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The National Presbyterian Church

## **Beatitudes: "Meek Not Weak"**

Psalm 37:1-11a, Matthew 7:1-5, 12-14

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In our sermons through the fall we are thinking together about the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ in what we call the Sermon on the Mount, three chapters in the gospel according to Saint Matthew, chapters 5, 6 and 7 – chapters which begin with what we might call a preface (and this is the focal point of what we are considering together) – a preface that we call “the Beatitudes”: statements about blessedness or, more accurately, “happiness.” [In the Greek language in which the New Testament was written the word there is *makarios*: it’s not a holy word, it’s just the regular word for “happiness,” though our Bible translations often use the word “blessed” instead of “happy.”] But these are statements at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount about happiness, as if Jesus wants to make it clear that he is very much concerned not just with our holiness or godliness, but with your happiness and my happiness! There are many people who don’t think of Jesus in those terms; but clearly crowds flocked to him when he lived here on Earth because he had something for them that would make them, well, happier than they were before they met him. Whether it was a physical healing or whether it was a word of wisdom to help them understand the complexities of life, people crowded to Jesus, flocked to Jesus, because there was something, in a sense, “in it for them.” And one way to describe that experience is through the word happiness.

So Jesus speaks about happiness; he is concerned about their happiness and your happiness and mine and at the beginning of his great body of teaching he speaks about this explicitly in these statements that we call the Beatitudes. But his prescription for happiness, his understanding of happiness, his definition of happiness is not exactly the definition that most of us would come up with. So this is what Jesus says in these Beatitudes, he says,

- *“Blessed (or happy) are the poor in spirit . . . I don’t know if you’ve thought about happiness in those terms? – happy are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.*
- *Happy are those who mourn* (that seems like a contradiction in terms, doesn’t it?) *for they will be comforted.*
- *Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness*, says Jesus, *for they will be filled.*
- *Happy are the merciful* *for they will receive mercy.*
- *Happy are the pure in heart* *for they will see God.*
- *Happy are the peacemakers* *for they will be called children of God.*

And then here's another strange one:

- *Happy are those who are persecuted* (happy? those who are persecuted?) for righteousness sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

And the Beatitude or the statement about happiness that I want us to think about today:

- ***Happy are the meek for they shall inherit the Earth.*** Happy are the meek for they shall inherit the Earth.

So a number of questions emerge as we read such a list as this and surely one of the questions is this question: are these statements true? Is this really where happiness is to be found? Happy are the meek? Really? Do you believe that in your heart of hearts? Do you believe that this is where happiness is to be found?

Or, let me put it this way. Have you ever aspired, I mean truly aspired, to be really meek? Is this a virtue at the top of your list? And when you think about happiness is that one of the words which immediately comes to your mind? When you were a child did you say, "when I grow up I will be free and I can become whatever I want: I think I will become . . . meek? Or for your children: "When my children grow up this is what I want for them – I want my children to be really meek?" Is that a virtue on your list? Is that idea anywhere in your thinking?

I tend to think that in my thinking and my guess is, also in yours, there is often a negative connotation to this word, "meek." When I look up the thesaurus to find other words which are akin to this word, synonyms with this word, I find words that I have to admit I don't really care for that much. So my thesaurus at least had these words as equivalents: acquiescent and spineless, browbeaten and bullied, compliant and docile, cowed and dominated, hangdog, henpecked, intimidated, broken and crushed. Happy are the meek, in these senses? Surely not! In fact, I'm not sure that I want to be meek in these senses at all, and quite clearly, at least at times, neither did Jesus!

So we find Jesus when he is 12 years old he's with his parents, he's in the city of Jerusalem, he's at bar-mitzvah age, becoming an adult, and they take him to the Passover Feast in the City of Jerusalem (Luke 2:41-51). It's filled with people. German scholar Joachim Jeremias estimates that there were some 25 to 30,000 people in Jerusalem normally. At the feast of the Passover there might be four or five times as many people so there were well over 100,000 people crammed into the old city of Jerusalem at Passover time, and Jesus gets lost in the shuffle. So when his parents return home they think he's with somebody else but he's not, he's there in Jerusalem. He's lost and they go back and they find him and the good news is they find him in the Temple. That's a good place for your child to be lost. He's talking to the Rabbis. It's not a bad thing to find your child talking to Rabbis! But when Jesus' parents find him, it's important to note that Jesus doesn't say "Oh, I'm so, so, so sorry!" He's not meek! He says "Didn't you know where I would be? Don't you know where I'd be? That I would be in my Father's house? As if to say. Don't you remember what the angels taught you when I was born?" Jesus' response comes pretty close to Jesus speaking back to his parents. On the one hand, in taking him to Jerusalem,

they have tried to treat him as an adult. On the other hand, he's now acting as an adult, and in doing so, he's not exactly meek in this sense of broken or compliant.

