

Jesus' Beatitudes: Heavenly Wisdom to Chart Our Reset

3rd in 8-Sermon Series:

Blessed are the Meek

Matthew 5:1-5 ~ 1 Corinthians 13:1-8a, 12-13

6th Sunday after Pentecost ~ July 12, 2020

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Introduction to Second Scripture Lesson

When Paul fired off his letter to the Corinthians, there was not much blessing going on there at all. It seems like all beatitudes had left the building. *Unhappy were, Out of line with Christ were, no longer attuned to God's instruction were*, the people in this feisty Body of Christ. In fact, this brand-new church Paul had started several years earlier was about to come apart at the seams. Conflict, contempt, bragging and blaming had become rampant. Truly: they had devolved to the point where they were anything but, meek.

The familiar words from 1 Corinthians 13, what has come to be known as “the Love chapter,” are part of Paul’s poignant attempt to remind these folks where their real source of power and strength comes from, and how it really works in the block and tackle of every day life. As we listen to this text backlit by Jesus’ beatitude, *Blessed are the meek*, may the enduring, resilient power of *humble love* flow through the screen and into your heart.

Sermon:

Did you hear? I heard it on July 9: in research news: “Scientists Discover Enzyme that Could Result in a Drug Substitute for Exercise.” That’s right. Exercise in a bottle. We’re not quite there yet, but mice injected with this enzyme got healthier and smarter. They displayed the positive results of exercise without moving a miniscule mice muscle. Just think: Everyone who knows they *should* exercise would never feel guilty into an aerobic sweat. Hope is on the way! It’s in the early stages of development. But an “exercise pill” may be just around the corner from being invented.

As amazing as that may sound to many of us, an even bigger breakthrough would be news that a “meek pill” was on its way into development and mass distribution. Then we might *really* have something to rejoice about. When we heard Jesus say, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” I’m sure many of you—especially teachers, principals, parents, and students, *anyone involved in the essential work of education*: were thinking, “right now Jesus, I’m not trying to inherit the earth, I’m just praying for some clear direction about the best way to plan for school this fall.”

There is so much we don’t know, starting with a full understanding of this novel corona virus, how do we solve this vexing question? Who knows? For now, we see in a mirror dimly, for now I know only in part, wrote Paul. “Yes, but Please God, could you shed just a *little* more light on this one? We have a crazy hard challenging question on our plates with pressure coming from every angle, a distinct lack of solid data points, and an acute shortage of money to seed the

solution. So how do we plan? What is the best way forward? Just tell us, God, and we will jump into action.”

If this or any other vexing question is causing you heart burn, insomnia or migraine headaches, Jesus’ third beatitude is God’s gift to you today. It is not dramatic. Nor is it particularly performative. It doesn’t jump out and wow us. But it can save us—slowly. The humble love of meekness can turn the tide, right the ship, rehabilitate the dangerous ocean of our, “me-first” or “us-first” attitude that’s killing us and the earth. Slowly. (These days one might ask, if we keep damaging the earth’s ecosystem the way we are, what earth will there be to inherit?)

Being “meek” calls for patience, perseverance, discipline, humility, attunement, and trust. If only we had a “meek pill” that would infuse all of us with this beatitude. If we became meek and listened to one another, we could put the pieces together. As Paul wrote, “Now I know only in part.” Meek remembers this truth. Meek looks for and honors the light, the perspective, the wisdom, of the other. Meek accepts the fact that we will never have the full knowledge and therefore embraces the mystery. If you think about it, you may be surprised to realize that becoming “meek” is the key to individual fulfillment and a better world.

Being meek is definitely Jesus’ jam. How do we know? Jesus first beatitude is almost the same: “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Being “poor in spirit” and being “meek” are practically synonymous. Both begin with a daily, present, quiet acknowledgment that we will choose to trust God, rather than our own limited perspective. Jesus teaches, preaches, lives, and dies that we might get the hang of trusting God with all our might. At every turn. Every day. We also know it’s Jesus’ jam because he calls himself “meek” using the same word in Matthew 11:28-30, in his invitation to come to him all who are weary and heavily burdened...he says “for I am gentle and *humble* in heart.” Here it is translated as “humble.” Jesus was and is, meek in heart.

Being “poor in spirit” and being “meek” also means that we are teachable, adaptable, and doing our best to do our small part in the ongoing work of creation. Yes: the secret to a generative life is to be “meek” with all our “might.” Counterintuitive? Perhaps. But being meek is our ticket to get on the God train, bound for glory for all of God’s children. This train knows that we will all get there together, or we won’t get there at all.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. expressed this truth prophetically, when he wrote his Letter from the Birmingham Jail on April 16, 1963. “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” There has been discussion among Presbyterians about adding Dr. King’s prophetic Letter to our Book of Confessions.

