

entire created cosmos, of which we are but a small—but nonetheless significant—part. Pray that God will use the church not only as an instrument of that peace but also as a sign and foretaste of the reconciliation made possible in Jesus Christ.

*Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20)*

## FIVE

### Cultivating Patience in the Midst of Productivity

*We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now, and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Rom 8:22-25)*

*Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You must also be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the door! As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. (Jas 5:7-11)*

**I**t's hard for me to imagine my day apart from the clock. Before we had small children, the squawking of my alarm clock normally ushered in my day. Now our children wake us early each day, yet I still instinctively glance at the clock during my first few conscious moments, responding to some deep impulse I have to know what time it is. I next stumble to the kitchen, help to fix breakfast for the children and myself, quickly peruse the newspaper, and then take up a few small household tasks, all with an eye on the clock and my schedule. I jump in the shower for seven or eight minutes, dress and leave for school. I know that it usually takes me twelve minutes to drive to work and only ten if I'm not impeded by any stop lights or school zones. I'm one of those people who prides myself on being "on time," and so I likely check my watch more than most. I hate to be late, and I'm often irritated by those who



are: I know that I should give myself three-and-a-half minutes to walk (at a brisk pace) from my office to the classroom where I teach and five if I wish to stop by my campus mailbox on the way. I like to start class on time, and I am conscious throughout the class period of the passing of time, checking my watch periodically to see if we are where I think we should be in the material for the day. I eat lunch when my watch and schedule tell me that I should, whether I am particularly hungry or not. I am conscious of when Kim expects me to be home, and I try to be on time. After dinner we have playtime with the children, followed by bath time, reading time and bedtime. If either Kim or I have any energy left, whatever time remains after the children are asleep is "our" time. Is it possible that being such a slave to the clock affects the way we think about and cultivate patience?

By almost any standard, historical or cross-cultural, most people in Western societies embody a most peculiar relationship to time. To see this, it's helpful to contrast our "normal" view with the ways other people think of time. Most of us, for example, would grow impatient with some African cultures where Sunday worship lasts for most of the day, not least because it takes several hours for the congregation to gather from miles around. Because it takes such an enormous effort to gather, it makes little sense to dismiss after only a short time. Such an example suggests how closely our view of time is linked to our ability to master moving from point A to point B in a specified period of time. This sense of (or illusion of) absolute control over our own movements is perhaps accountable for why we regularly get so irritated by unexpected traffic jams and other unexpected "delays." These painfully remind us that we are not always in control. In addition to being actors, we are also being acted *upon* by others. These situations call for patience, but such patience is difficult to cultivate when our lives are constantly regimented by the clock.

### The Character of Patience

Most modern English translations render the fourth fruit of the Spirit as "patience." Although such a rendering is appropriate, older versions offered a more vivid translation: "long-suffering." We often speak of people having

a "short temper," but we have no contemporary equivalent for having a "long temper." If we did, such a word would be close to the meaning of the Greek word Paul uses in Galatians.

Scripture employs several different words that point to this disposition, words that are often translated as "patience," "forbearance," "endurance" and "steadfastness." The latter two, though certainly connected intimately to patience, often refer to a person's response to persecution and suffering and as such will be discussed later with the fruit of faithfulness. (This reminds us once again that these fruit do not exist in isolation from one another.)

Most of us greatly admire people who endure, who persevere, who stick it out against all odds. Our collective memory overflows with stories about people who persevered in the face of adversity. We love stories of underdogs (such as Olympic athletes) who have triumphed in the face of overwhelmingly difficult circumstances. Many of us wish we had such character, and we are not wrong to admire such people. The Bible repeatedly encourages God's people to endure hardship and persevere. But patience and forbearance are slightly different dispositions than perseverance, and they appear to be less desired and perhaps less admired by our society as a whole. To see this difference one has only to reflect on the noun form: patient. In English this noun refers not only to the character trait but also to the person under the care of a health professional. Indeed, the latter usage developed out of the notion during the Middle Ages that anyone suffering patiently was a "patient." Hence, 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*.

Like all the fruit of the Spirit, patience has its roots in God's character. For example, the Old Testament speaks repeatedly of God being "slow to anger." Indeed, a refrain echoes throughout the Old Testament: "The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Ps 103:8; cf. Ex 34:6; Num 14:18; Neh 9:17; Ps 86:15; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jon 4:2; Nahum 1:3). Scripture rarely portrays God as having a hair-trigger temper, a fact that makes the few exceptions where God seems to be so portrayed that



much more puzzling. In other words, it is precisely *because* God is so consistently portrayed throughout Scripture as long-suffering that we find it difficult to understand the exceptions, such as the story of God presumably striking Uzzah dead for steadying the ark of the covenant (2 Sam 6:6-7).

The point that is easy to miss in all of this, however, is that God's patience—God's slowness to anger—represents a willingness to yield control. Although most of us may readily admit that God is patient, we may balk at the notion of God yielding control in the ways noted above. Yet Scripture speaks of God in ways that are surprisingly similar. Indeed, it seems that God's very act of creation itself manifests God's willingness to yield control. By creating that which was other than God, God created the space for the creation to go its own way. This situation is familiar to all parents who, in bringing children into the world, soon recognize that their children are not simply extensions of themselves but distinct beings capable of going their own way. Creation always necessitates a willingness to yield at least a measure of control.

