry to get to tomorrow, we trample all over today. Patience doesn't forget the goal – it just refuses to sacrifice life in this moment for something yet to be.

Jesus celebrated. His time was near, but he lived in the time before the time.

After sunset, he and the Twelve were sitting around the table. During the meal, he said, "I have something hard but important to say to you: One of you is going to hand me over to the conspirators."

They were stunned, and then began to ask, one after another, "It isn't me, is it, Master?"

Jesus answered, "The one who hands me over is someone I eat with daily, one who passes me food at the table. In one sense the Son of Man is entering into a way of treachery well-marked by the Scriptures — no surprises here. In another sense that man who turns him in, turns traitor to the Son of Man — better never to have been born than do this!"

Then Judas, already turned traitor, said, "It isn't me, is it, Rabbi?"

Jesus said, "Don't play games with me, Judas."

Not only does Jesus know his time is coming – He knows who's responsible. It's like some surreal scene from a mystery movie. "One of you in this very room is the guilty one." What? You've got to be kidding? It's unthinkable. One by one, they search their own souls and scan the room with new eyes. It's not me, is it Jesus? Is it? The whole time, Judas is sitting right there, acting all innocent when he has already struck a deal. Christ's arrest had already been put in motion. Judas has turned traitor but he's still trying to blend in.

Wouldn't that just make your blood boil? If I were Jesus and I knew that much information, I would want tell Peter and John, "grab him." Then I'd try to squeeze a confession out of him and hold him in that room indefinitely.

But here's where Christ's infinite patience comes in, because he didn't attempt to stop Judas at all. In fact, John tells us that Jesus actually told Judas, "Do what you're going to do and get it over with." That's patience, because **patience lets go of control.**

It's no accident that our English word for somebody receiving medical care is patient. Philip Kenneson says that in the Middle Ages, anybody who was "suffering patiently" was a "patient." Then he says this: "What being patient and being a patient have in common is this: both require that a person come to terms with yielding control to another. That is, rather than simply viewing oneself as an actor, in both instances, one has to come to grips with being acted upon."

It's strange to think of God the Father or Jesus yielding control, but even as far back as creation, God made something other than himself, which meant he gave it the option of going its own way.

The writers of the Bible had several words we translate as patience, but the one Paul uses in Galatians when he's talking about the fruit is a word that older Bibles like the King James used to translate as "long suffering." That's a more descriptive word than patience, and it's used of God as well as us. Peter wrote this to the church:

2 Peter 3:9

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient (long-suffering) with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance...

At the heart of the gospel is a God who is patient with his people. Over and over again in the Old Testament, God allowed himself to be acted upon by Israel. He didn't use an iron fist to control them. Rather than jumping in and forcing them to obey, he let them abandon him. He let them do the opposite of what he asked. And he waited instead of bringing down his judgment. Why? Why would he allow himself to be walked on that way? Peter goes on to tell us:

Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation.

The Lord's patience equals salvation. Patience and salvation are linked. Salvation came on the cross. And the cross is what the Lord's Supper is all about. The Lord's Supper is a slow cooked meal because it is the sign of God's patience with us. As Jesus stood there looking into Judas' eyes, he could easily have squashed him like a bug. But he patiently stood aside. Why? How could Christ allow that blatant sin to happen? One word: He was thinking of salvation, giving Judas one last chance to make a free choice, and giving that choice time to have its consequences. The cross was the consequence. Salvation was the result.

When your kids are in soccer, you see something like this every year. One player gets the ball and makes a quick break for the goal. They're way out ahead and feel unstoppable. There are no defenders anywhere. They want to score so bad. They kick, it goes in, they're ecstatic. Then they realize that goalie sure looks familiar. In the rush of the excitement, they just made a goal for the wrong team.

When you've been offended, or you think you're about to be offended, it's so tempting to jump in to set the other person straight. When we see someone stumbling along in their faith and we lose patience with their constant failures, we want to write them off to teach them a lesson. We want to vent our righteous anger. But in doing that, we can be scoring points for the wrong team.

Rob Parsons gave a sermon on the story of the Prodigal Son, talking about bringing home the prodigals, the people who have strayed off course but are trying to make their way back to God. And he said, "Pray that when they do come home, they meet the Father first, and not the elder brother."

Imagine if it had been the brother waiting when the younger son got home. "Unbelievable. You've got some nerve showing your face. Do you realize what you've done? Do you know how much you hurt Dad?"

"I know. I'm really sorry. I..."