Just this week, theologian, author, and preacher Brian McLaren made a similar point in the present and urgent context of the coronavirus: “We used to think that we caught diseases as individuals: “I’m sick; you’re not.” But now we realize, no, we catch diseases as individuals who

are part of families, and families who are part of cities, and cities that are part of states and nations. We realize now that our whole species can become infected, and that our whole globe can be changed because of our interconnectedness.”ⁱ

I believe that if we step up to Jesus’ beatitude challenge: to be poor in spirit, to mourn our losses, to be meek, these are the attitudes that can guide our personal and social reset. We know God is pushing us forward into something new here in this pandemic of 2020. But what is it and how do we get there? McLaren uses the viral metaphor to discuss the chance for social transformation that COVID-19 is opening up for us: “Maybe this is also an opportunity for us to become enlightened about some other viruses that have been spreading and causing even greater damage, without being acknowledged: social and spiritual viruses that spread among us from individuals to individual, from generation to generation, and are not named. We don’t organize against them, and so they continue to spread and cause all kinds of sickness and death. Social and spiritual viruses like racism, white supremacy, human supremacy, Christian supremacy, any kind of hostility that is spread, based on prejudice and fear.”ⁱⁱ

I think he is on to something. Prejudice and fear are the super spreaders, invisible markers on the loose that make their mark in small ways and large. From the racist sly, under-the-breath slur, to the brutality of an actual lynching on camera for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, prejudice and fear infect and kill bodies and souls. Each of these sicknesses he names: racism, white supremacy, human supremacy, Christian supremacy would be cured with an infusion of meekness. Curing these sicknesses would generate a world that is more just, fairer. Curing the sickness of human supremacy would give our mother earth a chance at not dying or becoming uninhabitable to future generations.

I see “meek” as an antidote to prejudice and fear. Meek doesn’t blame others for the state of our union. Meek doesn’t blame one political party or another. Meek actually reflects on our own complicity and support of systems that abandoned the poor, warehoused our children in failing schools, and failed to provide adequate health care, even under normal circumstances.ⁱⁱⁱ We do have leaders who have given us a glimpse of what “meek” can do.

Moses, Jesus, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr. were all “meek” men. There were each influenced by each other. They provide models of what “meek” looks like in human form. They each offer us an example of just how mighty meek can be. The work of exodus, of liberation, the march toward freedom is slow and plodding. It takes patience and perseverance. The grease on the wheels of social progress is meekness. Jesus style. It’s knowing that goodness is stronger than evil.

It may be a good idea to add Dr. King’s Letter from the Birmingham Jail to our Presbyterian *Book of Confessions*. But more importantly and presently, in this time of racial reckoning, action is more important. To take action we need to exercise patience, to exercise perseverance, no matter how long or how hard it is. There will never be a pill for this kind of exercise. Here is the good news today: we don’t need to invent a “meek pill.” It’s already inside you. The dust from which we were made, the star dust in the core of our very being is inflected

with meekness. As Jesus said right after the beatitudes in Matthew 5:14: “You are the light of the World.” He said this addressing the motley crowd seated on the mountain. And he is saying this to you as you look at your screen or device today. Jesus is looking at you and sees the meek in you, waiting to exercise its power.

I will end with wisdom from Elder Zosima, the hieromonk in *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky. Words that Alexei Fyodorovich, the youngest brother, remembered as his mentor and friend lay dying, “One may stand perplexed before some thought, especially seeing men’s sin, asking oneself: “Shall I take it by force, or by humble love?” Always resolve to take it by humble love. If you so resolve once and for all, you will be able to overcome the whole world. A loving humility is a terrible power, the most powerful of all, nothing compares with it.”^{iv}

Blessed are you: With your “meek” and mine, together we will inherit the earth.

ⁱ Brian McLaren, “We Are All Connected,” *Wisdom in Times of Crisis* (Center for Action and Contemplation: 2020), faculty presentation (April 20,2020).

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ This idea comes from Barbara A. Holmes, “Still on the Journey: Moral Witness, Imagination, and Improvisation in Public Life,” *Ethics That Matters: African, Caribbean, and African American Sources*, eds. Marcia Y. Riggs and James Samuel Logan (Fortress Press: 2012), p. 238.

^{iv} Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear & Larissa Volokhonsky, (Vintage Classics, Random House: New York, NY, 1990), p. 319.