

Go Meekly
Matthew 5:1-12

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

While preparing this sermon I just knew that when I did a word study of the Greek word for “meek” that I would find a meaning far different from the way we understand it in English. Jesus could not possibly mean that the Casper Milquetoasts of the world would inherit the earth; could he? We make fun of the meek cracking jokes behind their backs. We don’t pick meek people to be on our sports teams or as tennis partners. We don’t hire Casper Milquetoast and position him to rise to the seats of power in government and industry. In fact, put the word meek on your resume and you will not get a job! The meek are the butt of jokes – cartoonish. So maybe Jesus didn’t mean what we think of as meek.

So with all the language aids at hand I started to dig into the text, researching the word and what I learned is that it really does mean mild, gentle, unassuming, perhaps, unable to take much initiative. Imagine an animal whose wildness has been tamed, with disciplining that has rendered him very gentle. That is what this passage means! It describes a rather meek person who shyly hangs back reticent to step forward – passive.

Yet, the meek in Jesus’ crowd may not have chosen meekness; it may have been forced upon them by circumstance.¹ After all they were occupied by the Roman army whose iron boot was quick to stomp out any and all rebellion or rebellious persons. In the Matthew 5 passage, Jesus is describing people who are treated by the world as nobodies. They are beggars on the streets of our cities, the ones who hold cardboard signs at the intersections that read “Homeless vet,” or “Will work for food.” Were they not so obvious by their location they would be invisible because our eyes choose avoid them. They are the children of AIDS ravaged Africa or the homeless orphans in Haiti after the TV crews leave and they are no longer front and center on the Six O’clock news. They have no power and nowhere to turn, no one in their corner. And to them Jesus says, “Blessed are the meek.”

As we overhear Jesus’ words of comfort to the people in the crowd who are literally meek, we know implicitly that he also speaks to us who rightly assume a attitude of spiritual meekness. For 21st century

¹ Howell

Americans, cultivating spiritual meekness in our souls is an uphill struggle. We are conditioned from birth to be anything but meek. All of my life I have been in positions of leadership and authority – never once can I recall anyone telling me that leaders are meek. The meek are humble, and although life in the world can be humiliating, few out there celebrate humility. Yet I hear the echoing words of Paul, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.” And again Paul says, “do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but think with sober judgment” (Romans 12:2-3, paraphrased). We are to move towards a healthy meekness – a meekness that is wise as we are but lambs among wolves, knowing who our shepherd is.

The virtue of this type of meekness or humility means that I get out of the way so that others might see the Lord I follow. Thomas Merton has a most vivid image of a truly meek person, “The humble [person] receives praise the way a clean window takes the light of the sun. The truer and more intense the light is, the less you see the glass.” Like the wild horse who has been tamed and trained to hear and heed the commands of his rider, it is only in our meekness that we can receive the message of Jesus. Jesus is interested in meekness towards God, being “directable” towards God. A “directable” meekness, a “leadable” meekness, is no handicap instead it means we are people God can use to accomplish His purpose.

We cannot force God, try as we will, He is in control and until we yield we are useless and our efforts while well intentioned are folly. We cannot be aggressive in our relationship towards God. We must have what John Calvin called a “teachable spirit.” It is not something I do; it is something that I am. Jesus said, “Blessed are the meek, the humble, the happily docile, the noble weak. He did not say, blessed are the smart, the theologically agile, the spiritual giants” (Howell, 49).

God did not call the biggest, boldest, or strongest to accomplish His plans, just the opposite. The biblical narrative is replete with stories of the least accomplishing the most for the kingdom. Moses laughed over God’s choice of the Jews. “It was not because you were more in numbers than any other people that the Lord set his love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of peoples” (Deut. 7). Moses himself was “very meek, more than all the men on the face of the earth” (Num. 12:3). God told Gideon 32,000 warriors were too many for God to use to defeat the Midianites, and the battle was on hold until a mere 300 were left” (Judges 7). Didn’t Samuel pass over the

older and bigger sons of Jesse before anointing little David, who in turn defeated the biggest of Israel's enemies, the giant Goliath (1 Sam. 16-17). The mere boy Jeremiah called the nation on the carpet. The meek do not mind being weak, for know their strength lies in God.

Consider the Virgin Mary. Her simple, calm, predictable life, laid out before her was disrupted by an unsolicited angelic pronouncement. Her obedience was so grounded in her humility that her response was, "Let it be to me according to your Word" (Luke 1:38). Is this what the Great Apostle Paul meant when he said, "the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger?" Blessed are the humble who wear the folly of the world as their coat.

