

“BLESSED ARE THE MEEK...”

By Rev. Victor Kim

Matthew 5:5, Colossians 3:12-17

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Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Our beatitude for today raises a number of questions. **Among them, what is it to be meek, who are the meek, and how exactly will they inherit the earth?** The dictionary defines meekness as being overly submissive or compliant, spiritless and tame. Not exactly the kind of words anyone would want to be described by, are they? Meekness, it's almost synonymous with weakness, with being a doormat, with a practically debilitating inability to stand up for oneself. You won't get anywhere in our society by being meek. People will walk all over you; you'll get taken advantage of. Our world doesn't value meekness; don't you know that nice guys finish last?

If you want to know what the world values you only need to pay attention to the elections that are taking place, both here in B.C. and south of the border in the U.S. Did you happen to watch the U.S. Presidential debate this past week? If you did, or even if you didn't, you probably know or have heard that it was possibly the most chaotic, out of control, ridiculous debate in all the history of presidential debates. The so-called debate broke down from the very beginning, with the moderator losing control of the proceedings immediately and the two candidates, but mostly one and you know which one, talking over the other, completely flouting the agreed upon rules. It was a mess.

But I also think that was a planned mess, again planned by one of the candidates. I suspect that President Trump, rather than debating policy, wanted to use the debate to show that his challenger, former Vice President Joe Biden, was old, weak and struggling with mental capacity. Unfortunately for Trump, he never allowed Biden to speak long enough without interruption for viewers to determine anything about Biden. Trump wanted to come across as strong, powerful, in control and capable. I'm not sure that those were the traits that most viewers would have associated with him after watching this performance.

But one thing seems pretty clear, whether you're a supporter of Trump or Biden, and that is that meekness seems to have no place in politics. And not just in the U.S. presidential elections but also here at home as we are in the midst of an early provincial election. Anyone paying attention to the party leaders in our province would see that the election seems to revolve mostly around attacking the weaknesses of the other parties. It's pretty clear that the political parties have concluded that meekness won't win you votes, it won't get you into power, it won't help you to achieve your goals, so why even consider it.

So why does Jesus say that the meek are blessed and that they will inherit the earth? Well, maybe we have misunderstood the meaning of meekness. Meekness, at least in the way Jesus

intended it to be understood, has never been about being a pushover, or a doormat. Meekness isn't about being wishy-washy, indecisive or timid. In the book of Numbers in the Old Testament, Moses is described as being meek, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth. Think about Moses, the great prophet of God. Moses, the one whom God used to deliver God's people from bondage in Egypt. Moses, who confronted Pharaoh, who led an unruly, rag tag group of quarrelers and complainers through the desert for 40 years, does Moses seem like a man who would have been a pushover, spiritless or tame? Hardly.

And the same word used to describe Moses is used to describe Jesus later in Matthew's gospel account. Jesus says, ***come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest...for I am gentle and humble in heart.*** That word gentle is the same word in Greek that Jesus refers to as meek in the beatitude and that same word is used to translate the Hebrew word that describes Moses as being the meekest person on earth. **Again, think of Jesus, his life, his ministry. Overly submissive, compliant, spiritless and tame? I hardly think so.** Jesus' life and ministry challenged the order of his day, he overturned the conventions of his society and though he willingly gave himself over to be crucified, **no one would have called Jesus tame.**

So then, what exactly did Jesus mean by using the word meek? I read an essay this week that was written by a recent VST graduate, Shauna Kubossek, which happened to win a prestigious North American essay contest. Her paper was entitled, ***"Kenotic Hospitality and the Eucharist: An Alternative Economy."*** It was, obviously given the recognition, a wonderfully written essay and speaks highly of both Shauna and the Vancouver School of Theology. I won't go into the details of Shauna's paper, but one of the central points that the essay made and that has helped me to understand what Jesus might have been getting at in his use of the word meek is this idea of **kenosis**.

Kenosis is a Greek word and means **self-emptying** and describes how Jesus emptied himself, most vividly detailed in Philippians 2, where it says that Jesus, ***who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*** Kenosis is a letting go, a denying to oneself of something, in the case of Jesus his very divinity, for the sake of something that God has in mind.

