

The Gentle Ones Who Inherit the Earth

Matthew 5:5; Matthew 11:28-30; Matthew 12:18-21

Some scholars think the Beatitudes build on one another, one spiritual step leading to the next. First step, being poor-in-spirit, knowing your need of God; second step, being capable of mourning sin, losses, and the sufferings of the world. Third step, today, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth”.

I’ve called the beatitudes “Building Blocks of the Church as a Community of the Kingdom of God”, perhaps too much of a mouthful. What if the Beatitudes were the by-laws of a church? We’d be the kind of church Jesus wants. We’d be closer to Jesus as he leads us on a spiritual path.

So what does it mean to be meek? Certainly not weak! And what does it mean that the meek will inherit the earth? Is that just so much wishful thinking? The plunderers of the earth and invaders of lands seem to have the upper hand most times. So today let’s take a look at the gentle ones who inherit the earth.

I

The way the beatitude is translated by most is “Blessed are the meek.” It’s too bad that meek rhymes with weak. Charles Wesley’s well known 18th century hymn has made the unfortunate association: “Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild”.

Since the 18th century, the interpretation of the beatitude has associated meekness with a kind of weakness. Qualities like being passive, quiet, non-assertive, inoffensive. If Jesus were these, he'd never have been strung up on a cross! We get the message, "Don't be loud, don't be pushy." (Especially, women get that message!)

But there's a truer way to look at "meekness". One problem is that the Greek work here, *pays*, is hard to translate with one English word. I like the word *gentle* much better than meek. But what does the kind of gentleness Jesus blessed look like? It looks like *Jesus*, who described himself as gentle and was described as gentle. The one who spoke this beatitude *lived* it!

So let's look at the kind of gentle Jesus was. Let's first look at one day in his life, Palm Sunday. He rode into Jerusalem on a lowly donkey, not on a war horse and chariot. He came as Zechariah prophesied it, a king coming "humble and mounted on a donkey." He came as a servant king and servant messiah.

But then he went to the temple, turned over the tables of the money changers and drove them bodily out! He was challenging the way the Temple had become complicit with the power-that-be as they crushed the poor and oppressed, a den of thieves robbing the people of God. "Gentle Jesus meek and mild?" The gentleness of Jesus was strong to defend the weak and most vulnerable in his midst.

So let's explore more about the kind of gentle Jesus was. Some of the most beloved words Jesus spoke were these:

Come unto me you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me for I am gentle (same Greek word as the beatitude) and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

His yoke was not the kind that piles laws and rules on you 'til your breaking point. His yoke was not a harshness in response to people's sin. He teaches us to be gentle with ourselves as he is gentle.

His was a yoke of gentleness. What is this yoke of gentleness? I begin here: it is the restraint of own's power, so that it does not hurt or damage others. There are holy uses of power, and there are unholy uses of power that abuse, dominate and attack people. There are humane and inhumane uses of power, which we see so heart-breakingly today in Ukraine.

On a personal level it means not to strike back. It means to refrain from returning evil for evil. We need the help of Jesus as our yoke partner to help us with this kind of restraint. Picture a first century cart drawn by two oxen. Jesus shares the yoke of gentleness with us, helps us keep on the path.

Every day we have the choice of a gentle or angry response to people. A gentle teacher does not humiliate a student in class. A gentle boss or supervisor does not speak harshly to those under their supervision. A gentle parent refrains from angry outbursts toward their children. A gentle person does not “put a person in their place”. Someone gossips about you. You don’t retaliate by bad-mouthing them.

Think about the times you are tempted to strike back or strike out in angry words and actions. It often comes when our pride has been punctured or our integrity has been questioned. We lash out when the idol of our perfect self feels threatened.

Parker Palmer, Quaker educator and author, writes about “Leading from Within.” He defines a leader as anyone who has the “unusual capacity” to shed their light or their shadow onto others. Most of us have some sphere of life where we have such a leader-like responsibility. In the home, at school, work, community leadership, at church. We need to do our inner work so that we maximize the light we shed and minimize the shadow. Your shadow self is full of pride, anger and envy. It is always ready to defend itself!

When you find yourself over-reacting, giving an out-sized response to what someone has said or done, it is time for “shadow work”! A time of inner examination, what A.A. calls a “fearless moral inventory”.

On the other hand, when we act out of our true self as the beloved of God, we can be gentle.

I've always been touched by the description of Jesus in Matthew, using the prophet's words about the true servant of God.

Here is my servant, whom I have chosen
my beloved with whom I am well pleased.

I will put my Spirit upon him
and he will proclaim justice.

He will not wrangle and cry aloud...in the streets.

He will not break a bruised reed

or quench a flickering wick. (Matthew 12: 18-21)

He is about the strong work of justice, but in this pursuit he will not break the bruised reed or quench the flickering wick,

There are days we all are bruised reeds and flickering wicks. Jesus will not break the bruised reed of us or quench the flickering wick of our lives.