Yet there is a further point that must be made about God's willingness to yield control: God doesn't seem to be in a hurry. God doesn't coerce us, doesn't force our hand, but instead waits patiently for us to respond to God's initiatives in reaching out to us. Certainly God's grace enables us to respond, but God's love is patient and does not "insist on its own way" (1 Cor 13:4-5). Thus, however it is that God exercises control over the universe, God does not appear to do it in the ways that we imagine when we glibly proclaim that God is in control. Indeed, as Christians we must come to grips with the implications of the cross of Jesus Christ for our understanding of the character of God. The cross is a startling and humbling reminder that the Lord of the universe does not reign with an iron fist; rather, this sovereign reigns from a tree. Is it possible to imagine a more stunning example of long-suffering than this: the Creator hanging on a tree on behalf of creation?

The book of James, undoubtedly echoing how Scripture speaks of God as being "slow to anger," encourages us to be the same: "You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, for your anger does not produce God's righteousness" (Jas 1:19-20). A skilled

listener knows that listening involves handing over control to another. I often struggle with this as a teacher. During class discussions it's tempting to believe that it's my job to jump in and correct every bit of wrong-headedness that arises. Occasionally I yield to this temptation. But in my better moments I try to be patient with students, realizing that my jumping in at every juncture is only a short-term solution. Unless I can guide students to see what I believe it's important for them to see, no "correction" of their vision will be of any long-term effect. If in the long run I want to help them see matters differently, I have to be willing to be patient, to bring them along slowly, to allow for them to continue to see things as they currently do, yielding control to them all along the way.

Perhaps this willingness to forgo short-term control in service of long-term purposes is similar to what God does. For example, Peter notes the intimate connection between God's patience and our repentance, using the apparent delay of Christ's return as an example of God's different way of reckoning time:

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. . . . Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish, and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. (2 Pet 3:8-9, 14)

God's patience does have a purpose; it is not simply restraint for the sake of restraint. God is *slow* to anger, but God does get angry. God bears with people for a time, but a time of judgment is coming. Paul reminds the Jews that being God's chosen people does not exempt them from judgment: "Do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" (Rom 2:4). Paul even points to his own life as an example of God's patience. After acknowledging that he is foremost among sinners, Paul writes, "But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might



display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who come to believe in him for eternal life" (1 Tim 1:16).

God's patience has not only a purpose but also a clear object. In the New Testament patience typically has a *personal* object: we are called to be patient, not for the sake of patience, but for the sake of another. This other-directedness of patience distinguishes it from stoic resignation, which is an attempt to keep one's life from being disturbed by one's own or another's misfortunes. In contrast, Christians are called to be patient with others *for the sake of* others. Paul notes that God's active love, the kind of love that seeks the good of another, is patient and endures all things (1 Cor 13:4,7). Paul sounds a similar note in his letter to the Romans:

We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Rom 15:1-6)

The connection between peace and patience should now be evident. Patience is a necessary prerequisite for establishing peace. One's willingness to be wronged, to absorb evil patiently without retaliating, helps to break the cycle of vengeance and opens up the possibility for healing and peace. Hence, though forgiveness is a constitutive practice of peace (the act of forgiveness itself helps to constitute peace), forgiveness is unimaginable apart from patience. We see this perhaps most clearly along with the intimate connection between divine and human patience, in Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant. The immediate context for this parable—which could just as aptly be called the parable of the impatient (or unforgiving) servant—is Peter's question to Jesus about how many times Peter was obligated to forgive the person who continued to sin against him. Jesus rejects Peter's suggested answer (seven times) and, in suggesting his own (seventy-seven times), hints

that Peter's question itself was inappropriate. Jesus then tells the following parable:

For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart. (Mt 18:23-35)

The echoes of Jesus' petition in the Lord's Prayer—"and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors"—are clear (Mt 6:12). In both cases we are taught that God forgives with the expectation that we will do likewise; to presume otherwise is to assume wrongly that God has forgiven us merely for our own benefit. God has broken the cycle of vengeance and expects us to do the same. Only by patiently forgiving one another do we have any hope of being that community which God has called us to be. Hence, the New Testament connects the virtue of patience with the practice of "bearing with" others in two powerful passages. Paul begs the Ephesians to "lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:1-3).



The Colossians are given a similar admonition:

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other, just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. (Col 3:12-13)

### Obstacles to a Life of Patience

As noted earlier, at the heart of any culture, of any way of life, is an understanding of time. Usually this understanding is not so much articulated as it is embodied in countless day-to-day activities. Trying to articulate a particular culture's view of time is notoriously difficult, not least because of the mystery that time itself is. Most people who have stopped to consider what time is find themselves as perplexed as the fourth century theologian Augustine: "I know well enough what it is, provided that no one asks me; but if I am asked what it is and try to explain, I am baffled."<sup>1</sup> If we could see more clearly the way in which our culture's temporal habits shape our lives, perhaps we would be in a better position to see why patience is so difficult to cultivate in this soil.

