

We have explored the first two Beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor in Spirit...” and “Blessed are those who mourn.” And today we turn to the third Beatitude where we stumble on a word that is devalued in our culture context! Yet, this word according to Jesus, describes one who is blessed! So, once again, I believe we will learn new insights as we explore what Jesus attempted to teach his gathered disciples on a hill in Galilee! Listen for God’s Word to us this day...

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”
The Word of Lord, Thanks be to God!

I don’t know about you, but I can’t ever remember saying, “Gee, I hope my twin sons grow up to be meek,” or “I’ve really tried hard to teach my sons to be meek.” No, like most of us we probably didn’t even have the word “meek” in our parenting vocabulary! Meek doesn’t get much press in our culture and when it does it is not meant to be a compliment. The meek are considered spineless or wimpy, someone who walks with averted eyes and head down.

I don’t know if you remember the commercials years ago where children said with all seriousness, “I want to grow up to work in dead-end job,” or “I want to grow up unappreciated and exploited,” or “I want to live my life in obscurity.” These messages were powerful, as this is not what parents envision for their children. Yet, these statements personify our cultural image of meekness.

Biblical scholar, William Barclay, called meekness “the most untranslatable of words in the biblical lexicon.” And with Jesus’ use of this word in our Beatitude this morning it should be obvious that the Greek word “Praus” - (prah-ooce’), must have had a different meaning in first century Palestine than it does in our culture today. Here is our 21st century definition according to an online dictionary: “easily imposed on; submissive.” It’s no wonder that all the images we have about “meekness” are negative today.

Yet, according to the Online Etymology Dictionary, in the Middle Ages the word *meek* meant “gentle; courteous; kind.” This earlier definition doesn’t carry suggestions of weakness, colorlessness, or lack of passion. This earlier definition begins to give us insights to the word as it is used in scripture, for in scripture there is nothing weak or timidly submissive about meekness. Meekness is rather an active and deliberate acceptance of undesirable circumstances that are wisely seen by the individual, as only part of a larger picture. The virtue of meekness demonstrates reframed power by restraining or controlling one’s response, so that the response is thoughtful and not reactive.

Moses, one of the heroes of Hebrew scripture, is described this way: Now the man Moses was “very humble [very meek] more so than anyone else on the face of the earth” (Numbers 12:3). Yet, if we know our biblical history, Moses faced down the pharaoh of Egypt and led God’s people out of Egypt. This is not a picture of a powerless wimp and it suggests that we have more to learn about what meekness means.

From scripture, we know that Moses enjoyed a special relationship with God. The book of Numbers tells us that God comes to prophets in dreams and visions. But of Moses God says, “With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the Lord” (Numbers 12:18). What an amazing statement to make about someone who is “very meek” according to biblical definition.

Yet, being privileged to behold the form of God would seem like license to have a fairly high opinion of oneself, but this is not the effect the experience has on Moses. Moses saw himself in relationship to God and he realized God's complete otherness. Or as the psalmist said so eloquently, "O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens... When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that your care for them?" Like Moses, the psalmist understood that God was God, and he was not. Meekness then has something to do with understanding our sense of personhood, our sense of personal and communal power in relation to God. [pause]

Let me tell you a story to illustrate what I am getting at. It was a cold winter day, when Grace and her best friend Judith went for a ride on their horses. It was a day that would change their lives forever, for a truck careened out of control and hit them both. Judith and her horse were killed, while Grace and her horse Pilgrim were seriously injured, both physically and mentally. Grace's mother Annie takes Grace and Pilgrim to Montana in search of a "horse whisperer, as an attempt to bring Pilgrim back from his now savage condition."

Mary Lou Redding shares that one possible image for meekness is the way horses are trained, the way that Pilgrim's savage condition is transformed. When a horse allows itself to be saddled and ridden directly by a rider, it is said to be "gentled." To gentle a horse is to establish a relationship where the horse's power is used under a human's direction. Tom Booker, the horse whisperer, helps Grace's horse relearn this ability. Pilgrim's power is not taken away by this process. Pilgrim is still a horse, and a powerful one at that. Yet, Pilgrim learns to offer his power under the control of Grace. A gentled horse or a tamed wild animal offers us an image of meekness – power under control.

Tom Booker, the horse whisperer, said, "Sometimes what seems like surrender isn't surrender at all. It's about what's going on in our hearts. About seeing clearly, the way life is and accepting it and being true to it, whatever the pain, because the pain of not being true to it is far, far greater."

