

“Gentleness”

Sermon by Dan Harrison, pastor of Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA, 7/12/20

Philippians 4:4-7

As a young person 30 years ago I remember a pastor telling me—when cautioning me against my aggressive reaction to something—“Jesus was meek, but make no mistake about it. Meekness isn’t weakness. It is power under control.” I think he was kindly telling me to emulate Jesus and control my emotions a bit.

I’ll never forget that. And I believe for the most part that’s true, Jesus was meek at times and loud at other times, but I really believe gentleness was an overarching characteristic of Jesus—a purposeful meekness, if you will. As we just read, the Apostle Paul encouraged the Philippian church to rejoice. Many of us even grew up singing the song, “Rejoice, rejoice. Again, I say rejoice. Rejoice in the Lord always again I say rejoice.” And there is little doubt that God desires for us to rest in a genuine attitude of joy. Within such I can attest for me, at least, certainly lies a formula for life-giving happiness.

But it is the next line in Paul’s letter that grabs me this morning and beckons me to dive deeper into what he wrote, “Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.” I couldn’t help chuckling some when I read this particular verse, because to be honest I do not find myself to be a very gentle person. I can be a bit gruff at times, and if you doubt it, simply ask my family. I lose my patience more than I’d like to and I project my own self-criticism or perfectionism onto others within my immediate family far too often. Though I am gentle at times, it certainly isn’t my defining trait. But I want it to be.

I want gentleness to explode through every cell of my body. I want my very atoms to transform themselves into the essence of human gentleness. I think Saint Paul is certainly amplifying a significant truth about God’s desire for how we should interact with one another, and that includes all of creation! With gentleness (which in our language is often coupled with the word “kindness”): Gentleness and kindness.

Paul props up this admonition for these early followers of Jesus’ teachings to not hide their gentleness. In fact, let it show. And I think we can read between the lines that perhaps culture at the time dictated to some that showing gentleness to others in public could be a sign of weakness. This particular cultural taboo around showing gentleness to others publically then being interpreted as weakness has not entirely disappeared, has it?

I also am enamored with the next sentence Paul states just after encouraging them to show gentleness in public: “The Lord is near.” My immediate thought was a gut reaction, “Ouch!” It’s this idea that the gentleness that Jesus showed, even to the end when he prayed aloud within earshot of his executors, “Lord forgive them for they know not what they do,” that we can somehow muster a similar strength and fortitude in our own minds and hearts to be gentle with all of God’s creatures, even the most brutish and unkind ones. We must be the example.

In my previous church in Fancy Gap, Virginia, I would end each service's benediction with a simple phrase of encouragement: "Remember, you may be the only Jesus some will ever see. So, be the right kind of Jesus."

The principle, I believe, is a sound one: You're already living into your life of faith, and with it you carry the essence of Christ, so be the right kind of essence for a world in pain. Your family needs you. Your community needs you. Your nation needs you. Your world needs you. Your planet needs you. Your universe needs you. You need you. So, be the best version of yourself that you can be, right? Embody the qualities that Jesus exemplified in his life and teachings. Be gentle.

Even evangelist Tony Abrams, whose worldview will differ quite substantially from my own, interprets "gentleness" through the lens of "tactfulness." He says, "Although the world tells us to be assertive, scripture tells us to be gentle. Tact is thinking twice before saying nothing. Tact is the ability to think of things far enough in advance not to say them. Tact is the ability to stand on your own two feet without stepping on anybody's toes. People with tact have less to retract." I couldn't agree more. Tactfulness is certainly imbedded deeply within the idea of gentleness. Thinking before saying or doing. Such a disciplined practice as this fits nicely within our community's own predilections, anyway, doesn't it? Gentleness. Even the Buddha said, "With gentleness overcome anger. With generosity overcome meanness. With truth overcome deceit." I think the "truth" in this sense is most likely "self-truth" and "self-deceit," which Paul's letter to the Philippians nicely dove-tails into with his next line of encouragement, "Be anxious for nothing," even insinuating prayer as the place to house such fears—the idea of giving over our "yoke," our anxieties and worries. Then Paul says at the apex of this culmination of public gentleness and absolute surrender of self, of bare honesty or self-truth, there at that exact point of nexus, peace occurs. And not just any peace—a "peace that transcends."

This peace rises above our senses, defies all past experiences, Paul says. This is the nexus of peace where gentleness abounds and "control" relinquishes, where grace exudes and love rolls downward and outward. This is where I want to be, and I know many of us do as well. But let us take the first steps and watch our words and actions. Let us listen. Let us be gentle, wrapped in love, and let our fears and worries go. Let us be known for our gentleness.

Shalom