

Summer in the Beatitudes: “Blessed Are the Meek? They’re Only Going to Get the Leftovers!”

Psalms 37:1-11

- ¹ Do not fret because of the wicked; do not be envious of wrongdoers,
² for they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb.
³ Trust in the LORD, and do good; so you will live in the land, and enjoy security.
⁴ Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.
⁵ Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act.
⁶ He will make your vindication shine like the light,
and the justice of your cause like the noonday.
⁷ Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him;
do not fret over those who prosper in their way,
over those who carry out evil devices.
⁸ Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath. Do not fret—it leads only to evil.
⁹ For the wicked shall be cut off,
but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land.
¹⁰ Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more;
though you look diligently for their place, they will not be there.
¹¹ But the meek shall inherit the land,
and delight themselves in the abundance of peace.

Matthew 5:5

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth!”

My senior year in High School, my choir director chose me to play Arthur in the musical Camelot. My career as a vocalist has gone downhill ever since. However, playing Arthur was a great joy because I’ve always loved the stories of Arthur and his round table. Unfortunately, I did not get to sing one of my favorite songs from the operetta because it was sung not by Arthur but by Lancelot. It’s really the Lancelot anthem because he sings it when he first appears on stage and it describes him to a “T.” Lancelot is thoroughly and completely conceited, but he’s blind to his own pride.

Lance is responding to the call for noble knights to come, and join, this remarkable new creation: the “Round Table” where there is no “head” where the favored sit; Arthur’s “Round Table: where all knights will be equal to one another. And Lancelot sings:

*“A knight of the Table Round should be invincible!
Succeed where a less fantastic man would fail.
Climb a wall no one else can climb,*

*Cleave a dragon in record time,
Swim a moat in a coat of heavy iron mail.
No matter the pain he ought to be unwinceable!
Impossible deeds should be his daily fare/
But where in the world
Is there in the world
A man so extraordinaire?*

*C'est moi! C'est moi!
I'm forced to admit,
'Tis I, I humbly reply
That mortal who
These marvels can do
C'est moi, c'est moi, 'tis I!*

*The soul of a knight should be a thing remarkable
His heart and his mind as pure as morning dew
With a will and a self-restraint
That's the envy of ev'ry saint
He could easily work a miracle or two
To love and desire he ought to be unsparkable
The ways of the flesh should offer no allure
But where in the world
Is there in the world
A man so untouch'd and pure?"*

*"C'est moi, c'est moi, So admir'bly fit
A French Prometheus unbound!
And here I stand with valor untold,
Exception'lly brave, amazingly bold,
To serve at the Table Round!"*

And when Guinevere chances to hear Lancelot's pompous refrain she asks him, "Tell me, my Lord, have you ever heard of humility?" "Humility?" Lancelot asks in surprise. "Yes, humility my Lord! Hu-mil-i-te!"

Through the course of the story, it turns out the Lancelot does not really understand humility! His strengths and his passions are not under control and he causes the noble idea of the Round Table to be destroyed. And we discover that King Arthur is the one who has mastered his strength, his emotions, his passions. Arthur is the one who is truly humble and meek.

I want to get something out of the way here at the beginning. The word “meek” is hopelessly inadequate to describe what Jesus is saying. It’s an old English word we have held onto since King James had the scriptures translated. But what we understand as “meek” is not what it was first meant to convey. When we think “meek” we think of a Casper Milquetoast, someone who is afraid of his own shadow. We think of a wallflower who has no courage, no self-respect, no confidence. We think of meek as being weak, being a pushover, a doormat, a shrinking violet. To be called meek today would be an insult! In our minds, we translate this as “Blessed are those who let others have their own way!” “Blessed are those who give in without a fight!” “Blessed are those who let others bully them!” Not so! That’s not at all what Jesus is talking about! While we may dislike this beatitude because we think “meek means weak,” it’s true meaning is very different. In fact, I’ve discovered that several scholars believe that this Beatitude is among a half dozen of the most important verses in the entire Bible!

