

Gentleness

Life in the Spirit, Part 11

from the pulpit of
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James 3:13-18

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵ Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶ For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for ^[a]those who make peace.

Philippians 4:1-9

¹ Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

² I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³ Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

My friend's daughter was just walking—that exciting point in a toddler's life when everything is done at a full tilt. – It is an Evel Knievel-esque - careening running if not falling, full sprint kind of movement. It is also at this point in a toddler's life when all of the family pets start avoiding their presence. I had to notice that the cats who had always been in the very center of that household were now hiding, seeking out refuge hidden behind the sofa, well aware that the newest member of the family was quick to find them. I remember there was a lull in activity and the family cat lurked from her hiding place to escape towards another room. At that same moment, an enthusiastic cry went up and the chase was on. As the little girl went sprinting after the cat, she screaming out at the top of her lungs: Entle Entle!

Her parents repeated after her: Yes, Gentle Gentle, be gentle with the cat.

It's a dance, isn't it? I'm sure many of us have been a part of. It is a wonderful dialogue as parents and caregivers and children attempt to teach those little ones how to hold back their enthusiasm as they meet new people, interact with pets, or handle family heirlooms. We have to learn how to be gentle.

After a while and a lot of practice, children begin to master that particular skill, the cats and the siblings start to venture from their hiding places. Everyone stops eyeing that particular child with wariness and begin to trust them, approach them with hope. It was only a few years later that, that that same little girl approached me asking to help set the table and I didn't bat an eye as I handed her a stack of her grandmother's china to take to the dining room.

It takes time to learn to be gentle, it takes effort. Imagine everything that has to work together in the brain in order to be gentle. It's social, emotional, physical. It lets us interact with others and with the world. Think of all the things you have to figure out to move from that no-holds barred two-year-old?

I'm equally amazed at the conversations that then start happening a few years later... maybe first or second grade, depends on the child, but it's this odd turn, when we start to regret teaching them all that gentleness, when suddenly that hard earned gentleness becomes a liability. We start to worry....

Worried that someone might take advantage, worried that a child might not get ahead. It's the parent scratching their head when their child peels off away from the goal to help the child who trips. It's the trepidation and the worry that begins to set in. So we start to temper the very gentleness we spent so much time embedding. We wouldn't want that child to be hurt by a world that can be so cruel.

It's a little Funny isn't it. It all happens within 6-9 years that we go from those extremes. But I understand that catch in the back of our throats that stops us when someone asks for help, of the strange feeling when you think, "Is this fair?" Am I being taken advantage of? How do these pieces fit together? After all, it was Jesus who told his disciples to be wise as serpents—and innocent as doves—and if that isn't the heart of this challenge I don't know what is.

Like all of the other fruits of the spirit: gentleness is something that God desires to grow and live and be seen in each of us. It is something that can be nurtured and it is something that can help us reflect God's kingdom in the world. It is mentioned in nine of the epistles always as trait to be sought by believers and to be shown by their communities; and yet, I don't think it's a mistake that it is in the smallest font on the cover of our bulletin, tucked in there at the bottom. It's among those big gifts: Joy and Hope and Peace; but in some ways, gentleness has always been one of our most countercultural values, countercultural traits.

Teacher and thinker Leo Buscaglia says this way: If you're an advocate of gentleness, you're simplistic and naive. If you're an advocate of despair and hate, you're sophisticated." Because clearly you couldn't possibly understand the world if you didn't turn from those gentle ways.

There is always a fear, that gentleness opens us to some sort of danger or manipulation; that it makes us naive in a world that demands constant vigilance.

But gentleness is something more than naiveté, Biblical gentleness is something more. I think of it this way. It's when you're carrying a cup that you value, maybe a tea cup from your great grandmother. Maybe it's valuable, maybe it's not; but instead of crashing that cup into the table, you place it softly. You have the power to break it, to treat it without care; but gentleness is choosing to treat it softly because you cherish it. When you interact with people, you hold them with

the same care, that you cherish them enough that regardless of the power you have over that person you place them softly, with grace, you treat them gently.

James and Paul – the authors of our two texts worked and served in very different contexts. James, the brother of Jesus, was firmly embedded in Jerusalem, he worked with the same people his entire ministry, he was the respected leader of the Jerusalem Council and was called the “just” not only by Christians, but by Jewish and Roman leaders alike. A man marked with integrity and respect.

