

Sermon: Like a Sloth

Written by: Rev Jessica M. Ashcroft-Townsley

Scriptures: Ephesians 4:1-16; John 14:15-31

Introduction to theme:

Onward we move through our current sermon series, discussing the nine qualities of the phenomenon St. Paul, in chapter 5 of his letter to the Galatians, calls the “Fruit of the Spirit.” It’s important that we remember that these qualities are not fruits themselves. The Fruit (singular) of the Spirit is the thing made manifest through the works and visibility of the nine virtues. These include faithfulness, goodness, self-control, patience, gentleness, joy, peace, kindness, and love. Each week all the way to June 11, our worship will feature a different feature of “The Fruit of the Spirit.” The first week, we talked about faithfulness, looking to God’s steadfast example of how to model faithfulness in our lives and relationships. Then, centering on goodness, we arrived at the inspired scriptural notion that we are already good, we just need a bit of help getting that good out. Last week, we turned our focus to self-control and a reminder to keep our heads when all about us seems to be chaotic, that we might act with appropriate restraint—not from a place of anger, but with a heart for what is good.

This week, we’re actually covering two virtues simultaneously: patience and gentleness. I decided these two were so closely correlated that they could reasonably be paired. Today, we will hear two scripture passages. The first is a reading from another of Paul’s letters, the letter to the church at Ephesus, which is purported to have been written from prison. In it, he exhorts his audience, including the entirety of the Christian world, to live a life worthy of their calling, to maintain unity in the Spirit of the living God. Our second reading today will take us directly to the gospel of John in which Jesus reminds the disciples of his abiding presence with them, even as he prepares to leave them. Let us listen.

Sermon:

I don’t think it will come as a surprise to any of you that the vegan pastor has quite a love for animals. Many people believe that animals are put here not just for our enjoyment or as part of the circle of life, but also to guide us, teach us, or even

communicate with us if we're open enough to listen. Just this morning, I watched a video about a woman who had saved a wingless bee, giving it a chance to live its short life in comfort, learning much more from it than it may have conceivably done from her.

It's not uncommon to identify with a particular animal. Folks, including myself, used to appropriate the term "spirit animal," from the Indigenous community, but we're not going to do that today. Instead, we will carry on doing our level best to act with sensitivity to cultural uniqueness by simply noting that some of us have a particular *affinity for* or *identification with* a species of animal. When I was a kid, I watched animals with a particular reverence. I loved to watch the powerful bison of the plains and think about how it must feel to be so strong and imposing because, as a girl of limited stature, I felt everything but. I hoped that as I got older, I would identify with something cool or powerful like a lion. Or... maybe something associated with wisdom or wit—the wise old owl, for instance.

At 41, I can tell you that I've kept my eyes open, hoping to find I am kindred spirits with an especially enchanting, cool, or even cunning animal. And I have, indeed, finally figured out what animal that is. For various reasons, I'm afraid I have to tell you that the animal I most identify with is... a sloth.

Now, I know what you're thinking: Pastor Jessica, just because you're exhausted from packing boxes and would *like* to lay around all day doing absolutely nothing does not mean you can! But seriously, the more I learn about the sloth species, the more drawn I am to it. Every time we go to the National Aquarium, we take a detour through the rainforest exhibit hoping to get a glimpse of the rescued sloths in residence there. Once, in fact, before I knew there even were two sloths hanging around in at the Baltimore Inner Harbor, we walked up the steps to the observation deck and there we were, face to face with Ivy, one of the two-toed sloths who of their rainforest. I had by that time long been enamored with these gentle creatures, but I'd never seen one in the fur, so-to-speak.

As I looked at Ivy, I was struck by the contrast, I think, between all the hustle and bustle of the city and crowds of people trekking through the aquarium that day and the sloths literally hanging out in trees, taking their sweet time to do anything, and all seemingly

without a care in the world. As with almost everything in my life, I've given perhaps too much thought to why I love sloths so much. At first, there doesn't seem much to them, does there? They're cute, but also kinda odd looking. They've got a symbiotic relationship with bugs who crawl around in their fur, so we're not going to learn much about hygiene from them. They rest for anywhere between 15-20 hours a day, so I suppose we could learn something about self-care from them, but they aren't especially exciting to watch.

But here's the thing: Perhaps most endearingly, they're gentle. They're patient, they must be! Sloths are also methodical... almost meditative. They move so slowly that they often appear not to be moving at all. They are, for all intents and purposes: *still*. As I think about sloths more and more, the words that come to mind are drawn from the 46th Psalm: Be still and know.

Be still and know.

If we give them a chance, the sloths may teach us something about *stillness*.

I don't know about you, but stillness is not something that comes naturally to me. We established last week that I have a busy, neuro-divergent brain. As a kid, I was very sensitive and anxious. When you gave a lot happening inside your body, it can be hard to feel grounded. For a long time, I think I felt held by God, but untethered to the world. I haven't usually fit in, to be perfectly honest, which is especially difficult when you're of school-age and everyone is all about trying to do just that. I may know as an adult the gift of uniqueness, but when you cannot feel the ground beneath you, you long for rootedness. For grounded-ness.

Have you ever felt the earth was shifting beneath your feet in a really stressful time? Or like your mind just won't stop?