There is a story of the 4th century desert father, Abba Macarius. One day while out walking, Macarius met up with the devil. Attacking repeatedly, the devil asked, "What is your power Macarius that makes me powerless against you? All that you do, I do too. You fast, but I never eat. You keep vigil, but I never sleep. In one thing only do you beat me." Abba Macarius asked what that was. The devil said, "Your humility. Because of that I can do nothing against you" (Howell, 51).

Contrast that with Lancelot in the movie Camelot. Macarius does not hold up his spiritual credentials, his humility precludes any boasting, for he considers himself as Calvin said 12 centuries later, a 5 foot worm, unworthy. Conversely, Lancelot boasts of his *humilité* when Guinevere inquires about the source of his power. As the story unfolds it is the one who boast of his humility who falls the hardest, and in his falling he brings down and destroys the noble ideal of Camelot; the humility of which he boasts was but the charade of an egomaniac. Macarius is clueless as the truly humble are: his utter humility is something he never considers. It's like the back of his head; it's there but not obvious to him, because his focus is entirely on God, not himself.

What is their destine - Mary, and David, and Moses, and Macarius? They will inherit the earth. Jesus promises a "jolting reversal" of the world's power structure. St. Augustine penned this warning, "You who wish to possess the earth now, take care. If you are meek, you will possess it; if ruthless, the earth will possess you." The possessive find it all but impossible to avoid being possessed; our possessions inevitably possess us.

The psalmist sings over and over that God will deliver us from the pit; lifting the lowly from disappointing despair, and positioning them like

shining lights on a hill. Of course, God is not going to reward you with uncountable wealth, so you can live a life of pleasure, soaking in the tropical sun on your own island, isolated and removed from the pains of this world. We are heirs in a family that remains forever meek. They do not possess, they leave the kingdom in the hands of the Lord of the kingdom, Jesus Christ, and they continue about the work He has for them – working for the benefit of others. The treasure the meek seek to possess is proximity to Jesus.

The meek have transforming power. It is the meek in the Bible stories that changed the world. It was the meek in the century past who overthrew tyrants and broke the chains of oppression – not by force of arms but by moral courage and with godly integrity. Consider the power of these non-violent resisters (clip from *Gandhi*, showing the resisters to the English law forbidding the manufacturing of salt).

In our own country, we can still see the African- American men in suits, signing hymns, being hosed down and bitten by German shepherds in Bull Connor's Birmingham. One of these men is now congressman John Lewis of Georgia.

Lewis was the son of a sharecropper. He had grown up terrified of prison; he was arrested in a non-violent demonstration. He was going to jail, he was terrified, but as he was being taken "from the downtown store where he had led a sit in, his desire, to eat at the lunch counter, not out back in the alley, on his way to jail suddenly he felt as if a great burden had been lifted from his shoulders. He felt his strength growing. As the cops arrested his group he looked at the faces of his friends and saw the same thing he felt himself. He no longer felt small and vulnerable. He felt empowered, part of something much larger than himself ... Years later he could point out the photos of the very young John Lewis coming out of jail on that day, and note that there it was in his face, the confidence, the dignity. I had never had that much dignity before, he said years later. It was exhilarating."²

That story reminds me of another non-violent resister, St. Peter. When he and the apostles were arrested and brought before the religious court, they stood before the authorities, those whose power was exceedingly greater than Peter could ever imagine. When ordered to stop these stories about Jesus and his resurrection, Peter said, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

² David Halberstam, *The Children*, p. 139-140

Blessed are the meek – for the meek have power. Holy meekness has changed the course of history and the earth to be inherited will never be the same.

Back to the word study of the Greek work “meek.” It is not singular, it is plural – it is not a lonely individual impotently standing against the forces of evil. A single meek person will be lonely and isolated, and ineffectual. Jesus uses the plural, suggesting that we stand in community. When he promises the earth, I don’t imagine he plans for each of us to have a little slice of the pie so that we can retreat into blissful rest and solitude. Instead, a new family is being birth, and the meek inherit the earth as a family or not at all. But this is to be expected for the meek do not put forth their agenda, but God’s.

Blessed are y’all who are meek. Where is God calling you? Is God calling for you to stand with homeless families; shining the light of God’s love and chasing out the darkness of their hopeless despair. If so, meet with the Mission, Outreach and Service committee today, have some lunch, hear their stories and learn what you can do.

Blessed are y’all who are meek. Is breaking the yoke of addiction that paralyzes young men, trapping them in a world that grows more dim with each passing day, your call? Then move out of your comfort zone and join us in working with our sisters and brothers at First Presbyterian, Robstown. Christina Long can show you how.

Children need to be read to; there are elderly in nursing homes who would love to have a visit – see me.

Jesus said, “Blessed are the meek, plural, all of them in a new family of mutual deference and humble kindness, united in their move to shine the light of Christ upon the hurts of the world. These will inherit the earth. Amen.