



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: August 30, 2009

Blessed Are the Meek..., Robert B. Culp

Psalm 37:1-11; Matthew 5:5

As you well know, the preamble to the Constitution of the United States is a moving piece of literature that begins with the simple but majestic words, “We the people ...” And just as the preamble defines the essence of the nation’s vision of itself and expresses the sort of citizenry it hopes to embody, so, too, does the Sermon on the Mount act as the “constitution” of the church of Jesus Christ, with the Beatitudes serving as its own kind of “preamble.”

The Beatitudes proclaim what is unassailably true, in the light of the kingdom of heaven. In a wondrous fashion, they describe the purpose of every holy law, the foundation of every custom, the aim of every practice of the new society of those following after the way of Jesus ... this “colony of the kingdom,” this church that is called by our Lord and seeks to follow after his way.

But as we read through the seemingly innocuous preamble to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, it becomes quickly apparent that the Beatitudes turn the world’s values upside down. What is true for those who live in the power of the kingdom of heaven is a flat reversal of what is considered to be true in the culture at large. For Jesus declares that the poor in spirit, the peacemakers, the meek are the ones who are truly blessed ... blessed within a world, 2000 years ago and still today, that pronounces the benediction over the self-sufficient, the assertive, and the power-brokers. The people whom the world would see as pitiful – the mournful, the persecuted, the vulnerable, and “the least of these” such as we hosted at Tod’s Point this past Tuesday – these are the very people Jesus declares to be blessed.

During this past month of July, I was able to spend some time with our grandchildren Gemma and Jonah, and I confess I am truly smitten with these little ones (as most grandparents are with their grandchildren!). I enjoyed watching them outside on the sun-drenched grass and indoors where it was cool, at mealtime when their faces were painted with rice cereal and sweet potatoes and at bedtime when, after several songs and stories, they slowly closed their eyes and snuggled their faces against the softness of their favorite blankets ... noting how different they are in temperament, how persistent they can be when they want something, how prone to giggle they can be – especially when pop-pop’s beard happens to rub against their bare feet!

Now, while I adore little Jonah and am so grateful for his steady development, I confess that I am utterly captivated by Gemma who will be three-years-old in November. She simply loves to be active and can be a little rambunctious when the mood strikes her – smashing down tall towers of blocks with shrieks of delight, splashing around in the tub and making sure she gets wet everyone who dares to draw near, and sometimes patting her younger brother a little too firmly on his back ... and then rolling her eyes in feigned innocence when she is reminded not to be so rough.

But at other times, she displays a gentle tenderness that has been wondrous to behold. Within a one-hour period of time late one afternoon, I witnessed her capturing in delicate ways the fragile bubbles she was blowing and being fascinated by their shimmering delicacy ... and then collecting bouquets of colorful leaves

and presenting them to her mommy ... and then drawing near a flower in the front yard garden, bending down, and bestowing a soft kiss on a single petal (which you can see on the back of the bulletin this morning). Those summery scenes of a little child's discoveries of God's glorious world and her gentle appreciation of the miracles before her eyes were enough to take my breath away. (Story of Gemma's offering Cecily her blanket corner to comfort her during an internet video chat this past week.)

Without any question, the gentle spirit of a grandchild is touching in many ways, but it does stand in stark contrast to much of how our world is characterized these days, doesn't it? I'm thinking of the endless cycles of retributive violence about which we learn, whether in the Middle East or Africa or among the Afghani tribal leaders. I'm thinking of the harsh and bitter words that are spoken all too often within families, the hurt feelings and crippled spirits within the lives of husbands and wives and children. And I am thinking, too, of the uncivil and angry diatribes in recent town hall meetings dealing with health care across our country, and how such poignant feelings are being expressed by wounded and fearful individuals who feel increasingly frustrated and disenfranchised.

In the face of our all-too-macho society that bows to the causes of the strong and powerful, while trampling the weak and powerless, there is a biting irony to the report of someone who found these words inscribed on the wall of a lavatory in a British pub – "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth," with this phrase appended to them – "if that's all right with the rest of you."

Those who have the gift of gentleness, who are meek, are the opposite (both in nature and in their actions) of those who are aggressive. They are not harsh, not self-assertive and swaggering, not covetous, not trampling in brute force. Rather, they are humble in the strength of reverence. Others claim their rights vociferously, but the meek are more concerned about their duties. Others are demanding and "in your face" about their needs, but the meek walk in a quiet godliness. Others seek revenge, but the meek seek to discover beauty in everyone and leave matters of judgment to God.

Jesus' blessing for the meek surely cut across the fashion in his day. The Pharisees and Sadducees asserted their pride of race and place, the Romans their pride of power and authority, the Greeks their pride of knowledge and tradition. Even today as modern nations insist on their place in the sun, the meek are unfashionably content to walk in the shadows where God keeps watch over his own, who are called to be godly. Indeed, to be meek is to be like God.