What if we didn't understand meekness as being spineless or spiritless but rather as the willingness to empty ourselves, in the same manner that Jesus did, of course, not to the same degree, after all we are not divine. **But what if we were to understand meekness as letting go of something, denying ourselves of something, for the sake of something that God has in mind.**

What do I mean by that? Well, Jesus emptied himself of his divinity so that by his obedience, even to death on a cross, God made possible the salvation of all humankind, and in the resurrection of Jesus God exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend...and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. But in order for all of that to happen, Jesus first had to empty himself of his divinity, he humbled himself, and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Is that self-emptying a weakness or is it a form of unimaginable strength?

What if our meekness is about a form of kenosis, emptying ourselves of something, a perceived right, something we think we are due or owed, something we feel we are entitled to, something we believe deserve, so that something bigger of God's planning might be realized through us? What if our meekness is not about responding to strength with strength? power with power, force with even more force, even if we can? What if meekness isn't about returning an insult with a stronger insult, talking even louder when someone constantly interrupts us, responding with anger when taunted by baseless accusations, but rather letting go, emptying ourselves of the need to get even, of the desire to take revenge, of the natural inclination to give as good as we get? **And what if in that letting go, in that self-emptying, something God has in mind gets achieved? What if meekness is letting go of our agendas and being open to God's?**

When I think of the word presidential, the person that comes to mind isn't Donald Trump or Joe Biden. The person I most think of as being presidential is a 96 year old former peanut farmer from Georgia, Jimmy Carter. Jimmy Carter turned 96 this Thursday. He is the longest living former president in U.S. history. He's also, in my opinion, and in the opinion of many, the most gracious and meek president in American history. By meek, I don't mean weak, although some may accuse him of that. I see Carter as someone who long ago let go of the ego that comes with being the most powerful person on the planet. I see in Jimmy Carter someone who doesn't need to compete with the ghosts of presidents past or presidents to come. He's let go of the pretensions of the office.

For decades he has built homes for the homeless through Habitat for Humanity. For years he traveled the world as an ambassador for peace, winning the Nobel Peace Prize, deservedly I might add. For years this former President of the United States has taught a weekly bible study at his church. Of all living presidents, Carter spends the least amount of public money in terms of what former presidents are entitled to. **I think of all the good that has entered the world through the life of Jimmy Carter, especially after his term in office, and I am convinced that so much of that has happened because Carter has let go of all that so many others have found so difficult to do.**

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Something tells me that 96 year old Jimmy Carter would feel that he has inherited something that no amount of prestige, power, privilege or presidential position could ever bestow. **He has inherited God's blessing, the blessing of what it means to participate in the unfolding kingdom of heaven.** There is an abundance that God wants to provide in our lives. But that abundance isn't measured by the world's standards. It's not about wealth or power, ego or dominance. It's about the values of the kingdom of heaven, values that the Apostle Paul describes **as clothing oneself with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. God's abundance is about knowing forgiveness and above all, knowing love, allowing the peace of Christ to rule in our hearts.**

But here's the thing. Shauna Kubossek in her essay writes that there is no finite limitation on the resources that God provides. **The paradox is, however, that in order to enter into this abundance, we are required to let go of certain things.** To be blessed, to know what it is to enter into God's promised inheritance, both in this life and in the life to come, **means that we are also willing to be a people who will empty ourselves of those things that work against the values of the kingdom.** To clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience means to strip off other things that would hinder us and weigh us down. **To be counted among those who Jesus calls meek is to be willing to let go of those things in us that would impede what God might do through us in our obedience and in our self-emptying.**

As with all the beatitudes, we must at the end, always return to Jesus. The meekness he desires of us, Jesus first took on himself. The self-emptying he invites us to know, Jesus knew first hand in ways none of us ever could. **We come to the table this morning, the table of our Lord Jesus Christ, who emptied himself, who gave his very life, his body broken for us, his blood shed for us... so that we might have his life in us.** We come invited by the one who offers us the example of his meekness and beckons us to follow. We are invited to come with the promise that in our emptying, in our denying of ourselves and trusting in God, we will inherit the earth, the blessedness of knowing God's abundance, peace and love.

Thanks be to God, Amen.