*Segmenting and regulating time.* How we experience time is inseparable from how we measure it. One of the most fascinating topics in cultural anthropology is how different cultures think about, experience and live in time. For example, throughout history most people's view of time has been intimately linked to the rhythms of the created order: the rising and setting of the sun, the phases of the moon, the seasons of the year. For the most part people's days were ordered by the ebb and flow of night and day and by their own mundane activities. We do, however, see examples of other ways of telling time that functioned alongside of these more "natural" ways. For example, in sixteenth-century rural France, time was regularly measured in Aves (the amount of time it takes to recite one Hail Mary).<sup>2</sup> Such a practice of telling time is instructive for at least two reasons. First, it reminds us that precision and uniformity have not always been the most critical issues when it came to telling time. Second, it suggests that there is nothing about *time itself* that requires us to segment it in such "inhuman" ways. That is, this antiquated

way of telling time helps us see that the unit of time has not always been something abstract, artificial and lacking any inherent relationship to human life (as is the case with the hour, minute or second), but that it has sometimes been intimately connected to the concrete and vital practices of people's lives, such as prayer. This more fluid and flexible way of conceiving time was changed dramatically with the invention of the mechanical clock, a device developed in the West by Benedictine monks as an aid to their rigorous schedule of prayer and work. Ironically, this invention paved the way for viewing time as something other than a seamless, endless flow. Now time was a resource, something to be segmented, scheduled and managed.

We are so accustomed to thinking of time in this manner, so accustomed to assuming that our way of viewing time is "normal," that we can scarcely get ourselves to realize that this way of thinking about time was invented relatively recently. Those of us who glance at our clocks and wristwatches countless times a day likely find it difficult to imagine that our modern concept of an hour was completely foreign to most people in the Middle Ages. Nor is it easy for us to comprehend that our concept of the second did not appear until the early 1700s. Such historical reminders are important, for they create the critical distance necessary to imagine other ways of understanding time.

There are, of course, obvious advantages to regulating our lives by the clock. Particular kinds of cooperative endeavors are more productive when people are assembled together at the same time. Teaching would in many ways be more frustrating were we to begin class "sometime after breakfast." Who can imagine running a business that employed scores of "hourlies" (a telling category) without having a clock to punch? And how could we possibly organize our evenings around our favorite television shows if we didn't know what time they were being aired? (It is interesting to note, however, that many students admit that it works the other way around: they know what day it is and what time it is by noting what program is on the television. For some people, therefore, the television is itself an instrument for segmenting and organizing time. That people often regulate their daily activities in order to be able to see their favorite shows only underscores the way in which the



television is capable of imposing a discipline every bit as rigorous as the clock.) Yet for all of its advantages the precise segmentation and regulation of time has led to a kind of bondage to the clock. Like so much of culture, that which came into being as our tool is now in danger of becoming our master. Or as Thoreau once remarked, we are in danger of becoming the "tools of our tools." So much of life is regulated by the precision of the clock that it becomes all but impossible to see time as a gift; instead the clock becomes the great taskmaster that cracks the whip to make sure we are where we are supposed to be, when we are supposed to be there.

This bondage to the clock is so much a part of our lives that we usually remain oblivious to it. The times I have been most aware of it were those times when I was suddenly thrust into an environment where clock time meant nothing. Before we had children, Kim and I used to spend several days a year at a cabin tucked away in the mountains of western North Carolina. The cabin had no clocks, no radio and no television. In fact, we always made it a habit of taking off our watches as soon as we arrived. We were always amazed at the difference this made in the way we experienced our days together. And it was a painful reminder of how our days were normally ordered. The words on a small wooden plaque that hung on the cabin wall captured well our own experience: "Time is slow here; a friend, rather than a master."

*Hoarding time.* As noted above, our increased consciousness of time encourages us to think of it as simply one more resource. Or more likely, it now becomes the most important resource in our possession. I naturally think of "my time" as my own. It is mine to control. It is a possession, a commodity. This conviction is so deeply rooted in our culture that we regard it as a maxim that "time is money." If one doubts the hold that such a commodified view has over us, consider the ways in which we routinely speak about time: we spend time, buy time, save time, waste time, manage time and invest time. Within such an environment how can we learn to experience time as a gift? Ours is not the only culture that is finding this increasingly difficult. Reflecting on life in Southeast Asia, Kosuke Koyama writes:

Time was traditionally experienced as being unlimited as a loving mother's milk is unlimited to her baby. Time was generously given. It was not sold as pork chops are sold. There was no business engagement about time. Time was cyclical, that is to say, calm and levelheaded. . . . It was communal. Indeed, the essence of our experience of time can be said to be a sense of continuity of communal fellowship. We never experienced time in isolation. Apart from community no time existed. . . . Now this has been changed without any consultation with us! Time is now to be understood in terms of business achievement. Time is now located in the export-import companies, motorcycle manufacturers, stores and shops, instead of being in the paddy field, under the coconut trees and in the temple yards. Time is now violently grasped. It was once public community property. It is now private business property. Once it was shared, now it is monopolized. Time does not heal us now. Time wounds us.<sup>3</sup>

Because we routinely view time as our own resource to "spend" as we see fit, interruptions in our daily agenda are inevitably viewed as intrusions. For instance, if I have grasped a two-hour block as my own in order to do some writing, a student who drops by unannounced to discuss a problem is no longer a person but an interruption. And even if I know I shouldn't feel this way, I still often do. Unfortunately, people now expect us to be stingy with our time, which is likely why they find it necessary to always apologize for "taking" so much of our time. Isn't that how we feel? That people have taken (stolen?) from us something that wasn't theirs? Can we really hope to be patient with people as long as we believe that our time is our own? Can we really hope to be patient with people when all too often our assumption (even if unarticulated) is that people are unwelcome intrusions into our preplanned schedules?

