

Blessed Are the Meek

A Sermon on Matthew 5:4

We are continuing our sermon series on the Beatitudes this week, which I pronounced as the beau-tides the first time I tried to say it out loud. Needless to say, I felt very meek in that moment as my choir director tried to figure out exactly what my twelve-year-old-self was talking about. Very meek indeed and not at all blessed. But learning that I could be wrong is always a helpful lesson, so as we focus ourselves for the sermon this morning, I want you to think of a mistake you made that taught you a gentle, helpful lesson. Hold that feeling, that stretch of self, in your mind.

And will you pray with me?

God of the strong and God of the meek, you are constantly calling us to you. Help us to hear you in this time and this place. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

As we start off this morning, I want you to think through two questions: What does the word “meek” make you think of? What about the word “blessed”?

On our first read of a biblical text, we often do this kind of thinking without thinking about it. We look at the words and we put them together with what they mean and we come up with a meaning for our lives from there. “Blessed are the meek,” we read, and think, “I want to be blessed, so I should be meek.” And then we start to put pieces together. Since meek means weak or quiet or submissive, I should be quiet and accept what comes to me. That’s what the Bible tells me to do, we think.

This is not a bad place to start reading the Bible, by figuring out what the plain words on the page say. But if this is the only thing we do when we read the Bible, we’re potentially missing out on a big chunk of the story.

It’s like when I punched a friend of mine on the church playground in third grade. All my mom saw was that I hit a kid. She didn’t hear him tell me that girls were so weak that they couldn’t make boys cry. Was I wrong for hitting him? Absolutely. Was there also a bigger story going on? There certainly was.

So today I want to do a couple of things to help us understand the bigger story of what’s going on in this short beatitude. I want to talk about:

- (1) what it means to inherit the earth,
- (2) what it means to be meek, and,
- (3) why Jesus calls the meek blessed.

After we’ve got those pieces together, we can see if the verse means what we thought it meant.

Now that we know where we’re headed, let’s get going.

“Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.” (Matthew 5:5, KJV) The word that’s translated “earth” here (γῆ) could also be translated “land, region, or humanity,” in the way that “country” can mean “out in the country,” or “the country that I’m from,” or “we are the country.” If you flip over to Psalm 37:11, you’ll find that “the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant prosperity.” (NRSV) It’s possible that the writer of Matthew had this psalm in mind as he was compiling the teachings that became the Sermon on the Mount, because the phrasing of this beatitude matches the Greek translation of the Hebrew bible that he

would have had exactly, since the word for “land” that’s used here is the same as the word translated “earth” in the beatitude.

Why is that important? Well, because in this psalm, it's pretty clear that "the land" is the land of Israel. It's the promised inheritance of the people of Israel. The meek here are listed along with those who are righteous as the people who deserve the inheritance of the land. This psalm, like many of the psalms, tells us about the rewards of serving God. For the psalmist, in a very concrete way, the meek would live in the land of their inheritance, because they pleased God. If Matthew is quoting this psalm, then his quotation carries with it this idea of inheriting and land.

Now, at the time, the people Jesus was talking to were living in the promised land. They in theory had their inheritance. But in a very real way, they also didn't. They were living in an occupied land and they certainly weren't delighting in abundant prosperity. Jesus is doing two things here as he speaks to these meek people: he is reminding them of the promise of the psalm and he is showing them a better future, the way all the Beatitudes do. In the future, when God has set things right, the land will not belong to those who strong ones who have taken it by force. The land is instead the inheritance of the meek.

Now, hold on, you might say. I get how some of these words are similar, but where do you get this idea that Jesus is talking about some future time? Well, that's where our Isaiah passage from today comes in. (Isaiah 60-61) There are parallels between those verses in Isaiah, which are imaging the good future Israel will have in the land as they return from the Babylonian Exile, and the Beatitudes. Jesus was a rabbi. He knew these words backwards and forwards and he knew why he wanted to bring these words to his followers and not those from another prophet or another section of the Torah. He wants them to imagine the better future that will happen when God's kingdom comes, and he uses these ideas from Isaiah to help them do that. The meek inheriting the land is a setting right of things. It's a promise of a future we should want to live in, which is different from where we are now.

So why we read that the meek will inherit the earth, rather than the land? Well, the text supports either word, but we're Christians and as our epistle lesson today reminds us, we're gentiles. We have no stake in the land of Israel. We also don't think the kingdom of God is going to stop at the bounds of Israel. We think it'll cover the entire earth. That's the inheritance we claim and the future we want to imagine: the whole earth living together in the light and love of God's kingdom. Jesus expanded the promise of the psalmist. The meek shall inherit the earth.