Or there's another time when Jesus is with his mother and his friends, his disciples, at a wedding near his home town of Nazareth in a place called Cana (John 2:1-11). And they're at the wedding and many of you remember the story – the wine runs out, and Jesus' mother steps into action. She knows that her son can fix things. She may not know everything about her son but she believes her son can fix things. So she tells the stewards of the feast: "Come and talk to Jesus and he'll sort it out." And if we were to slightly retranslate Jesus' words to his mother they would go something like this: "Mother-rrr – back off! My time has not yet come. Woman what do you have to do with me." To us, it sounds awful; at the very least; Jesus' response is not meek.

I think there's good reason for it. He is in fact a child of his Heavenly Father even more than he is of his mother and he is now on a path that he must follow; and she is not going to interfere with it. But at the least, Jesus is not meek in this situation; and he's not meek with the religious leaders who are filled with hypocrisy. He stands up and he blurts it out, "You hypocrites, you white-washed sepulchers." You and I might sometimes feel like saying this to somebody else – but don't actually say it! BUT Jesus actually does! He says it! This is not meek in the sense I found in the thesaurus.

And then, years later, Jesus moves into the Temple again and we find him creating havoc, turning over the tables of those who are buying and selling animals for sacrifices in the temple (Matthew 21:12-13). He makes something which looks like a whip, brandishes it around, turns over some tables. He quotes the Bible to the people from the prophet Jeremiah, saying that God's house "*shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations; but you have turned it into a den of thieves and robbers.*"

That's what Jesus does. So meekness, in the sense of acquiescent, spineless, browbeaten, bullied, compliant also cowed, dominated, hang dog, henpecked, intimidated, broken and crushed, doesn't exactly fit with who Jesus is, and what he did in those particular situations. Though . . . some of those words, do apply to Jesus in some other situations. Not all of them, but some of them.

For example, we know of at least one situation where Jesus was "broken," and, remarkably, in that moment of brokenness some wonderful things began to happen for you and me. I'm thinking of the time when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane and it was just before his crucifixion (Matthew 26:36-56). Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane, is wrestling with God. It's in that moment when his humanity really comes through, when he knows that he's going to die and that his death is going to be absolutely excruciating – and he doesn't want to do it! So he prays to God his Heavenly Father and says "I don't want this cup of suffering. If it is possible take it away from me. Please, please, please!" (repeatedly he prays this). And then, and not just as a kind of a sop, but then, truly, he prays "Nevertheless, not my will be done, but thine!"

And in this moment there is a sense in which, humanly speaking, he is crushed. His own will is broken. The will of God was so painful and hard, the knowledge that he was about to face not only excruciating physical suffering but spiritual suffering, being abandoned by God for your sin and mine. The weight of the world, it seems, was on Jesus at that time. BUT it was there that Jesus becomes meek – deciding of his own free will to follow not his own will or path, but the will and path of the living God.

The writing of the prophet Isaiah comes to mind (53:5, 7): *“he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed . . . He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.”*

Jesus was meek, for us: like a sheep being sacrificed, he gave his life over to the will of God in that moment. Not spineless or cowardly or hang dog! Indeed, even in his meekness, his dignity and majesty was maintained to the end (John’s gospel in particular gives us this image of Jesus with dignity going towards his death). But, before the will of God, his own human will was forcefully broken open so that God’s will could be fulfilled through his life, for you and me – so, in a sense, that you and I through him could “inherit the Earth” – through his willingness to bow down before the ultimate will of God.

And this is surely what Jesus has in mind when he speaks about meekness in the beatitudes. It’s true for him. It’s true for us: that so often in life, the way we think is right is not the right way; so that our will is not initially aligned with the will of God and needs to be broken, cracked open, until the will of God becomes more important to us than our own particular will. And this willingness to be “cracked open,” often not easy, often painful, disruptive and hard is the meekness that Jesus is seeking from us, and within which our happiness is ultimately to be found.

Last Sunday I mentioned General William Booth the founder of the Salvation Army as we thought about Jesus’ words on grief and mourning: happy are those who mourn. Booth found himself grieving over the poverty that he saw in London; and that grief in his life led to the establishing of this remarkable organization called the Salvation Army.