*Exalting productivity.* By precisely segmenting time and transforming it into a scarce resource, the West has created the conditions for the appearance of a new virtue: productivity. Productivity is simply this: a quantifiable amount of work achieved during a specified length of time. The more work per unit of time, the greater the productivity. Few virtues are more exalted in Western societies, a situation that exerts subtle and not-so-subtle pressures on most every citizen. For example, once productivity is regarded as the key benchmark



by which we assess our worth, the question that naturally follows is this: What do you have to show for your time? We usually expect the answer to this question to take some tangible form—a paycheck, a grade on a test, a nice meal. But what happens when demands are placed on our time and there is seemingly nothing to show for it? How do we feel? I can still vividly remember the frustration I felt during the three years I worked on my dissertation. Often weeks would go by with little measurable progress. Although I knew Kim understood the frustration I felt, I still found it difficult not to take her well-meaning inquiries as indictments of my lack of productivity. Otherwise, why would her simple question: “How did things go today?” so unnerve me?

As noted in an earlier chapter, many stay-at-home parents (who are in most cases women) experience enormous frustration functioning within a system that validates only that work that is visibly productive and tangibly compensated. What messages does our culture send such a parent about the value of her time and hence even of herself? Are such people “wasting” their time by “spending” it on such things as stacking blocks with their children, reading them books or changing their diapers? What, after all, do they have to show for it at the end of the day? The fact that most of us, myself included, suspect that devoting ourselves fully to such “unproductive” work would have devastating effects on our sense of self-worth, says something profound about how thoroughly most of us have internalized our culture’s views about time and productivity.

Kim and I have had a long-running joke in our marriage about “being productive.” Neither one of us finds it easy to sit still. Even before we had children, our time was filled with completing tasks that when finished we would dutifully check off of our “to do” lists. This is so much a part of our lives that it has become common for each of us, when asked by the other what we’re going to do during the next period of time, to respond mockingly, “Be productive.” Simply recognizing our own participation in our culture’s “cult of productivity” has not by itself freed us from the grip that cult has on our lives. Nearly every day we fight off feelings of anxiety about devoting ourselves to matters that do not lend themselves to being checked off or that do not yield quantifiable results. For instance, I desire to be a more devoted father

and husband, but how do I check that off my “to do” list? I also desire to continue to mature as a Christian for the rest of my life, and I know that growth will likely come slowly and imperceptibly, but how do I think about that in a culture that only counts tangible, measurable results?

One final comment about the connection between time and productivity. Economists and social scientists have long observed that the value of time rises with increased opportunities. In other words, the more options I have for ways to “spend” my time, the more valuable that time becomes. For people with “nothing to do,” time is cheap; it is the one commodity of which they have an ample supply. But for those of us whose lives are constantly “busy,” time suddenly appears scarce and therefore more valuable. This partly accounts for why we have become the culture of the “disposable”: we believe that the time “saved” is more valuable than both the products thrown away and the landfills needed to hold them.

Surely being immersed in this way of life has an impact on whether—or to what extent—our lives bear the fruit of patience. We pride ourselves on being “people of action” who are constantly productive and incessantly busy. With such a mindset firmly implanted, being patient, being willing to be acted upon, understandably looks and feels like passivity. Being patient often feels like weakness, if not death. What could be worse, we wonder, than “doing nothing,” which is often what being patient seems to entail?

Or to take a specific example and return to a previous discussion: How many of us feel enormously time-conscious when it comes to our corporate worship? Is it possible that there is a connection between our time-consciousness and our sense that we are engaged in an activity whose productivity is suspect? Does the way we find ourselves talking about worship (“I didn’t get anything out of the service today”) betray a conviction that worship ought to be productive? (Translation: “Given the time I spent at church today, I’m disappointed that I’ve nothing more to show for it.”) Perhaps our fixation with productivity instills in us a deep sense of impatience, an impatience that might partly be responsible for our lack of joy in worship. How can we joyfully engage in worship if we are continually mindful of all the other more productive things we could be doing with our time (and will be doing once this service is over)?



Perhaps the impatience that characterizes so much of our lives spills over into other areas of our corporate life as well. Do we really have time for each other? And even more specifically, do we have time for those among us who may be an incredible drain on our time and energies? I've been disturbed lately to read in several church newsletters "positive thinking" advice that encourages church members not to let themselves get "bogged down" with depressed and otherwise "negative" people. Is it possible that we've been given the freedom to devote ourselves to one another even if what comes of it cannot be measured in any tangible way? In short, have we been given the freedom to be involved with others in ways that may appear unproductive?

*Going faster.* If what is said above accurately characterizes our culture, then we can perhaps understand more clearly why our culture places such an enormous premium on speed. Because we have more and more things that we *want* to do with our time, we have less and less time to do the things we *have* to do. Once we regard time as a scarce resource, we then feel the pressure to do whatever needs to be done as quickly as possible. As a result, we have become a society characterized by its love affair with "time-saving" devices. Every year hundreds of products flood the market that promise to save us precious minutes. But what happens to all the time we ostensibly save with all these wonderful gadgets? Don't these devices merely enable us to cram those few extra moments with further attempts to justify our existence by being even *more* productive? In strange and subtle ways, therefore, many of these devices that were supposed to liberate us have instead contributed to our further enslavement. Rather than having more time, we feel as if we actually have less.

