

**Sunday, March 28, 2021**  
**Readings, Sermon and Song Lyrics**

**Readings:**

Two excerpts from “Letters to a Young Poet” by Rainer Maria Rilke, 1903 (translated by Stephen Mitchell).

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue.

Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them.

And the point is, to live everything.

*Live* the questions now.

Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

2. “There is no measuring with time. A year doesn’t matter, and ten years are nothing.

Being an artist [being a human being] means: not numbering and counting, but ripening like a tree, which doesn’t force its sap, and stands confidently in the storms of spring, not afraid that afterward summer may not come.

It does come.

But it comes only to those who are patient, who are there as if eternity lay before them, so unconcernedly silent and vast.

I learn it every day of my life, learn it with pain I am grateful for.

Patience is everything.”

**Sermon: “Be Patient...”**

“Be patient with all that is unsolved within your heart,  
and learn to love the questions themselves...”

Well...what questions could possibly be unsolved?

Looking around at the multiplicity of people on our Zoom screen  
today...we know that the questions are many!

And they provide so much opportunity for patience.

For waiting and wondering.

For noticing our *impatience* when it surfaces,  
and choosing another course:

A course of patience.

Of acceptance. Faith. And simply, presence.

§

So what questions are with us, in this room today?

Well, I imagine there are wonderings  
about life path or career,  
as there were for the young poet in our reading.

Are we going in the right direction?  
Will the right opportunities open for us?  
Will we be able to fulfill our life's potential?

Or perhaps it is a relationship question.  
Are we in the right partnership or would we like to be?

Is there some way a relationship could be improved?

What could we and another do to enhance the connection that we have?

Then again, there may be health concerns that occupy our hearts today.

What will the diagnosis be?

How will we cope with a new illness or progressing disability?

How will we find relief from a source of pain?

Or perhaps existential questions weigh on our mind.

Will human beings act decisively to slow climate change and to heal the damage done to the planet?

What can we do, to contribute positively to the healing that the world now needs?

I could spend the rest of this sermon listing the many questions that remain unsolved in my heart, and I'm sure you could, too.

But as much as we may like to itemize, analyze, dissect and ruminate over the questions...and I certainly do, myself...

Today we're called to be patient with them...  
indeed, to accept them.

To love them, as difficult as that sounds.

## §

Strategizing to solve the questions as swiftly as possible...  
Judging so many aspects of our life experience...

These are things we very do naturally as human beings, perhaps  
because they give us a sense of power and control.

But there's a great body of spiritual wisdom  
that invites us not to answer the questions quickly,  
to solve all our problems right away.

Wisdom says, instead, "be patient."

Don't hurry up and do something to force a solution.

Wait.

## §

The Jewish season of Passover or Pesach is a time of patience...

Of waiting and wondering, and celebrating the miracles that happen  
in the fullness of time.

As the writer Eve Fairbanks wrote in *The Washington Post*:

"Passover is all about time. It's about the way we have to have faith  
in time, and live time, and trust the way it turns things over:

It turns water to blood, and then back again;  
it turns darkness to light, restriction to freedom,  
suffering to joy.

Time is a chemist. Time is, perhaps, even an alchemist,  
with powers we human beings have never been able to harness for  
ourselves.

In the Passover story, though, everything takes time.

More than that, time reveals that difficult things —  
bad things — are a passage, a preparation for goodness.”

Writing about the ancient leader of the Jewish people, she says,  
“Moses, at first, is [...] no man ready to lead a people.

If he had to judge his future by what he could come up with in the  
five seconds after he saw the bush on fire,  
he’d have given up. [...]

His rebirth as a leader took time.

The work of time on him wasn’t linear,  
but a kind of cyclical process, or a pendulum.

It wasn’t manifested as a simple step-by-step trudge out of low self-  
esteem.

It was down before up: a journey *through* his anxiety and uncertainty,  
through challenges that deepened him,  
taught him compassion, and allowed for a fuller,

rounder ultimate becoming.”<sup>1</sup>

## §

During my recent mini-sabbatical, I watched the movie “News of the World,” in which Tom Hanks rescues an orphaned girl and travels a long distance across post-Civil War America.

Before the two met, the girl was raised by Indigenous people, and when she was asked to describe the world, she made a gesture of a circle.

But Tom Hanks’ character says that his culture, the White culture, sees life as a straight line, from one destination to another.

From a problem straight to a solution.

Ancient wisdom teachings often return us to a more circular understanding, which takes us through a place of unknowing again and again.

We can think of ancient koans—unsolvable riddles—that were intended to keep the mind in a state of wonderment rather than certainty.

In our culture’s understanding,  
this need to be patient,  
to sit in the unknowing,  
can seem uncomfortable and even counter-productive.

We want to get to a solution, and fast!

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<sup>1</sup> Eve Fairbanks, “Passover reminds us that time is not the enemy,” Washington Post <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2018/03/30/passover-reminds-us-that-time-is-not-the-enemy/>

But our growth, our inner development,  
is often better served by patiently living the questions.

This is something that not only old voices tell us,  
but new ones as well.

The contemporary poet and spiritual writer Mark Nepo writes that each person needs to find the particular path “that will welcome the questions that will liberate our mind”<sup>2</sup>

Not the answers that liberate our mind, but the questions.