“Are you? I don’t feel like I can trust your word any more. You know trust has to be earned. Respect has to be earned. It’s going to take a long time before I let you in again. Things are going to be different this time. Go get cleaned up. You don’t want Dad to see you like that. What would he think?”

That’s the older brother. That’s how we can think. But the Father didn’t do that. He ran to his long lost son. He wrapped his arms around him while he still smelled like pigs and was covered in filth. There was plenty of time for him to change his ways – what mattered was that he had come back and wanted that relationship again.

Patience releases control and asks, “How necessary is it for me to interfere right now? Could God work through this in ways I don’t understand?” It’s not that we never correct or speak up. We just need to make sure we’re not imposing our own guidelines when God is measuring something else. When I’m impatient, I’m judging the progress of the other person based on my own timetable. When I’m patient, I yield control of the situation to God and let him lead. I have to believe that God is already at work in the other person’s heart – without my help. I need to trust that Patience means salvation.

During the meal, Jesus took and blessed the bread, broke it, and gave it to his disciples: “Take, eat. This is my body.”

Taking the cup and thanking God, he gave it to them: “Drink this, all of you. This is my blood, God’s new covenant poured out for many people for the forgiveness of sins.

Patience gives grace before it’s wanted.

We’ve heard those verses so many times they kind of roll past. But that night Jesus first said them, they must have been horrifying. Eat this. It’s my body. Drink my blood. Christ is speaking in these graphic word pictures that are disturbing. No thanks, Jesus. That’s gross. I want to be your friend and all, but don’t ask me to do something disgusting.

Of course, Jesus isn’t asking quite what they think, but that doesn’t make his words less jarring. I’m dying and offering you myself. You’ve got to make my death your own. Swallow this death and find forgiveness. It was a costly death paying for our sin came at a high price.

What’s he talking about? What the disciples want is for Jesus to stay alive and be their friend. They love his teaching and his healing power. Life with him is great. That’s what they want. But what they need is for him to die and be their Savior. And they need to own that death for themselves, to cling to it and internalize it like that bit of bread and drink of wine.

It’s easy to have Jesus as a friend. A buddy we can say we know. What’s not to like about him? But he’s offering us something different. He’s holding out that piece of bread and saying, “Calling me your friend is great, but will you take this? Will you let

my death for your sins get down inside your soul and do its work? Accepting my death for your sins means letting your sins die with me.” That’s an even more shocking idea than what the disciples thought Jesus was saying. Christ patiently holds grace out to us, even when we’re not so sure we’re ready for it.

What never ceases to amaze me is that Judas was still at the table at this point. Jesus handed him a piece of bread and said, “This is my body, and it’s for you, too, Judas. My death is big enough that even your betrayal of me can find forgiveness there if you want it.”

Now you might be thinking, “I get that this is grace – but how is it patience?” It’s more than just Jesus waiting for us to take it. What is patience? It’s slowing down. And the act of his dying was the supreme act of patience because it was Jesus slowing down to a complete stop.

Kosuke Koyama has written a book about God’s patience called “Three Mile an Hour God”, meaning God walks at our pace. In it he says this, which I think is profound:

Jesus Christ came. He walked toward the ‘full stop.’ He lost his mobility. He was nailed down... What can be slower than full stop – nailed down? At this point the church proclaims that the love of God to man is ultimately and fully revealed. God walks slowly because he is love.

Jesus was patient enough to stop completely for us. Hallelujah.

I am so grateful for God’s patience with me. It takes me forever to learn a lesson. People laugh when I tell them it took me 9 years to get through seminary. And I’m sure it sounds ridiculous. I remember going to lunch with a friend who shook his head and chewed me out for not moving quicker to get on with my life.

But God knew I was struggling with the whole concept of pastoring. He knew I needed the extra time and he gave it to me. He walked at my pace, which was probably even less than three miles an hour. God is able to see where he’s taking us, but he is willing to yield control of the process to us. What a humbling concept – that God doesn’t force us into his will, but gently guides us and holds our hand.

As we think about his approach to us, it changes how we treat other people. The thing about the fruit of the Spirit, particularly patience, is that we can’t grow in it on our own. **Patience travels with friends.** The only way to learn patience is to practice on the people close to us. It’s that messy part of figuring out how to get through life together. Do you need to stop or at least slow down for someone? To figure that one out, all you need to do is think about who frustrates you. Who do you wish was changing faster, making more progress, becoming less irritating?

When Paul wrote to the church in Corinth about patience, it fittingly was dealing with the way they were celebrating communion.

1 Corinthians 11:20-21

When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else.