Well I want this morning to share with you about another person who was involved in the early days of the Salvation Army movement (at the end of the 1800s, the beginning of the 1900s): Samuel Logan Brengle. Brengle was an American, instrumental in the growth of the Salvation Army on this side of the ocean. The great missionary leader Oswald Saunders writes about Samuel Brengle like this in his book, *Spiritual Leadership*: he says that Brengle was a well-educated man, a great preacher, a minister sought after by large churches in the United States.

From a human point of view had a great career ahead of him. But then he heard William Booth speak in person about the Salvation Army, he felt the call of

God to leave his career opportunities as a preacher behind, and sail for London to enlist in the Army.

At first when he came to London to offer his service William Booth didn't want him. He didn't think he would fit in with the poor of London, with uneducated officers who were the mainstay of the Salvation Army at that time. Ultimately though, "he was accepted for service but in order to test his caliber Booth made sure that Brengle was put in the training garrison with scores of cadets, most of whom, though full of zeal, were innocent of formal education. His first work was to clean up a pile of muddy boots belonging to his fellow students. As he brushed away the mud, a battle royal raged in his head: 'Was it for this that I've renounced all the possibilities of my ministry and have come to London?'" Was it for this? His will, you see, was there fighting against the will of God, becoming less certain of the will of God. [And you and I may have experienced battles like that within our lives: is it for this that I have taken this path or that?] So Brengle fought against his situation until he was in a sense crushed by it, and at that moment it was as if the heavens opened and the most pertinent story in scripture came to his mind – another of those stories of Jesus in his meekness. It was just before Jesus suffering and prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus was with his disciples sharing dinner. The story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet. Brengle could not escape the parallel as he washed the mud off those smelly boots, belonging to those unlike him who had no education. He began to see what Jesus had done for his friends, his disciples, and how even in this place, though there seemed to be no glory in it, he was following his master – which was ultimately what he wanted to do. He became meek: broken, crushed, until he accepted the will of God, no matter what it was or where it lay.

Later, he returned to the United States and for the next 40 years grew to become one of the greatest if not the greatest leaders in the Salvation Army on this side of the ocean.

Not weak, but meek, compliant before the will of Almighty God. Sometimes it really does take a crisis for us to find that kind of meekness. We keep on insisting on our own way. Sometimes it takes dark days in which God seems to be absent, and our prayers don't seem to be answered, for us to become truly dependent on God. Some of you may know a statement known as a Confederate Soldier's Prayer. We don't know who it was written by, but it nevertheless speaks truth to us about the fact that unanswered prayer is often, unwittingly, the vehicle of God's grace within our lives – at the time, though, at the time it's usually really painful because it seems as if the last thing that God is doing is listening to us. The prayer goes like this:

I asked God for strength that I might achieve;  
I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.  
I asked for health that I might do greater things.  
I was given infirmity that I might do better things.  
I asked for riches that I might be happy.

I was given poverty that I might be wise.  
I asked for power that I might have the praise of men.  
I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.  
I asked for all things that I might enjoy life.  
I was given life that I might enjoy all things.  
I got nothing that I asked for, but everything I hoped for.  
Almost despite myself my unspoken prayers were answered.  
I am among all men most richly blessed.

Happy! Happy? Crushed in the process? But preferring ultimately the course that God wants rather than the course that I saw and that I wanted to begin with, but could not see, but now see, and want passionately, more than any of those things I would have desired before. Meek before the will of God no matter what it is or where it lies.

So this is certainly one way of understanding the word meek starting from this negative sense and finding something in that negative sense about being crushed and open to the will of God which is patterned in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But I do think there's more to it than that. Indeed, we need to turn this around and think of meekness not just in that negative connotation but more positively. So my thesaurus had another whole angle on the word meekness and among the good words associated with meekness were not acquiescent and spineless, browbeaten, bullies and all of those word already mentioned, but modest, self-effacing, unassuming, understanding, patient, persevering, unhurried, quietly confident, contented, courteous. I know that this is a word picture of who I want to be, and my guess is that you want to be that person too: *modest, self-effacing, unassuming, understanding, patient, persevering, unhurried, quietly confident, contented and courteous*. And if this is indeed what Jesus has in mind when he speaks about the meek being blessed or happy, and when he then goes on to say "the meek shall inherit the Earth", what he is saying may be as simple as this: ***"You don't always have to be pushy, demanding, to win. You don't always have to be pushy or demanding to get what you ultimately want – to inherit the Earth."*** Jesus certainly expresses this though elsewhere in his teaching when he says, "the first shall be last and the last shall be first" (Matt.20:16); or when he calls his disciples to lead by serving (Luke 22:24-27)). It's not the expected-one who necessarily gets there first, wins, gets what they want!