How many times have we found ourselves saying or thinking, "If I only had more time, I'd do . . ."? We incessantly complain that we never have enough time. When anyone asks us, our lives are always too busy and too hectic. (When was the last time you heard somebody say, "My life is wonderful. Just the right balance of things to do and time in which to do them"? If we as a society share a common story, one of its story lines is surely how the pace of life keeps increasing, almost exponentially. Yet I often wonder if we notice how we contribute to this increasingly frenetic pace. We get up

in the morning and eat our instant oatmeal and drink our instant coffee. If we're not feeling too rushed, we quickly scan the headlines of the newspaper and read our *One-Minute Bible*. On our way to work we fill up our car with gasoline at the pay-at-the-pump service station, drop off our film for one-hour photo development and our clothes for one-hour cleaning. After what is inevitably a "busy" and "hectic" day, we rush home to a meal of instant rice, microwaved vegetables and instant pudding. Whatever conversation we manage with our families is likely rushed and superficial as we hurry off to our evening activities. Finally, we climb into bed mindful of all the things we failed to get done and even more mindful of all the things to be accomplished the following day when the proverbial rat race begins all over again. Why do we allow ourselves to get caught up in this vicious cycle? Why is it that almost all of us long to slow down, and yet we seem so incapable of doing so?

There seem to be very few places left in our society where we are encouraged to wait. When combined with self-interest the fixation on speed accelerates the drive toward immediate gratification. We want *what* we want, *when* we want it, and that is almost always *now*.

In contrast, waiting involves slowing down. Waiting inevitably involves "wasting" time. Perhaps this is why the few situations that routinely require us to wait often bring out the worst in us. Why do I get so frustrated waiting in line in a grocery store? Or why do I get irritated if the person in front of me at a stoplight doesn't accelerate the instant the light turns green? Or why do I find myself resenting the person driving in front of me on the way to work who puts along at ten miles an hour below the speed limit, even though I know perfectly well (because I've calculated it!) that I am being "delayed" no more than a few seconds?

Relying as we do on newer and ever-faster technologies of speed, we have acquired (and continue to acquire) whole new sets of expectations that encourage impatience. Is it possible that our fixation with speed, nurtured as it is by a culture characterized by its jet airplanes, microwave dinners and Pentium chips, spills over into other areas of our lives, including our so-called spiritual lives?

For example, we have become a culture of quick fixes. We have no patience



for the long haul. If something is wrong, it ought to be able to be fixed immediately. This way of thinking has become so ingrained in us that it shapes the ways we think about the Christian life. As a result, many of us find ourselves exceedingly impatient about Christian growth. Yet maturity takes time; fruit does not grow overnight. Cultivating a life in the Spirit is slow, painstaking work. But most of us (myself included) secretly long for the day when we will wake up and find that we have been instantly transformed. (Perhaps you have even found yourself growing impatient with the analysis sections of these chapters, wishing that I would get to the "application" section more quickly so you would know what you are supposed to do to be a more "productive" Christian!)

We have come to believe that arriving at the desired result or final destination is all that matters. Because we consider the journey or process as wasted time, we routinely seek to speed up the process as much as possible. If a machine can make a chair faster than a person can, then why not let the machine do it? The point is to produce a chair with the least expenditure of resources (including time), right? Or what if I am a parent who hopes to instill certain virtues in my children. Does it matter what I have to do to get the desired result, or is the desired result all that matters? Or what if I am a student hoping to be accepted someday into medical school. Should I take what appears to be the quickest and surest route to this goal, even if it means snubbing personal relationships while I bury my head in the books? Or should I also be concerned about the kind of person—and doctor—I am becoming along the way?

Much about our culture seems to preclude us from even asking such questions. The deck is stacked. The answers are obvious. Yet there are other experiences that we have from time to time that call our culture's goal-oriented obsession into question. For example, Kim and I have found over the years that some of our best talks have come during long car trips to see family (or at least this was the case before we had a van load of children!). Indeed, these talks became such a central feature of our marriage that we missed them whenever we flew to our destination. So although much in our culture insists that the most important thing is to arrive at the destination, many of us have

had experiences that remind us how important the journey can be.

Not surprisingly, this tendency to focus on the goal to the exclusion of the process is often reflected in our churches as well. For example, I suspect that our view of time and productivity affects the ways decision-making is carried out in many churches. There is a clear difference between operating by consensus and by majority vote: although the latter promises more productivity, choosing to operate in this manner only makes sense if one has already determined that the final outcome of a decision is more important than the process. Furthermore, there seems to be little incentive for the majority to listen patiently to the concerns and objections of the minority if the former is certain that they have the necessary votes to impose their will. But what if God cares about not only the decision (and what results from it) but also the kind of people we become in the process? Operating by majority rule in the name of productivity and efficiency also assumes (wrongly I suspect) that God normally votes with the majority. It seems hard to account for why Israel needed the prophets, or for the lack of democracy displayed when the twelve spies returned from their trip to Canaan (Num 13–14), if one assumes that the best way to determine God's desires is simply to take a vote.

### Cultivating Patience

Cultivating the fruit of patience in the midst of a culture obsessed with productivity and speed is no easy matter. Yet God has provided us with abundant resources for cultivating this important fruit. Here is just a sampling of these manifold resources.