Their impatience went against everything the Lord's Supper stands for. We're missing the point if we're just in a rush to make sure we take it ourselves.

I was talking with someone a few weeks back about the way New Day does communion, and I was saying, "We're going to have to figure out something because the lines are getting so long at our the two stations. Should we add more on the sides or what?" The other person had a completely different take on it. He said, "You know, there's something precious about seeing the whole body lining up to take part in this together."

He's right. Not that we want to have a long wait, but communion isn't just an individual experience between me and Jesus. When I walk up to the front, I'm taking my place in the cloud of witnesses, the communion of saints down through the ages who have joined together to hold up the name of Jesus. It is this tireless remembering of what he did for us, generation after generation. It reminds us that just as we share a common loaf and a common cup, we're part of something bigger. The Lord's Supper calls us back into community each time, urging us to wait for each other – not just around the table but in life.

After Jesus and his disciples had finished their meal, He made this comment:

"I'll not be drinking wine from this cup again until that new day when I'll drink with you in the kingdom of my Father."

Communion doesn't just look backward – it also looks forward. And that, too, brings us back to patience.

Patience holds out for the future.

There are two ways to lose patience in this world. The first is to get angry and lash out. We've all been there and don't need to be told the dangers. When we hear sermons on patience we expect to hear the verses about being slow to anger, kind to one another, etc.

But the second way to lose patience is just to get tired and give up. And surprisingly, the Bible talks just as much, if not more about that. If you read through the New Testament and looked for every reference you could find on waiting patiently for Jesus to return, you would find something in almost every single book. It is that big of a theme.

We are called to have patience for Christ, to look forward to him coming back, to think about it and live as though it could happen any time. How would it change your life if you knew for sure Jesus would be coming back this week? What would you do differently to prepare? That's the kind of readiness Jesus asks of us

James 5:8

You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.

We hold onto that as being equally true as the cross. What Christ has promised is as solid as what he has already done.

Everything about life would do its best to distract us from waiting. There are a million reasons to not even think it could be true. But each time we take communion, we are pointing to the words of Christ: "Behold, I'm coming soon." Our patience is renewed through something as simple as a loaf of bread and a glass of juice.

I love how the Last/First Supper ended:

They sang a hymn and went directly to Mount Olives.

As intense and sad and confusing as the night had been, it ended with a song. **Patience makes room for praise.** If I'm living in the present, if I've quit trying to control the situation and other people, if I'm enjoying and investing in the community God has placed me in and I'm expectantly looking toward the future, my heart will be full. Patience frees me up to sing to God with thankfulness. Thankfulness for his patience with me. Thankfulness for the cross. And thankfulness for this slow cooked meal we can share from now till eternity.

Sometimes it's worth watching a movie just for the credits, and one of those is *The Apostle*, starring Robert Duvall. He's this Southern preacher who is a man on the run from his past. He was a womanizer who had accidentally killed someone, so he tried to run away and start a new life in a little town in Louisiana. His whole life he's not had the patience to face up to consequences for his own actions. Finally, through a series of events, he comes to terms with the fact that he's going to have to admit his sins and come clean. The final scene of the movie shows him turning himself in to the police, facing what will probably be the rest of his life behind bars.

But as the credits start to roll, it cuts to a scene of him out with a bunch of prisoners in a chain gang, laboring alongside the road. And as they are swinging their scythes and pitchforks, he's calling out to them in rhythm, "Before Abraham was, was who?" And they yell back "Jesus!" "Who's our Alpha and Omega?" "Jesus!" "If I go through the valley, who goes with me?" "Jesus!" "If I go to New York City, who do I meet in Times Square?" "Jesus!" "If I jump up and down, who jumps up and down with me?" "Jesus!"

Owning his own sins and having the patience to do the right thing made room for praise in his heart. He was more free as a prisoner than he had been his whole life.

We'd rather take short cuts. We'd rather not slow down to deal with our stuff. It keeps us from where we're trying to go. But we find wide open spaces when we practice

patience. And who do we find when we walk in those places? Jesus. There's room for praise when we are no longer running away or running ahead.

In just a few moments, we'll come to the table again. Before you do, take a moment to thank Jesus for his patience – his long-suffering that took him to the cross. Daily we betray him, yet daily he holds out his hands and says, "This is for you." Where am I most thankful for God's patience in my life?

He's making the offer. What will it mean for you? To take his death up in your hand and internalize it, what will need to die in your own life? What do you need to let go so there can be room for new life?

Then, as you dip the bread in the juice this morning, hear again Christ's promise to come back. What difference will it make for you to live with that truth in mind? What would you change? What will you change?