

Lenten Sermon Series 2009

*Beatitudes 3: Blessed Are the Meek, The Strength of Patience*

Isaiah 42:1-4; John 18:19-24

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If it weren't for the Beatitudes, I don't think I'd have ever even heard of the word "meek." It's not one we encounter every day. What exactly does it mean? In my mind it conjures up the stereotypical image of a librarian: Donna Reed in the Jimmy Stewart-less world of "It's a Wonderful Life." Mousy, timid, shy, a bit of a doormat. It doesn't sound very promising, really. Who wants to be meek like that?

But remember the idea that the Beatitudes are a kind of ladder, each one leading to the next. First is poverty of spirit, that sense of utter dependence on God, something we never feel so completely as when we mourn (the second Beatitude). With this model, mourning leads somehow to meekness. But how?

Think of the ways a person can respond to grief. Surely excessive mourning, extreme grief, can indeed make a person timid and shy, beaten down, defeated by life, like that alternate reality, Donna Reed. It's nice of Jesus to single these people out, but is this supposed to be some kind of model for us?

Then again, excessive grief can also make people bitter, angry, resentful, ready to lash out at the world. If I have to suffer, then by God I'll make everyone else suffer, too! There's nothing at all meek about that. But consider that the Greek word translated as "meek" is *praus*, a word you would use to describe a wild animal that has been tamed, domesticated. Again, that might not sound too appealing to us. We tend to romanticize being "born free" as opposed to being "collared," but if we think about it in terms of our own spirits, of the extreme emotion of grief, then we think about wild, potentially destructive emotions that have been tamed. Not beaten into submission or driven into the ground, but rather curbed, tempered, put to good use, able to be led and directed and taught. Now we're starting to get a picture of what Jesus might have meant by this Beatitude.

Furthermore we look to Jesus himself as our model of meekness. Certainly there is nothing timid or mousy about him! But meek, most definitely. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the Servant of God, in whom Christians recognize Jesus. Isaiah says, "He will not shout or cry out or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth." This is a far cry from the typical bluster we hear about an angry God bent on judgment and hellfire. This is a kinder, gentler image. Pay attention especially to that part about, "he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth." One of my sources, Erik Kolbell, describes biblical meekness as "quiet perseverance in the face of brute rage; a staunch refusal to either lie down in submission or rise up in violence before those forces that oppress us."

When I thought of examples of Jesus' meekness, first and foremost in my mind came up the stories of Jesus before his accusers, whether Pontius Pilate, King Herod, or the religious council. In all cases Jesus does not argue or rail against his accusers. Physically he submits to their authority. He does not resist arrest, and he does not let his followers take up the sword on his behalf. Spiritually, though, he does not submit at all. But his resistance is not characterized by anger or violence. If he answers their accusations at all, he does so simply.

Take the example from John that we heard today. His accusers are hoping to get a rise out of him, to stir him up so he'll say something self-incriminating. Instead, Jesus is cool and even cooperative – but only on his own terms. “I’ve always spoken open,” he says, “I said nothing in secret. Ask those who heard me. Surely they know what was said.” He is in a sense letting the public serve as his witnesses, something the priests want to avoid at all costs. One of the officials then strikes Jesus, hoping to provoke a reaction from him, but Jesus simply says, “If I said something wrong, then testify as to what I did wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?” He is the epitome of meekness, yet he has completely turned the tables so that his accusers now find themselves on the defensive. Recall again Kolbell’s definition: “Biblical meekness is quiet perseverance in the face of brute rage; a staunch refusal to either lie down in submission or rise up in violence before those forces that oppress us.”

In fact, it’s interesting that every single one of the books I’m reading on the Beatitudes, in discussing meekness they all pointed to the great nonviolent struggles of the twentieth century: the independence movement in India led by Gandhi, the civil rights movement in the United States led by King, and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa led by Tutu. I’m reminded again of the Servant of God as described by Isaiah, who will not falter or be discouraged until he establishes justice on earth. Meekness, we begin to see, is a powerful force indeed. It is an implacable patience in the face of opposition.

But social injustice is not the only force of oppression in the world. Kolbell says that an oppressive force is one which threatens to diminish me as a human being. Unjust laws, sure. But what about the ordinary stresses and trials of life? Road rage. The jerk in the grocery express line with two items over the limit. The demanding boss who never gives you a break. The creditors breathing down your neck. In these examples, consider what is the oppressive force that threatens to diminish you as a human being? Is it really the other driver, the boss, the creditors? Or might it be our own reaction to them: our anger, our bitterness, our resentment? Sometimes it is our own emotions that oppress us and diminish our humanity, when they run out of control and threaten to cause harm to ourselves or others. Recall again that meekness refers to a wild animal that has been tamed. Can’t the same be said for our own emotions? Meekness is about taking our wild emotions and bridling them, taming them, enabling them to be led so that they may be put to a useful purpose. It’s amazing the depth we can get out of this concept that seemed at first so alien to us!

So how do we go about acquiring this meekness? As always, the answer is rooted in God. Meekness is rooted in the humble knowledge that we are not God, we are not the boss of the universe. But at the same time it is the awareness that we are God’s beloved children, and that gives us a dignity and a purpose that can never be taken away. Meekness is rooted in a regard for one another that sees each other not as enemies nor again as gods, but as fellow children of God. Meekness means trusting in the promises of God, that God is working his purpose out, and we should not falter or be discouraged. Meekness involves humility and dignity, patience and perseverance, mildness and confidence.

Those who are meek, Jesus says, will inherit the earth. This is interesting, because those who are not meek, who are domineering, oppressive and demanding, these are the kinds of people who seem bent on grabbing as much of the earth as they can, hoarding it for themselves, denying it to others. But what is it they are really holding on to? Gandhi, King, and Tutu would all say that they are chasing after an illusion. They think they can possess power, wealth, property, but in grasping after these they let slip away everything that makes us truly human, our most precious gifts that come from God: compassion, love, community. St. Augustine warned that, “If you wish to possess the earth now, take care: if you are meek you already possess it, but if you are ruthless, the earth will possess you.” Those who are greedy and grasping will lose that which they try to hold on to. But the meek don’t have to struggle at all; it’s already theirs. Sounds a lot like what Jesus says over and over again, doesn’t it?

The meek know that we don't have to struggle and grasp for these blessings. That we don't need to be the biggest or the fastest or the strongest, that we don't have to beat off other people who are fighting for our scrap of the pile. God will do all the work. All we have to do is hang on, holding down the homestead until God's purpose is finally worked out. Erik Kolbell likens meekness to a kind of spiritual gardening: planting seeds of hope, and nurturing and cultivating them to fruition. "Inheriting the earth," he says, "means wresting a piece of creation that has been ceded to the demons and reclaiming it for God."