*Remembering our story.* When we gather together each week, we need to remember that at the heart of the Christian story is a God who is patient, a God who works slowly and diligently over many generations to create a people who will, by their very life together, bear witness to that God. A God who takes these people into the wilderness for forty years to teach them about dependence and trust. A God who becomes incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, who in turn devotes thirty years of his life preparing for his ministry. A slow, patient God, rather than a God-in-a-hurry God. Or as Kosuke Koyama



remarks, a God who moves at walking pace, a "three-mile-an-hour God." But even this is not the whole story.

Jesus Christ came. He walked towards the 'full stop'. He lost his mobility. He was nailed down! He is not even at three miles an hour as we walk. He is not moving. 'Full stop!' What can be slower than 'full stop'—'nailed down'? At this point of 'full stop', the apostolic church proclaims that the love of God to man is ultimately and fully revealed. God walks 'slowly' because he is love. If he is not love he would have gone much faster. Love has its speed. It is an inner speed. It is a spiritual speed. It is a different kind of speed from the technological speed to which we are accustomed. It is 'slow' yet it is lord over all other speeds since it is the speed of love.<sup>4</sup>

There's something liberating about remembering that our God isn't in a hurry. There's something liberating about remembering that our God entered our world, moved among us at a walk and demonstrated the love of God most preeminently by being "nailed down" for us. And there's something liberating about remembering that in so doing, God acted to justify us (even if we're not sure how), thereby freeing us from the need to justify ourselves by hurrying here or there, or accomplishing this or that. Once we are mindful of these simple yet profound truths, we are free to embody different relationships with one another, relationships rooted in a different understanding of time.

*Reckoning time differently.* The church is called to embody a different posture toward time. For Christians the past is not a deterministic series of cause and effect relationships whose trajectories inevitably lead to the present. Rather, the past—like the present and the future—is the arena of God's creative activity. The story of God that the church rehearses in its weekly liturgy is the story of a God who continually acts to do a "new thing" in the midst of creation, a "new thing" that could not have been anticipated and that cannot be explained by merely tracing its preceding causes. For example, Christians do not believe that the cosmos was created because it *had* to be, or because it was a necessary effect of a prior cause. Christians believe that God acted freely to create the cosmos, to call Abraham, to liberate the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, to reveal the Torah and to create countless other new and

unforeseen possibilities, including the unfathomable possibility of becoming incarnate in our very midst. Rehearsing such stories reminds us that despite the powerful impact that the past does exert on the present and the future, neither God nor God's creatures are destined to live in bondage to that past. As Christians, our relationship to the past can never be marked only or primarily by regret and despair; rather, God's past creative action on the world's behalf serves as a wellspring of hope in the present and the future.

Christians are also called to embody a different relationship to the future. Contrary to most contemporary clichés, we do not believe that the future is ours, nor do we believe that "our children are our future." Instead, Christians are called to embody an eschatological posture. To view time eschatologically is to have one's view of time informed by God's ultimate purposes for the cosmos. What shape will the reconciled cosmos have when God's cosmic work of reconciliation is completed at the *eschaton* or end? Obviously we have not been given a comprehensive blueprint. Yet the witness of the church across the centuries has been that in Israel, in Christ, in the church, we are offered an important window into God's desires for all of creation. Moreover, part of God's past and present desire was to call out a peculiar people who by their very lives together might bear witness to God's intention for all of creation. God's people stand as an imperfect yet useable witness to God's ultimate desires. As such, we have been given a very high calling: to offer to the world in the present a foretaste of the ultimate glory that God is bringing definitively in the future.

Such a view of the future has dramatic and far-reaching implications. The future is no longer that arena in which we strive to work out our own agendas. Nor is it that arena we need constantly fear because it invariably threatens to arrive and snatch away our hard-earned achievements. The future—like the past and the present—remains the arena of God's sovereign activity, and as such the future always remains an open future. We can never say with absolute certainty what will happen in the future. The future belongs to God. Yet as Christians we do believe that the future has a definite shape. Our conviction is that the future will be profoundly marked by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The exact shape of that cruciform future we do not know, yet



we are called as God's people to remain constantly open to God's Spirit as we seek in the present to embody in the midst of the world a foretaste of that future.

With such a view of the past and the future, Christians are free to embody a quite different posture toward the present. Time is not to be understood as a scarce commodity, the shortage of which hangs over our heads like a cloud and threatens our feverish attempts to make something of ourselves and our lives. Instead, by the grace of God and with a view to what God has done in the past and desires to do in the future, Christians are freed to view time as a gift and to dwell graciously in the present, knowing that God has liberated us from the necessity of justifying ourselves. In short, God has created a "timeful people" whose existence offers the world a foretaste of the kingdom. These people have been freed from the tyranny of believing that their ultimate destiny or joy is tied to how they "spend" their time. This freedom makes possible the appearance of a "new" time: a time for caring for those—like the elderly, children and the mentally handicapped—whose productivity is suspect; a time for being with those—like the poor, the downtrodden and the discouraged—who do not promise to contribute to our status or to guarantee that we will leave feeling upbeat; and a time for entering into the gratuitous and joyful worship of a God who promises *not* that things will always work out the way we believe they should, but of a God who promises *never* to leave us or forsake us.