Everyday you encounter people who are bruised reeds or flickering wicks. Will we treat them with the gentleness of Jesus?

Professor Kristin Kobes Du Mez has written a brilliant book called *Jesus and John Wayne*. She documents how for 75 years the evangelical movement has

created a Jesus in the mold of John Wayne—an uber-masculine, macho Jesus, full of swagger who helps them defeat the evil-doers. There was a movement this century called, “Muscular Christianity.” A tiny bit of an over-reaction to “Gentle Jesus meek and mild.”

III

Gentleness is its own kind of strength. First, it is the strength of self-restraint. Paul writes to the younger Timothy:

For God did not give us the spirit of timidity [gentleness is not timidity!],
but the spirit of power and love and self-control.

The Spirit helps us master our darker impulses, helps us in our desire to be gentle as Jesus was gentle.

We have also seen the power of gentleness in non-violent movements against injustice and oppression—in India, the U.S. and South Africa. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. sought to follow and implement Jesus’ teaching in the Beatitudes and Sermon on the Mount as they led movements of non-violent resistance to systems of injustice and oppression.

Gentleness seeks for ways of non-violent social change. (The ballot box is an instrument of non-violent social change.) The violence of revolutions just

revolves. Jesus breaks the unending cycle of retribution. Non-violent movements of social change are gentle forms of strength.

Meek does not mean weak. It is a form of strength. It puts God's kind of power in motion.

IV

Now let's turn to the second part of the beatitude: "for they will inherit the earth." What can this mean? It seems only a dream in face of those who plunder the earth and invade land after land.

When Jesus was offering this beatitude, he had Psalm 37 in mind. The psalms were his song-book too. Here are some passages in it:

Trust in the Lord, and do good,
so you will dwell in the land
and enjoy security....

Commit your way to the Lord
and God will act....

Refrain from anger and
forsake wrath.

Fret not yourself; it tends
only to evil....

But the meek will inherit the earth

and delight themselves in

abundant prosperity.

(Ps 37: 3,5,8,11)

So, we follow the ways of God, we refuse to adopt violent ways to do God's work. We try our best to "fret not"! We trust in God. In his book *Strength to Love*, Martin Luther King wrote, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that."

So how do we the gentle inherit the land? To inherit the land does not mean to *own* it. It means to enjoy it, love it and care for it. For some in America the goal is to have almost no public land and all private land—which means a nation of private land owned by the wealthy few. That would turn our land into one great big, Do Not Trespass sign

But what if to inherit the earth means to love it, to live gently upon it. To look and see everyday what a gift it is from God, the land as a gift and not a possession.

The poets of God help us see the world anew and give us hope for the future. The poet May Sarton in a poem "New Year Poem" writes:

Let us step outside for a moment
As the sun breaks through clouds
And shines on wet new fallen snow,
And breathe the new air....

Let us step outside for a moment
Among ocean, clouds, a white field,
Islands floating in the distance.
They have always been there.
But we have not been there....

Let us step outside for a moment.
It is all there
Only we have been slow to arrive
At a way of seeing it.
Unless the gentle inherit the earth
There will be no earth.¹

Wendell Berry writes in a novel about Andy Catlett looking at a master farmer at work. He had his horses working easily in harness. As he plowed his

land he set his rows “considerately” on the hills. Perhaps a good description of “gentle” is to live “considerately” with others and with the land. *Blessed are the considerate, for they will live well with each other and with the land.*

Berry writes a poem of hope about the world, a hope that can come as we live gently upon the earth. Let yourselves envision it with him:

A Vision

If we will have the wisdom to survive,
to stand like slow-growing trees
on a ruined place, renewing, enriching it,
if we will make our seasons welcome here,
asking not too much of earth or heaven,
then a long time after we are dead
the lives our lives prepare will live
there, their houses strongly placed
upon the valley sides, fields and gardens
rich in the windows. The river will run
clear, as we will never know it,
and over it, birdsong like a canopy.
On the levels of the hills will be
green meadows, stock bells in noon shade.

On the steeps where greed and ignorance cut down
the old forest, an old forest will stand,
its rich leaf-fall drifting on its roots.

The veins of forgotten springs will have opened.

Families will be singing in the fields.

In their voices they will hear a music
risen out of the ground. They will take
nothing from the ground they will not return,
whatever the grief at parting. Memory,
native to this valley, will spread over it
like a grove, and memory will grow
into legend, legend into song, song
into sacrament. The abundance of this place,
the songs of its people and its birds,
will be health and wisdom and indwelling
light. This is no paradisaal dream.

Its hardship is its possibility.²

Here is what it means to inherit the earth.

Jesus is calling a new kind of person into being. How about you?

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1. May Sarton, “New Year Poem” *Collected Poems*
 2. Wendell Berry, “A Vision”, *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*.
(Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998),102