

**PATIENT LOVE**  
**A story sermon based on**  
**1 Corinthians 13:4**  
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**January 31, 2010**

Last Sunday we considered 1 Corinthians 12 and Paul's remarkable imagery of the church as the Body of Christ. I told you that it is best that we not chop up Paul's message in these chapters, but that we consider them to be an integrated effort to drive a message home to those who call themselves Christ followers. Paul's message takes a remarkably poetic turn in 1 Corinthians 13. Here Paul expresses the profound nature of love that we are called to embody in our lives. Paul calls this love, "a still more excellent way." His message is deep and profound. It goes far beyond the trivial understanding of love put forth by the culture in which we live. The love that we are to share in this life is our response to the love we have experienced from God in Jesus the Christ. It is a love that challenges us to move beyond simply loving those who love us. It calls us to live out love with everything we do and to wed that love with an effort to bring justice to the whole of God's people.

This is a message not easily learned. We are a people who play in the shallows rather than swim in the deep. However, there are times in life when the lesson of love comes home to us in a powerful way and we are changed forever. Today I tell you a true story of such a time in my life.

## **PATIENT LOVE**

The smell of new mown grass has made cutting my lawn an exercise in personal time travel. I mow and I remember an earlier time and the night when I learned about patient love.

About the age of twelve I desired more spending money than a weekly allowance could muster. I wanted a job, but in my small town those were hard to come by for one so young. So in a burst of entrepreneurial fervor I went into business for myself. I began mowing lawns.

I put together quite an interesting clientele. It was composed mostly of widows and retirees who were looking for someone like me to do what they could no longer do for themselves. There was Mrs. Little and Miss Collier who lived together about three blocks down Forest Street. Mrs. Little was a retired second grade teacher who remembered me favorably from elementary school.

Minda Crosby was one of my favorite clients. She lived in a large white Victorian house that featured a kind of tower at one corner and a wrap around porch. Her husband had been a cobbler. His shop was in a back portion of the house. Mrs. Crosby, I never called her Minda to her face, kept a regular routine. She called almost exactly every seven days to schedule another mowing. While I worked she busied herself in the kitchen. When I finished she always offered me fresh baked oatmeal and raisin cookies and a cool glass of lemonade. I would sit in her kitchen at a white enamel and chrome table, my arms sweaty and flecked with grass. While she searched for her purse I ate and drank with pleasure.

Another client was Bob Lamb. Mr. Lamb had been the town banker. I enjoyed mowing his lawn because in the garage behind his house he kept an old model T that he and a friend were restoring. I remember gazing through the window to assess their progress and imagining the day when he would complete the project and offer me a ride.

Now whenever I cut the grass the aroma takes me back and I think of all of these people from my past, but more than any of these I remember Mrs. Bingham.

My buddies at school had warned me about Mrs. Bingham. “Don’t work for her.” They cautioned. “She’ll talk your ear off.” But one day she called and I needed the work to pay for a new bike and so I accepted.

I arrived at her house with my lawn mower in tow. She came out into the yard and walked around with me to show me the boundaries and to warn me about special areas that she wanted attended to. She was a stately woman in her late seventies. Her hair was pure white and swept neatly and elegantly up into a knot and held in place by a brown translucent comb. She seemed out of place walking through the long wet grass and she made her steps unusually high trying to avoid the damp. When she neared her cleanly groomed flowerbeds she relaxed and spoke of them with a tone that could only be called reverent.

She wore a gray skirt and a shirtwaist blouse that came high on her neck. It was trimmed with lace. I remember something about Gibson Girls and wondered if she fit the description.

I worked about an hour cutting her grass and then I went to the door to be paid. She invited me inside and offered me a seat in a large old chair with white porcelain casters on each leg. I waited. It took her a long time to write that check. She sat across

from me at a cherry wood secretary full of pigeonholes stuffed with letters and stocked with pencils and stamps. As she wrote she began to speak. She asked about school and my family. Her questions seemed genuine and she asked them in such a way that we were soon engaged in a conversation that lasted most of an hour.

As time passed I worked more and more for Mrs. Bingham. In the summer I mowed her lawn. In the autumn I raked her leaves. In the winter I shoveled her walk. In the spring I washed her windows and planted her flowers. Each time after I finished we would talk. We talked about growing up and my plans for the future. We talked about school and the prospect of college. I discovered that she was a Vassar girl. I was not surprised. We talked about family and troubles. I soon realized that I cherished our conversations. She had become my friend.

I worked for Mrs. Bingham throughout high school. Even after I stopped mowing grass for Mr. Lamb and Minda Crosby, I continued to cut Mrs. Bingham's grass. As I grew older I felt a faint sense of embarrassment at our sessions together. How could I admit that this woman so much older than me could be my best friend? Still I kept on visiting and we kept on talking. I invited her to my graduation reception. Not the party with my school friends mind you but the family reception with my aunts and uncles, the one where the decorations consisted of my picture surrounded by glass bowls of mixed nuts and mints. She could not come but I still have the gift she sent. She gave me a copy of *Markings* by Dag Hammarskjold and she signed the note, "Lillian." I still have the note tucked within the cover of that book.

I went to see her before I left for college. I don't remember what we talked about, but I remember that I promised to visit again whenever I returned home. I actually did

visit her once or twice, but then I became a sophisticated college man and I found it easy to avoid seeing her whenever I was home. After a while I even stopped feeling guilty.

I graduated from college and met my wife and we married. From time to time the memory of Mrs. Bingham would come to my mind. The memory was both wonderful and painful. I knew that in growing up I had walked away from someone very special. I tried to put that out of my mind.

Several years later on a visit home Terry and I were in the local library when we met Mrs. Bingham's daughter. Hoping that she would not mention how long my silence had been, I inquired about her health. It was all very adult and very proper, but the child in me was screaming to run and hide.

"She is not well." Came her reply. "She has been in the hospital for some time now. She still mentions you. She thought so much of you."

The past tense in her voice felt like a razor strap across my behind. "I would love to see her. We will go to the hospital tonight during visiting hours."

Terry went with me but stood back at the door as I entered her hospital room. Mrs. Bingham lay asleep. She was shockingly thin. Her hair hung straight to her shoulders and appeared a faint yellow in the florescent light. I approached her bed, touched her hand and softly spoke her name. "Mrs. Bingham. Mrs. Bingham. Remember me?"

She opened her eyes without moving her head and held me in her gaze. "Oh!" she whispered in a faint signal of recognition. With her hand she pulled me weakly toward her. I bent my head and turned my ear to her lips. "You're here. You're here.

Thank you.” Then she spoke the truth I had always known but had been unable to accept.

“I always loved you.” She said. She kissed my cheek.

“I know.” I replied in a cracking whisper. “I loved you too.”

Now I mow the lawn and I smell the grass and I pause as Mrs. Little and Miss Collier, Minda Crosby and Bob Lamb all pass before me. But mostly I remember Lillian Bingham and the night I learned that love is patient, very patient indeed.

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