*Embodying a different rhythm.* The age of the church is an age of waiting and working in this time between Christ's initial and final advent. This means that central to our story is the activity of waiting. This posture of waiting is powerfully embodied in those traditions that follow the liturgical year. For example, the season of Advent is dedicated to cultivating this spirit of anticipation and patience. Indeed, the entire cycle of the church year—though unfamiliar to many Christian traditions—has the potential for cultivating within our communities of faith a quite different rhythm, a quite different experience and understanding of time.

Another potentially effectual resource for the church would be the age-old practice of observing the sabbath. Christians through the ages have certainly

not been of one mind about how, when (or even whether) to observe this ancient practice of setting aside one day each week for rest. For the Jews such a practice reminded them continually of how their own lives were expected to be patterned after the ways of God. Just as God rested from work on the seventh day, so were Jews to rest from all their labors. Such a practice must have seemed strange to Israel's neighbors. How can one ever hope to get ahead in the world (or even get a little less further behind!) if one sets aside an entire day each week to "do nothing" while the rest of the world continues its mad rush toward "more" and "better"?

For all its potential to call into question our incessant strivings, observing the Christian sabbath is only one possible option and resource for Christians. Another long-standing and potentially fruitful tradition of the church is to view Sunday not simply as the Christian sabbath nor even as the first day of the week, but as the "eighth day of creation." This tradition, particularly vibrant in Eastern Orthodoxy, encourages us to view our weekly gatherings as bearing witness to the new act of creation that God initiated in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the light of Easter we see clearly that God's new creation has begun. Indeed, the power and impact of this Easter event are so far-reaching that our normal ways of telling time cannot circumscribe it. The new creation has broken into the old, the future has broken into the present, and it has not left things as they were. When we gather for worship, therefore, we are not simply marking the beginning of another week; we are gathering to celebrate God's new and definitive act of re-creation begun in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and in conformity to which God is drawing all creation. We gather, therefore, to celebrate this new day of creation, this "eighth day of creation." Here, it seems to me, is an enormously rich resource that might aid our attempts to embody a genuinely eschatological posture toward time.

### Reflection Questions and Practical Suggestions

With the new millennium upon us, many people are more keenly aware than ever of the grip that human ways of marking time have upon their lives. Yet despite all the millennial fever and all the expectations created by such a



seemingly momentous event, my conviction is that the everyday lives of most of us are shaped more by the way we mark our hours, days and weeks than by the ways we mark our years, centuries and millennia. This seems especially to be the case when we pause to reflect on the obstacles to cultivating lives that would bear the fruit of patience. It is with this conviction in mind that I offer the following questions and reflections.

□ Reflect on your own life during the past few days, considering those times when you have found yourself growing impatient. How do you think your understanding of time contributed to your impatience? Can you, for example, think of times when your impatience and frustration was rooted in your conviction that your time was your own? More specifically, can you recall times when you have grown impatient because people were not meeting *your* expectations or were not conforming to *your* timetable?

□ In learning to think of time differently, we might begin by reforming our ways of speaking about time. We might, for example, begin by trying to avoid talking about time as if it were one more commodity to be saved, spent or wasted. In a similar way, we might try to avoid thinking and talking about “investing” our time in one another and start thinking and talking about “devoting” our time to people. I admit that such changes may seem small and incidental, but I would not want to underestimate the power that certain ways of thinking and speaking have over our imaginations and affections. If I “invest” my time in something (or someone), by definition I do so with an expectation of a return on my investment. In contrast, to “devote” my time to someone is already to acknowledge his or her worth; the act itself is one of devotion.

□ This raises the troublesome (and guilt-inducing) issue of daily devotions. Although I will take up the practice of prayer more fully in a later chapter, a brief mention is called for here. Many of us insist that we cannot find the time to engage in such activities, while others of us do so on a regular basis, but do so primarily to be able to check off one more thing from our “to do” lists. Both groups of people seem to be driven by an overriding preoccupation with productivity. If we are honest, many of us do not take the time to engage in daily prayer because we do not see the point; that is, it seems like a waste

of time. Some Christians might see it as their responsibility to try to convince such people that they are mistaken about this. I am not persuaded, however, that such convincing is necessary or even desirable. On the contrary, I am increasingly persuaded that each of us needs to come to see the importance of what Henri Nouwen aptly termed “strange periods of uselessness.”<sup>45</sup> If prayer so understood has any benefit, it will not be because prayer will come to be seen as a wise investment of time, but because prayer so understood will free us from the need to be constantly productive.

□ In a similar way, those among us whose lives are increasingly dictated by their appointment books would do well to find creative ways of building in “slack” time. If time is not my personal possession to be grasped, but a gift to be freely given and received, then it would seem incredibly wrong-headed to begin each day by constructing elaborate strategies for hoarding what does not belong to me. Furthermore, if I begin “my day” (itself an interesting locution) knowing that I have planned nearly every minute, it is difficult to imagine that I will be patient when unexpected situations and people pop up. (It is probably appropriate that my computer crashed during the initial writing of this paragraph, a crash that resulted in my losing about a day’s worth of writing. I hadn’t realized at the time that I needed another opportunity to experience what I was writing about, but I suppose that I did.) Of course, planning our days so that people can be treated as people rather than as interruptions in our agendas entails a refusal to bow down to the gods of efficiency and productivity. Admittedly we can always plan to get one more task accomplished in any given day, but such planning almost always comes at a cost, and too often that cost entails sacrificing this person in front of me here and now.