Society doesn't help, does it? We're so busy, needing constant stimulation to be engaged. We stay connected ALL. THE. TIME. And we forget, I think, that real engagement happens on a human level, not a technological one. In meditation groups, leaders talk a lot about the purpose of meditation not being relaxation, although that can be a result. We don't meditate or draw into the stillness of God's presence through prayer for the purposes of merely getting away. The goal of meditation is to bring you

fully into the present and able to confront life fully-engaged in the now. Meditation and prayer are meant, in part, to put you into a space where you are not worried about the future and lamenting over past. When we are present, we are mindful, we are awake to the world around us.

That presence requires us to put down some of the heavy, frenetic energy of the world's busy-ness and take up more stillness. When I think about that kind of presence, I think of Jesus's example. Before he leaves them, Jesus tells the disciples, "Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid." Christ brings them peace and will leaving with them with it, as well. His peace. The peace of God. Jesus exhorts them to be *rooted* in God's peace and the Spirit's abiding presence.

The practice of being rooted has plenty of biblical support. We see it with Abraham and his connection to the land. We hear about it in Isaiah, in the Psalms, and in the gospel of Mark. Jesus alludes to it here in John as well. To be rooted or grounded means that when worry creeps in, as it will do, or when distractions and busy-ness assail us, we should instead focus intently on the here and now—on what's happening in the moment and on God's steadfast presence with us. In the reading from the gospel of John, Jesus *stops* for this moment with the disciples, calling them to be fully present. Do not worry about the future. Do not fret over the past. The triune God is with you: the father, the son, and the spirit.

One of my favorite ways of trying to understand God comes from theologian Paul Tillich who relates to God not as a being, but as Being, itself. In fact, he called God "the ground of being." What we see from Jesus of Nazareth is an embodiment of this idea. So grounded is Jesus, so in tune is he with what's happening right now, so rooted in God's love is he, that he is able to attend to what needs attending to without being awash in the noise all around him. This grounded, in-the-moment nature is perhaps no better exemplified than it is in the scene from the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, with the woman healed of the issue of blood. She enters the loud, busy crowd around Jesus believing that if she can but touch the hem of his clothes, she might finally be healed. She does just that, touches the hem of his garment, which him to turn and acknowledge her presence and faith. Remember, he is amidst the crowds. How many

people had touched him in some way in those moments? He walked through crowds of people all the time. Rarely does he stop at the mere touch of his clothes. And yet somehow, in the middle of the noise around him, he was able to hear and feel this woman's need and help as he did so many of the places he traveled in his life.

Jesus as God incarnate tells the disciples that they will be able to do what he can do and reminds them that they are called to operate not with a mind set solely on things above and surely not on those things left behind, but in that the place where faith meets reality: in the present and at ground level. That requires stillness and presence because, as we all know, it's noisy here at the ground level. It can be deafening, in fact. Being rooted in the God means, in part, to be firmly rooted in the now, able to find quiet even when it's loud. It is to be a sloth in the trees in the middle of the Inner Harbor. It means being able to, like Jesus, discern what needs tending to and what does not.

We cannot manifest the Fruit of the Spirit if we are moving at the frenzied pace of the world and interested only in what interests it. Paul, in his letter to the church at Ephesus, writes that a life worthy of our calling is one that is characterized by "humility and gentleness with patience, bearing with one another in love."

Humility: I am not God. I am human like everyone else upon the earth no matter who they are or where they come from.

Gentleness: We were made for community. We are part of the body of Christ, called to care for one another as part of tending to our communal identity in Christ. That care is not aggressive or pushy or overbearing. It is gentle.

Patience: God may not be subject to the laws of time, but we sure are. To be patient is to accept that things do not happen on our time. We must be able to tolerate some delay, perhaps a little trouble, and sometimes even a bit of suffering without letting it arouse our anger, that we might lose our self-control.

These virtues are not always easy to exhibit, are they? Humility gets a sermon or two of its own from time to time, but we don't often talk about the importance of a spirit of patience and gentleness in church. And yet, on Mother's day, I think we need only to consider the example of parenting to know just how hard, but vital they really are. Who

among us either as a child or as a parent has not witnessed the importance of the gargantuan task of applying patience and gentleness in the parental role? If a parent or caregiver is not patient early in their development, children do not learn how to do things themselves. If they are not gentle, the child may well fear confiding in them or not seek their consolation when things in life are painful or hard as we all know life can be. We often ascribe patience and gentleness to women, and for good reason. But, while today I do want to recognize those who mother in all kinds of ways, Paul does not make that distinction here. He says all of us, Christians of all genders, are to exhibit gentleness with patience.

Paul wants us to understand that the body of Christ is one which calls for us to be patient and gentle, bearing with one another in love. That's difficult to do in relationships (of all kinds) because, contrary to what Paul and Jesus ask (which is unity in Christ), the reality is that we are individuals with separate minds and bodies, all operating of our own volition. People do not always do what we would like them to do. They cannot always be what we want them to be. And none of us gets it right all the time—even the best of mothers or parents.

When that happens, we really do need to take a cue from our furry little rain forest pals: take a breath, be still, and know. We must cultivate these dual gifts of patience and gentleness. To do this, we'd do well to look toward the rainforest and see the holiness reflected in its trees. We'd be wise to look at around us at God's creation. Patience and gentleness are hard, but necessary components of what it looks like to live as though the Spirit of the living God resides within us.

If we are not patient, if we are not gentle, the fruit of the Spirit is not there.

The Spirit of the still speaking God is with you *and* within you.

Be still. Be patient. Be gentle.

Today and every day, be like a bit more like the sloths.

Amen.