Another person I’ve been reading lately,  
the writer and philosopher Charles Eisenstein helps me understand how important it is to linger in those questions.

He points out that when we don’t know what to do,  
we often act anyway.

We rush to judgment, we spring into action.

When we do this, he says, we’re often responding out of habit, and we’re likely to take action that keeps us stuck in what he calls “the story of separation”—  
rather than “the story of interbeing.”

The story of separation—of competition, hierarchy and control—is of course what has led our human species to do so much damage, from which we now hope to heal.

Eisenstein writes, “There are two things you can do in the space between stories: nothing, or something.

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Nepo, *Drinking from the River of Light: The Life of Expression* (Sounds True: Boulder, 2019), 71

The danger is to, out of urgency or fear,  
keep doing what you have been doing in the old story.”

Instead, we are called to “wait for the mud to settle” as the ancient philosopher Lao-Tsu once said.

“Wait for the mud to settle, slowly the water clears.”

## §

This waiting can be very difficult for many of us, and this has been true in many human stories throughout history.

So, thinking back to the letters between those two poets a century ago, what were the questions Mr. Kappus was asking? What was unsolved in his heart?

I suspect that Mr. Kappus was oriented toward the world of competition and success when he contacted Rilke.

He may have been troubled by questions such as "Am I a 'good' writer?" and "what is the correct method to make work that's of sufficiently high quality to succeed in the marketplace?"

Rilke was wise enough to refrain from answering those questions directly.

He likely knew that those were not the questions from which great poems could be born...

Nor are they questions that lead to more love or peace of mind.

Instead, they tend to lead toward a life of competition and striving, of feeling not-good-enough (which I've explored in other sermons this year).

By contrast, being patient to live without the instant gratification of success, leaving the space for non-doing and non-fixing...

Well, that might lead to deeper questions such as "Who am I?", "What calls me?" or even "What poem is arising through my life?"

These are questions that defy easy answers.

Questions that invite us to suspend judgment... to simply be still and listen to Life.

Of course, we're in the habit of judging constantly...and that habitual judging is a big part of the "systems of oppression" that we're called to dismantle...systems such as patriarchy and colonialism that are known for dividing and conquering.

The "story of interbeing," as opposed to the "story of separation" leads us to integrate what is known and not-known in our hearts.

To be patient with what is not within our control... while becoming gradually more attuned to what we can do, here and now with what we have.

We can intentionally develop that patience through a spiritual practice such as meditation...and through prayer, in which we humbly ask Life, the Creative Process, or God, to work in us moment by moment and day by day.

This is, I think, what Rilke was recommending when he said that "ripening... comes only to those who are patient,

who are there as if eternity lay before them,  
so unconcernedly silent and vast.”

It's the engagement with that vast Mystery that leads to spiritual growth and inner well-being, if not perhaps the specific answers we thought we needed.

## §

What if we could all stay patiently present  
with the aspects of life that we find difficult, uncomfortable  
or mystifying?

What if we could be patient and kind...  
without running from those questions?

How could that change the way we see the world  
and our place in it?

Perhaps this spiritually humble stance  
could allow us to live in the interbeing of the world  
more gracefully--without fighting so much.

Perhaps we could let Life's answer flow through us...  
and be therefore more in harmony with ourselves  
and the world.

**When we allow ourselves to be patient and still,  
we allow ourselves to return to the ground of our inner teacher,  
where the most natural and loving choices are born.**

When we allow that to happen, the choices that arise out can shape  
our lives in ways that are profoundly meaningful.

New answers will come, in times and

in ways that we may not expect.

And it's important to add as well  
that as we are waiting,  
we need the companionship of others,  
the love and the patience of others...

as we live through the times of unanswered questions,  
that come at every stage of every life.

## §

Recently someone I know told me about how this kind of patience  
paid off for him.

He had a creative epiphany in the shower (as sometimes happens).

An unexpected flash of insight opened up a world of possibility, and  
answered a long unsolved question for him.

Reflecting on it, he said that he realized he'd been sitting with this  
particular riddle unconsciously for a long time.

I asked him how long and he thought and said, "about six  
years"...and then suddenly the riddle solved itself,  
when he was least expecting it.

Whatever questions remain unsolved in your heart this morning, I  
wish you the peace and the patience to let the answers arise in good  
time.

## §

**Song: “Riddle”**

**Music and Lyrics: Lynn Harrison (Lynoleum Music, SOCAN)  
On “Something More” (2020)**

Where do we go when we don't know where we're going?  
What do we know when we have no way of knowing?  
What do we hear when we thought we were not listening?  
What do we find when we find so much is missing?

Tell me a riddle, and tell me again  
You'll stay here beside me as the night's closing in  
When you tell me a riddle it sounds like a prayer  
and I don't need the answers when I know that you're there  
I don't need the answers when I know that you're there.

Can we start again, not knowing what we've started?  
When we fall apart can we become wholehearted?  
When we turn away, what will we then turn back to?  
When we're home to stay what will we have returned to?

(Chorus)

Mystery and wonder, earth and sky and ocean  
Spell that pulls me under all the day's emotion  
When our story ends, not happily, yet holy  
I'll call you my friend and ask for one thing only

(Chorus)