□ Perhaps we might also cultivate some places in our lives where we would resist the notion that we must always do things the quickest way possible. Could there be times where we deliberately choose to do things a slower, seemingly-less-efficient way? I am always deeply touched, for example, by people who give our family a gift of home-baked bread, for I know such things take time. The message is never merely “Here is some bread for your empty stomachs,” but “I care enough about you to devote time to you.” I also suspect



we might benefit from learning to walk places to which we could easily drive. The point, of course, would not simply be to save gasoline (though that might be a consideration), but to be reminded of what it is like to move at a much slower, more humane pace, a pace that allows you to be mindful of so much more. Such practices might serve as powerful reminders of all those things (and people) we often miss in our all-out race against the clock.

□ We might also make some modest attempts to liberate ourselves from our bondage to the clock. I have a friend who, rather than wearing a wristwatch, carries a pocket watch. The reason he does so is to resist, even if only minimally, the hold that clock time has over his life. How many times do we find ourselves taking a quick glance at our watch to see what time it is, even though it doesn't really matter? My friend finds that with a pocket watch he only looks when he really needs to know. Another friend of mine doesn't carry a watch at all, because he finds that there are nearly always plenty of clocks around when he really needs one, and when there isn't one handy, he welcomes the human interaction necessitated in asking someone else. These are small gestures, to be sure, yet such gestures might open up the space in our lives for the Spirit to cultivate the fruit of patience.

□ And what about our corporate life? How might we work together to cultivate a different relationship to time? Those congregations unfamiliar with the Christian liturgical year might commit to studying the matter and discerning whether it offers a fruitful alternative for structuring their community's experience of time. In a similar way, congregations could consider what it might mean for their corporate life to begin thinking and talking about the day they gather as "the eighth day of creation." What kind of activities, for example, should we be engaged in on such a day if we hope genuinely to embody this new thing that God is doing in our midst?

□ A related issue that affects our life together concerns the "time consciousness" that often places severe restrictions on our gatherings. Is it really conceivable that we will ever learn to be patient with each other when many of us gather to worship with one eye on the hymnal and the other on our watches? I find it telling and sad that so many congregations now pride themselves on the precision with which they can manage a worship service,

guaranteeing that it will conclude precisely at an appointed time. Such pride suggests that we have not yet come to see ourselves as the family of God, for what self-respecting family, in gathering to engage in vital family matters, would do so only if each family member were assured that such matters could be concluded within an hour? Being part of a family involves a willingness to have one's schedule "interrupted" by another family member's needs. Perhaps many congregations might learn something vital from those traditions (such as many African-American and Pentecostal ones) that routinely conclude their services not when the clock strikes the hour, but when family business has been completed.

□ Those congregations and pastoral staffs that customarily operate by majority vote might commit themselves, at least for a trial period, to making decisions by consensus, knowing ahead of time that such an approach will be slower, less efficient, and require them to be much more patient with each other than they have any need to be currently. Such a commitment to forging consensus might help us to see that what we learn along the way about each other, ourselves and what God desires of us might be more important than always striving to be quantifiably productive.

□ We might also consider seriously whether the contemporary church needs a renewed sense of seriousness about preparation for initiation into the body of Christ. The fact that many of the early Christians spent several years in adult catechesis before becoming candidates for baptism stands as a sobering reminder of the seriousness of becoming a Christian. Transferring one's allegiance from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light was not considered an easy or speedy process. Whether such preparation comes before or after baptism, we need a way of communicating clearly to new members of the body that patience is both a prerequisite for and consequence of growth in the Spirit.

□ Finally, let me encourage you to be patient with yourself as well as others as you and they seek to grow in the Spirit and bear fruit. This book is not intended to make you an "instant" anything. If it serves any use at all, it may be as a reminder of how difficult and slow the journey will likely be and how necessary it will be for us to extend to ourselves the same kind of patience we



are learning to extend to others. I say this with the full realization that there are many voices in our culture that would encourage us to “be patient with ourselves” and to “give ourselves a break.” In urging you to be patient with yourself I do not mean to encourage an irresponsible indulgence that turns a blind eye toward your own faults and shortcomings or those of others. Rather, I am encouraging you to embody a wide-eyed patience and long-suffering. No farmer expects the seedlings to produce ripe and robust fruit in only a few days. This patience embodied by the farmer does not, however, keep that very same farmer from diligently uprooting the weeds that threaten and inhibit good growth. Pray, therefore, for the wisdom to recognize the difference between patience and indulgence.

*Lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. May you be strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. (Col 1:10-12)*

## SIX

### Cultivating Kindness in the Midst of Self-Sufficiency

*Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,  
I took them up in my arms;  
but they did not know that I healed them.  
I led them with cords of human kindness,  
with bands of love.  
I was to them like those  
who lift infants to their cheeks.  
I bent down to them and fed them. (Hos 11:3-4)*

*If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (Lk 6:33-36)*

**B**illboards with the slogan began appearing sometime in the early 1990s. Since then there have been books written about it, talk shows devoted to it and thousands of bumper stickers promoting it. And although I don't remember when or where I first saw a billboard with the slogan, I do remember having no idea what was being advocated. The plain black-and-white billboard simply urged: “Practice Random Acts of Kindness.”

Some time later I read a newspaper account about this movement. According to Gavin Whitsett, the author of a little purple handbook entitled *Guerrilla Kindness*, the movement is a response to the “random acts of violence” that fill the news each day. Whitsett and others like him encourage