This sounds like the truth of this Beatitude. We have to ask ourselves, "What is going on in our hearts?" Are we seeing clearly the way life is? Are we willing to see clearly, the way life is, accepting it and being true to it, whatever the pain, because the pain of not being true to it is far, far greater? Are we clear that God is God and we are not? So, are we willing for our power, individually and communally, to be reframed and guided by God, the one who knows us most deeply?

You see, I believe a meek person is not weak or spineless or cowardly. Rather a meek person sees clearly the way of life as God desires for him or her and is able to hand over the reins of his or her life to God. To submit our power, our person, our faith community to God's guidance is the virtue of meekness. A meek person sees him or herself rightly – not as more than he or she is (that's arrogance) nor as less (that's false humility). A meek person knows that God is God and she is not.

Yet, if we are honest with ourselves, we all know how hard this is to do, to hand over the reins. We would rather exercise our own power, answering power with power, for it seems more natural to us given the society in which we live.

Yet, I believe it is far tougher to refrain from using our power over and against others. It is tough to hold our tongue when others lash out at us. It is tough to choose restraint when

retaliation seems to give more satisfaction. It is tough not to seek revenge and not to answer anger with anger. It's tough not to push back when our space has been violated or when our ego has been bruised. It's tough not to use our influence to get our way or to fight to keep things our way. Even as faithful followers of Christ, meekness may seem like an impossibility in these days when headlines reek of power continually abused at the expense of others.

But, what if we decided not to react? What if we took a deep breath and reframed our power to respond with a deeper wisdom? Hear the words of the psalmist, "but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the earth." In Psalm 37 the call to wait shows up not once or twice, but five times! The psalmist reminds God's people that those who wait for God to vindicate them, rather than taking matters into their own hands, will see God's salvation. In the psalm, we find no surrender to evil. The psalm does not summon us to weak submission and powerlessness but to a different kind of power, to a reframed power. This reframed power neither invades nor defends, yet it is the toughest, most enduring and transforming power in the world.

It's the reframed power that entered the world in the small town of Bethlehem, where Jesus was cradled in a feeding trough. He was wrapped in swaddling clothes, and enthroned on a mattress of hay. In the midst of a world that greedily thirsted for power, Jesus did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited; instead he emptied himself, being born a human. And being found in human form he humbled himself. Jesus, I believe, personified this reframed power of meekness for us.

Eugene Peterson gives us a descriptive view of what this looks like in Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians, "Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand" [Phil 2:3-4].

Jesus didn't push his way to the front or sweet-talk his way to the top of the Jewish synagogue scene. He wasn't clamoring to be the Pharisee of all Pharisees or the next High Priest of the Sanhedrin. He wasn't obsessed with the fact that he and God were of the same substance! Jesus reframed his power so that others, like you and me, could be reconciled to God. Jesus lent a helping hand to a woman caught in adultery, to a despised tax collector, and to many who were sick or demon possessed or even dead. Jesus was not weak, for we know he cleared the temple of moneychangers in righteous anger. Jesus was not weak; he was meek. He reframed his power so that others would be drawn to the love and grace of God.

Meekness relates to the character of person. It is a disposition of mind that grows out of who a person is. Jesus knew who he was, the beloved Son of God! Yet, meekness is not a matter of temperament or an inherited personality trait. It's not as if Jesus' meekness was simply a chip off the old block! Meekness is learned and practiced until it becomes part of our identity. It is an attribute of being, not doing. It is an attribute born out of our understanding of who we are in relationship to God. When we remember that God is God and we are not, meekness is possible.

So, what does meekness look like in you and me? First, we are to be content with just who we are – no more, no less. As Brian Bransfield writes, "Only the meek are truly at home in their own skin. They are at rest because they have nothing to prove." Are you comfortable in your own skin? Not clamoring to be something or someone you are not?

Second, rather than reacting to life, we are to respond with reframed power. In the face of anger or hardship or suffering, we are able to see beyond the moment and envision the greater good that is possible through God's love and grace. Meekness is being constrained – reframing one's power - by God's love on behalf of others.

And then there is that last line... the result of being meek – “they shall inherit the earth.” If we are comfortable in our own skin and able to respond through God's love, then the whole world opens to us in a new and profound way. We will be free enough to receive the goodness of all the gifts God offers us through this amazing creation called the earth.

Meekness is a most untranslatable word, yet I believe we will know when we see it in someone among us! Power reframed by God's love, which puts individual wants aside, to assist others who are in need. Will we dare to be meek? I pray so. Amen.