Paul on the other hand was wandering and traveling throughout the gentile world preaching, establishing churches, moving and melding and agitating as the situation demanded. I think he liked the agitating role. He wasn’t afraid of offence. He was watching as the Gospel spread into new context.

Regardless of their differences, both men expected that the communities they served would embody gentleness. That well established community in Jerusalem and all of those communities Paul helped to form, all of them would show gentleness to the world.

For James, gentleness is a marker of the good life, of a Christian life. A good life would be marked by works: acts of charity, daily business. That all of those actions would be gentle born of wisdom. A good life would be defined by gentleness tied to wisdom.

For Paul, in his letter to the Philippians he asks that the believers, his crown and glory, let their gentleness be known to all. Not something to hide or be kept to yourself, your family or your community but rather something that would be seen by the whole world.

Both letters have a fundamental expectation that the Christian act of gentleness would be known not only by those inside the church, but that everyone watching would see that behavior as well. That meekness – mercy and even compassion; that gentleness was not to be limited to the community, but rather be a sign and testimony of who we are.

This didn’t stop in the first century. As the church continued to grow, there was pride in the early church about that meekness as standing counter to dominant

culture. Gentleness defined how Christians feed the hungry, served the sick, and cared for the orphans. They didn't use words like self-righteous or holy, but rather described themselves as gentle, as acting with mercy. That's how Christians acted in the world.

As the church moved from being a small minority religion to being the dominate faith of the Roman empire, there was a legitimate concern that Christian Gentleness couldn't be practiced in the harsh light of the day – could it survive? The Roman empire didn't really lift up gentleness as the next big virtue. When Saint Augustine was asked to encourage the first generation of Christian judges. They asked him what they should do. To be a Roman magistrate was an important job, you had power, you were expected to torture and execute people. You had authority over others and the ability to exercise great power. Augustine wrote to those early judges and encouraged them to act with justice, to follow the law, but also to act with gentle mercy. If you judge with gentleness and with mercy, he argued, you will do more for the gospel than all the blood of the martyrs that came before. If you could act with gentleness, the gospel would be upheld.

I think it's important to recognize that no one in the early church was naive as to the risks. Neither James nor Paul thought that people would go out into the world and no one would ever take advantage. They are not asking us to be fools; but they are asking us to be open. James pairs gentleness with wisdom. Don't be dumb, but be gentle. Use God's wisdom that is pure, holy and kind. If you can do that, then why not face a world that is none of those things. Paul makes a more complicated argument.

He tells the church to rejoice in all things and show the world their gentleness; because in doing so they are telling the world something about their belief in God. If you believe that God will ultimately protect your heart, your mind, your being, then you don't need to be worried about protecting yourself, you can be open. You don't need to be afraid of an unfair world. If you have God on your side, we can be brave in facing a world with rough edges and difficult moments, it never promises that there won't be heartache or challenge, but that in the end, our gentleness is born out of a hope that God's kingdom expects us to be different and assures us that God protects us in that work.

It's hard work... really hard. Kind of like learning how to pet a cat or share a toy.

It wasn't that long ago that I was visiting one of our preschool classes, there was little boy who had a very hard time sitting still. As I was sitting a child saw me watching him and leaned over to whisper kindly: "he has a hard time keeping his body still." I said, "I understand." I watched as teachers tried to correct his behavior. Two other boys moved apart, "come sit here with us." Then in this ultimate act of grace, another child leaned over to share, "You know he's the fastest kid in our class."

Gentleness if knowing that by making a space, you might get in trouble, but you make the space anyway.

Maybe some of us need to learn from our toddlers and relearn some of those early lessons, but maybe we also need to sit with them and learn what it is to search for connection – to be brazen as we run full tilt into the world. To discover, and to desire to be in relationship with others that we are willing to trip over our own feet.

Maybe some of us need to sit with our Kindergarteners and learn from their mastery of their subject; of what it means to throw things aside for a friend, to make a place, to welcome, to take a risk.

Maybe we need to struggle with our third graders as they try to find that balance between being wise and being kind. How to be faithful actors in a world that asks them to be other.

The simple truth is that the church hasn't changed that much in 2000 years. Who we are called to be hasn't changed. This gentleness, this is part of who we are called to be, it should define how we speak and interact. How we act with one another, and in our homes, but also how we act in the world. This gentleness, it is a small fruit, but one we can cultivate.

If you start to be worried about what will happen ... remember this promise:

So let your gentleness be known to all and do not worry.... About anything, and the Peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Jesus Christ.

May it be so.

Amen