You see, God is not a tyrant, reeling about in heavenly power and zapping mere mortals for the fun of it, the way the deities of ancient mythology often did. There is a meekness at work in the divine personality, which means that God does not behave wildly and erratically, without plan or pattern, without mercy and justice. It is God's nature to be gentle and loving, forgiving and healing, nurturing and upbuilding, atoning and reconciling.

When we are meek, therefore, we are imitating God. We are not retreating from confrontation and pressure, but are behaving, instead, in the peaceable manner of the divine nature itself.

What this means is that there is no contradiction between being meek and having power or authority. I'm afraid, though, we sometimes think such a contradiction exists. We imagine that we cannot be meek, while at the same time aspiring to political office, or managerial status in a corporation, or wealth and power in a community. But this is not true. Meekness is not a function of powerlessness, but a function of a spiritual attitude, whatever one's power or position. From our faith's perspective, it is a function of servanthood.

Gandhi understood this, and developed the idea of nonviolent resistance. He said he learned it from Jesus, the great teacher of Christianity.

Martin Luther King understood it as well, and led this nation in one of the great revolutions for human rights the world has ever known. He said he learned it from Jesus and Gandhi.

Interestingly, even the leading corporate thinkers of America are beginning to see the importance of meekness and to preach that management styles that serve employees, especially in our economic climate these days, are not only more moral than mere business-oriented styles, but are also more practical and profitable, too. The systems within which people work function better when the people themselves are healthy, wholesome, and rewarded in spiritual ways for what they do. In these days of global competition and uncertainty, only the firms that care about the holistic patterns of employees' lives – including their families, personalities, and general

well-being, will have the inner strength and will to survive.

Bill O'Brien, who developed a values-based culture at Hanover Insurance Company in Massachusetts some years ago, said that what companies must aim at for all their employees, from the bottom to the top, is "advanced maturity." Managers, he contended, must redefine what they are doing. They must give up the old dogmas of planning, organizing, and controlling ... and realize "the almost sacred quality of their responsibility for the lives of so many people with whom they are working." Their fundamental task, as he understood it, is providing the enabling conditions for people to lead the most enriching lives they can.

It is rather fascinating to hear such counsel being offered for America's corporate life. Jesus' teachings about the importance of the inner life over external circumstances, of ethical considerations above personal profit, and of an existence that serves the community and the divine instead of the self seem to have found their way into the speeches and manuals of management experts. As one commentator puts it, "Apparently some business leaders have begun to believe it's really true that the meek shall inherit the earth, and that Jesus, far from imposing an impossible set of rules, actually described the kind of lifestyle and life-attitude that blesses and enriches everyone who comes in contact with it."

And Jesus embodied that meekness he proclaimed as "blessed." When people got the idea of starting a movement that would make him an earthly king, he slipped away to be alone and to pray. While he commended the use of riches to help the poor, he himself never had much in the way of earthly goods – apparently not even a home to call his own or an extra change of clothes. When he was preparing to leave his closest friends, he took a bowl of water and a towel, and he got down on his knees to wash their feet, insisting that they learn to live through serving one another. Betrayed by a follower who led the authorities to his prayer spot in Gethsemane, he kissed the follower and bade his friends not to raise their swords. Brought before Pilate and Caiaphas, he saw the uselessness of protest and fell into creative silence. Crucified between two criminals, he spoke kindly to the one with an open heart and forgave the soldiers who had followed orders in carrying out his execution.

Jesus did not have to be this way. He did not have to submit to such mistreatment. But Jesus was a meek man, a man after the heart of God, a man from the heart of God. He came among us as a servant, as one seeking to honor God and to make things better for others ... by giving himself away, by loving others with no strings attached, and ... as a grain of wheat falling into the earth and being buried, by dying to himself in order to bear much fruit.

Perhaps that is what he meant by the meek "inheriting" the earth. Not that the meek will own it or possess it the way people currently own or possess property. But that they will join it, be united and receptive to the whole process of growth and community and well-being in the world. And that, as we are beginning to see, is far better than owning anything.

Fred Buechner notes that it is not the strong ones, but the meek ones in the sense of the gentle ones that the Lord picked out as being blessed. He means not the timid ones like Caspar Milquetoast, but figures like ...
* Charlie Chaplin, the little tramp ... who lets the world walk over him and yet, dapper and undaunted to the end somehow makes the world more human in the process; or ...
* a little child ... who bends low to kiss a flower and melts the hearts of all who draw near to see her; or ...
* an itinerant rabbi stretched out upon a crude cross of wood ... who breathes his loving Spirit upon all who would truly live, and who invites us to model in our own lives his meekness so that we, too, may inherit the earth.