There's this paradox in so much of what Jesus teaches, and you have it here too: *Happy are the meek, happy are the meek – for they're going to win in the end; they will get it all; they will inherit the Earth*. And this is surely one point that the great Reformation theologian John Calvin was making as he looked at this passage of scripture. This is what he writes about this beatitude (*Commentary on the Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, Matthew 5:5).

When Christ promises to the meek the inheritance of the Earth we might think it exceedingly foolish. We say to ourselves, "Is it not those whose hand is ever ready to avenge injuries who are rather the persons who claim for themselves the dominion of the Earth?" [DR: Isn't it those who push to get their way who win in the end?] "But to the children of God, on the other hand, I would answer that

though they may not plant their foot on what is their own, they enjoy a quiet residence on the Earth. For they know that the Earth which they inhabit has been granted to them by God.

Or to put it another way: when we know God is on our side – or, I think it's far better to say: when we know that we've given up on our side, and when we've decided to be on God's side, on God's team, pursuing God's will as better than our own, leaning not on our own understanding but on God's understanding (Proverbs 3:5-6), when we have made that transition, then we just don't have to push ourselves so hard onto others in order to come out on top. We are free to choose to be meek.

Strangely, even in the business world there's a growing stream of gurus who are saying this, even from a secular point of view. A man by the name of Daniel Goldman, who some of you may know of, who spoke a number of years ago about emotional intelligence, speaks about the ineffectiveness of what he calls a "coercive style" of leadership. When a leader always knows best, he says, this robs employees and colleagues of a sense of ownership, destroys initiative, creates resentment, looks good but it can be destructive to the organization as a whole. Goldman says that this kind of person or approach rarely gets the best result.

Or some of you may be familiar with the book that was a best seller about 12 years ago called *Good To Great*, by Jim Collins. Jim Collins looked at some highly effective, powerful executives in corporate America whose corporations had done exceedingly well over a period of 15 years. And 11 of these he found, 11 of these he said, could be described as meek! He writes that:

None of these leaders ever wanted to become larger than life heroes. They never aspired to be put on a pedestal or become unreachable icons. In contrast to the very me centered leaders of many other corporations we were struck by how the good to great leaders didn't talk about themselves. During interviews with the good to great leaders they'd talk about the company and the contributions of other executives as long as we'd like but would deflect discussion about their own contributions. When pressed to talk about themselves they'd say things like I hope I'm not sounding like a big shot. And this was not just false modesty. When we interviewed other people to say what they thought about these top executives they said exactly the same thing: quiet, humble, modest, understated, gracious, mild mannered, did not believe his own clippings.

But they got to the top. They got to the top. Meek. Not weak but meek.

In the end I think the best definition for the meekness that Jesus has in mind comes from the Psalm that we read earlier, Psalm 37, which explicitly includes the statement that Jesus uses. So much of Jesus' teaching in these Beatitudes takes us back to the Psalms. Psalm 37 Verse 5:

*Commit your way to the Lord. Trust in him and he will act.* [DR: His will is best no matter what it is or where it lies even though getting there may be tough and painful and I don't want to give up on my own will.]

*Commit your way to the Lord. Trust in him and he will act. Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him.* [DR: How hard is that?]

*Do not fret over those who prosper in their way* [DR: who seem to be getting ahead; seem to be stronger and more powerful.]

*Refrain from anger and forsake wrath. Do not fret it leads only to evil* [DR: it just will not do for you the good that you want. It will not bring you the happiness that you seek.]

*Yet a little while and the wicked will be no more.* [DR: They seem to be permanent but there's nothing permanent about that way of life.] And then Verse 11:

*But the meek* [DR: yes, the meek, those open to the will of God, the meek] *shall inherit the land.*

And so Jesus says, echoing these statements, “*Happy are the meek for they shall inherit the Earth.*”

*Happy are the meek:* Who? Well, unassuming folk, not weak but meek; unassuming folk who trust God enough with their own lives that they don't have to push their lives onto others, and put themselves first. God notices us, always will and will guide and direct us, and lift us up in due season. “Humble yourselves,” says the scripture, “under the mighty hand of God that in due season God will exalt you.” (1 Peter 5:6). Let God take care of that.

*Blessed or happy are the meek:* Who? Those whose will and pride is broken, sometimes through many painful crises before God, so that the will of God can become central in our lives. The will of God: not peripheral, not an add-on, but central, replacing our will, until our will becomes more and more God's will, and we would not have it any other way than God's way.

And when that happens my friends, when that happens, our lives will be fulfilled. Our mission will be accomplished, and we will find a happiness that nothing and no one can ever take away. *Happy are the meek for they shall inherit the Earth.*

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