

“It Would Take a Miracle”
John 2:1-11
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When you drew your star a couple of weeks ago, or last week, or today, or whenever you got your star, you pulled it out and it had a word on it. And no one's word said, “Easy.” Nobody read, “Don't worry about it, you don't have to do anything.” Everyone had a word for them for the year that could be hard, could take work, could be something that makes changes in your life. The words are from the fruits of the Spirit that Paul lists in Galatians 5: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There are none of those that come easy.

In fact, there is more than one of you, who, when you drew your star, took a look at the word that was on there and said, “Oh no! That's never going to happen, it would take a miracle.” Was that you?

Don't raise your hands. But remember that we are followers of Jesus and as our story from John today tells us, he is in the miracle business. Last week we talked about three of the star-words, love, joy and peace. Today, I want to talk about the next three: patience, kindness, and generosity. Love, joy and peace may be easy, or at least easy to understand. But not so these three. These are harder. I'm sure that there were some groans when some people looked at their stars and saw the word “patience.” Are you a patient person? What does it mean to be patient? Sometimes the Bible has this word translated as endurance or long-suffering. What does that mean? Does it mean that you are able to wait without complaining? Or even if you complain a bit, you can still wait without giving up? Here we are in the middle of January and we certainly have some more weeks of winter ahead of us. Is it hard to be patient in waiting for spring? It can't be that hard, or else we wouldn't live in Michigan, right? Waiting for spring in Michigan sometimes means waiting not for March, but for May. But patience is important because it builds character—or at least that's what St. Paul says. In Romans he reminds us that suffering produces endurance or patience and patience produces character and character produces hope. I've always said that verse was the Cubs fan's motto, that we were the most patient of people, waiting

108 years between World Series titles. We were waiting for something. Because if you're patient, it's not just that you are able to wait, but you are waiting for something to happen, waiting for some result. We can't just be patient for the sake of waiting. What is the point of being patient? What is the point enduring—endurance for what result? Putting up with troubles or suffering for what purpose? Are we waiting for God? Waiting for another person? Martin Luther, in his 1535 lectures on the Book of Galatians says about patience, "I think this means a persistent patience, by which someone not only bears adversity, insults, injury, etc., but even waits patiently for some improvement in those who have harmed him."¹

Do we wait patiently for others, even those who have hurt us? Can we endure without judgment, still praying for them, wishing them the best, ready to ask forgiveness or to offer forgiveness to them? If you're a parent, isn't this one of the lessons that are forced upon us? We learn to be patient because our children are never seeming to be as wise as us, never learning the lessons that we want to teach them, never listening to us when we could save them so much trouble. Our son, Brandon, called me the other night because he is changing jobs again. I guess chefs do this fairly often. But he called asking "What should I do with my life?" I told him that he's 31, he should have been asking me that question when he was 20. But we talked over the options that were in his mind, one of them safe and a couple of others would require stepping out in faith, not being sure if there was a job if he moved to that new area. But we talked and I ended up patiently listening, I think, and encouraging him to step out in faith and that it would be ok. And after 45 minutes on the phone he said, "Ok, I already decided on that one, and told them I'm coming, I just wanted to use you to confirm it in my mind." My son requires patience. Having children requires patience. Have you learned to be patient with your children? How about with your spouse? Are you patient with your friends? What about with your church? Are you patient with us, with one another? Are you patient or is there a point where you just give up? Are you patient with God? The prophet Isaiah announces how the fortunes of the nation will be restored after a

¹ Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works*, volume 27, *Lectures on Galatians*, 1535. p. 94.

generation of captivity in Babylon. But it took many generations for the nation to be rebuilt, for it to be a land of joy and productivity like God had promised. Were the people patient? Would you be, or would you give up? Would it take a miracle for you to be patient for all those years?

Patience is not easy, but neither is kindness. But how important this is. When the nineteenth century author Henry James was saying goodbye once to his young nephew Billy, his brother William's son, he said something that the boy never forgot. And of all the labyrinthine and impenetrably subtle things that that most labyrinthine and impenetrable old romancer could have said, what he did say was this: "There are three things that are important in human life. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. The third is to be kind."

Be kind because although kindness is not by a long shot the same thing as holiness, kindness is one of the doors that holiness enters the world through.²

It's not easy being kind. Kindness means being gentle with each other, courteous, overlooking the mistakes of others, ready to forgive. The spiritual practice of kindness consists in little acts—a word of thanks, a nod of approval, a tip at a restaurant, a smile to a weary worker, a greeting on the street, a hug for a friend. It is letting another know that they are appreciated, that they are valuable. For a church, being kind means being hospitable. It means thinking about how it would be for a person on their first visit here and making sure they feel at ease and feel welcome. That's kindness. No wonder the great Jewish Rabbi, Abraham Heschel near the end of his life concluded, "When I was young, I used to admire intelligent people; as I grow older, I admire kind people."³ We said before that being a parent requires patience, but it also requires kindness, doesn't it. And it's not always easy.

Generosity is also hard. And it's hard to see as well. Who is the generous person? How can you tell? If a person hands a twenty dollar bill to a homeless person on the street, are they being generous? If they are a millionaire and have a lot of money to spare, are they still generous? What if the giver is a

² Buechner, Frederick. *The Clown in the Belfry*.

³ Heschel, Abraham. *Spiritual Literacy*. p. 261.

person who is a government worker on furlough and is walking around with three twenties in his wallet, but he sees this homeless woman and gives her one of those bills even though he doesn't know when his next paycheck will be coming. Is he generous? The Buddhist teacher Yi-Fu Tuan says, "A spontaneous act of generosity, performed with unselfish grace is an example of moral beauty."⁴ Are you generous? Do you love to give things away? Do you love Christmas because you get the most joy from giving someone what they really want, because of the surprise on their faces? You love Christmas not because of anything you get, but because it is a chance for you to give? Generosity is spoken of often in the Bible, but it is most often spoken of not as an encouragement for people to be generous, although we should, but as a characteristic of God. And that, I think is the key for all three of these characteristics, these fruits of the Spirit. Generosity is also a necessary attribute of a parent, just as we said that patience and kindness were. Patience, kindness, generosity are supposed to be evident in the Christian life because they are characteristic of God. God, as our loving parent, shows us patience and kindness and generosity. We are supposed to treat each other with patience and kindness and generosity because that is how God treats us. God is patient with each one of us. As often as we run away from us, God never ever gives up on us. And God is kind, treating us with love, welcoming us home like the Prodigal's father, sheltering us under her wings like the hen with her chicks. And God is generous, giving us life and love and each other and this world in which we live.

It may feel like it would take a miracle for these to be the fruit that people see in our lives, sort of like changing water into wine, but I don't think that it's really a miracle. If we look back at the story of Jesus at the wedding in Cana, John doesn't say that was his first miracle. What he actually says is that was Jesus' first sign. John doesn't call these spectacular unnatural events miracles, he calls them signs. This was the first sign that Jesus did. They are signs because they are events that proclaim who Jesus was. They are clues to his identity. They are signs that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the son of God. The changing of the water into wine is a sign of God's abundant generosity, of God's joy of life, of

4 Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Spiritual Literacy*. p. 65

God's celebration of love. It is a sign of God's blessing on his creation. The changing of water into wine is a sign that Jesus is bringing to us the joy and blessing of a loving God. It's a sign, it's an act with a purpose of showing who Jesus is and what kind of God we have. Just so, the fact that we might be growing in patience and kindness and generosity are not miracles. They are signs of who we are. The people of God. We act this way toward each other and toward all who come to us because that is how God has acted toward us. God is patient. God is kind. God is generous. And so we can be too.