But who are the meek, anyway? What does it mean to be meek? Is it a good or bad thing?

Before we go answering all those questions, we need to look at this word, “meek.” The King James Version uses it, as does the NRSV, but other translations will use “humble,” or, like the one from the reading earlier, “gentle.” What’s going on here?

Well, the Greek word translated as “meek” here, $\pi\rho\alpha\epsilon\iota\varsigma$, is actually a rare one in the New Testament, used around 5 times, and it’s difficult to translate. Jesus calls himself $\pi\rho\alpha\epsilon\iota\varsigma$ in Matthew 11:28-29 when he says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” The “humble” in “humble in heart” is $\pi\rho\alpha\epsilon\iota\varsigma$. The other place you find $\pi\rho\alpha\epsilon\iota\varsigma$ in Matthew is when Jesus is riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, and it’s usually translated as “humble” there too. (Mt. 21:5)

$\Pi\rho\alpha\epsilon\iota\varsigma$, in its original meaning, meant “gentle, humble, or considerate,” so it means more than meek as we might think of it today. $\Pi\rho\alpha\epsilon\iota\varsigma$ does not mean someone who’s letting themselves be stepped on. $\Pi\rho\alpha\epsilon\iota\varsigma$ carries the connotation of gentleness, someone who has power but chooses to wield it without violence. Meek, in its original meaning a couple of

centuries ago, like when the King James Version of the Bible was being translated, still carried some of this sense gentle, humble, and unassuming. The word didn't become associated with being weak until later.

Knowing this, I would say that it takes an incredible amount of strength to be meek, to be humble, to be gentle. For me, this changes the game. Because to me, meek isn't something you choose to be, it's something that disposition and circumstances have made you. The meek don't push back because there's no fight in them. The meek are passive. The meek are missing that fire in their heart.

But someone who is gentle chooses to be gentle. Someone who is gentle has strength and chooses not to wield it in a way that would hurt another. Someone who is humble has the ability to do something and does it without seeking praise, without wanting the world to notice. Someone who is gentle or humble is the exact opposite of Caesar and his thugs, who were the ones that Jesus and his followers knew as leaders. When the world is as it should be, it will not be the brutes who win the day. It will be the gentle.

And this is why Jesus calls them blessed, because he knows something that we don't see when we look at the world around us. When we look at the world around us, we see the bullies ruling the earth. We see world leaders wielding all the power they can in order to stay in power and not caring who gets trampled in the process. It's tempting for us to want to fight fire with fire, because this is just the way the world is. The strong only listen to strength.

But that way of life is not sustainable and it tears apart people's souls. This is why Jesus calls the meek blessed. The word μακάριοι, translated as "blessed" here, can also mean "happy, fortunate, or prosperous," but it means it in a heavenly way, the way we would say, "God smiled on you," when we hear someone's good news. So Jesus is telling these people, these people who might be at the end of their rope, who want to start taking arms up against Rome, who don't know the work that Jesus is going to do on the cross and how it's going to save us in a way they could never imagine, Jesus is telling these people who have needed to be meek that God smiles on the gentle, because gentleness will win the day.

What does this mean for us? Well, we follow a Lord who is described as a gentle shepherd, who humbled himself to death on a cross, and who tells us that the gentle and the humble will in the end inherit everything that the strong and violent have striven for. It would be good for us to practice humility, to practice gentleness. This is how we can be more like Jesus, who God the Father smiled on and called, "my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased."

And this is the story that the Bible likes to tell us over and over again. God sees the world as it is. God knows the pain that we can inflict on each other. And time and again, God calls us to be kind, to love one another, to outdo one another in goodness, and to be gentle. We have such power and such ability, such capacity for using all of our skills for good or bad. In the world we live in now, we do not use our capacity as we should. So Jesus reminds us to be gentle, in times where we want to violent, because gentleness is the way to God's kingdom.

So where have we come on this journey of learning this morning? We have talked about what inheriting the earth means—for us as Christians, it means living in God's kingdom. And we've talked about what Jesus meant when he said meek: he meant gentle or humble. And we've talked about what it means to be blessed: it means to be happy, to have God smile on us. We will all be blessed in the coming kingdom because it will be a kingdom ruled by gentleness. It is our task from here to make sure that we are living lives fit for the kingdom, that we use all our power and abilities to be gentle and humble. We can bless the world around us with our meekness.

Amen.