Blessed are the meek! Remember, we’re also told that “The man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth.”^[1] But Moses was a strong man! Moses had a strong desire for justice. He used his strength to try to free his fellow Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. When he used his strength without control, he killed an Egyptian. Then later on he encounters Yahweh and surrenders to the great I AM. And then, led by God, he faced down Pharaoh and led his people out of slavery towards the Promised Land. This is not meekness as we understand it!

And in the New Testament what person best displays meekness? Why, Jesus! In true humility, Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”^[2] A perfect picture of meekness is seen in the person of Jesus Christ. Yet pastor and author Gordon Powell says that there was something about Jesus’ meekness “that frightened people, especially those who were morally weak or positively evil.” Indeed, Powell says, when Jesus spoke about meekness, he was “talking about something that requires very great strength: he was speaking of self-control.”^[3]

Author Ellsworth Kalas, who has spoken at our church, reminds us that Jesus’ meekness was of a startling kind. “Again and again,” he writes, “Jesus stood up to the challenge of enemies, both individuals and hostile crowds.” He confronted injustice, endured sham trials with dignity, suffered physical abuse from soldiers without losing control of his emotions, causing one tough Centurion to declare that he must be the son of God! Yet this is the Jesus we describe in a hymn as “gentle Jesus, meek and mild.”^[4]

This is authentic meekness, unlike the false humility of a Lancelot! But we’ve lost the word! Meekness is like a beautiful piece of oak furniture which has

been painted over time and time again until we can no longer see the original beauty – we’ve got to strip away a lot of coats in order to get to the original! The word used here, “praus,” in Greek literally means “strength with gentleness.” The original use is an ancient equestrian term. Imagine, if you would, a wild horse who was born in the wilderness and never known a human hand, a stallion with great strength, pride and self-will, that no one has been able to tame. What the ancients would do with such a horse was to tie it to a mule and let them go. The stallion, of course, would yank and pull and buck and try everything to get loose. It would try to exert all of its strength to make the mule go where he wanted to go.

But mules have a reputation for stubbornness that is well deserved. That mule would simply stand its ground. It would graze and go wherever it wanted as it grazed. And no matter how strong-willed, the stallion would be powerless tied to that mule. The mule would bend the stallion’s will to its own. Eventually, the mule would return to its owners with the stallion following gently by its side. And do you know what they would say of the stallion? They would say that the stallion had been “meeked.” It has been “meeked.” The tremendous strength of that mighty horse had been brought under control as it learned to accommodate its will to that of the mule.

When Moses encounters Yahweh in the burning bush, and is persuaded to lead the Hebrews to freedom, he has been “meeked.” Jesus was a person of tremendous power, but his was a strength that was put completely into the service of God. He owned his identity and controlled himself in a way we do not. The Greek verb for “meek,” then, refers to the channeling of energies, as in the taming of horses. Until we are “meeked” we serve the master of our own ego and we do not serve God.

In Jesus I think we see a perfect picture of meekness. He was totally obedient to the Father even in the garden the night before the Crucifixion. He prayed, “O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless, not my will but Yours be done.”^[5] Nearly every week we pray “Thy kingdom come! Thy will be done!” When we yoke ourselves to Christ, we don’t pray for our will to be done, or for our kingdom to come! The meeked are those who seek God’s guidance and God’s direction. Our allegiance is to the Father, not to a peer group, not to the culture, not to our own egos. We are to be “in-formed” by the Holy Spirit. And what are the fruit of the Spirit? “Love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and self-control.” And most of these are indications of impulses which have been mastered.

Putting my gifts into the service of another is something I used to find very difficult to do. I have some strengths which strongly resist being tamed and trained. My natural inclination, like most folks, is to want to use my gifts for my own purposes – not necessarily for my own gain or advancement – but hey! they’re

my gifts and I get to use them as I want, right? What I discovered long ago, however, is that when I use my strengths for my own purposes, I become enslaved to my gifts and desires! When I put myself into the hands of God, with no agenda at all, at rest simply trusting God, I find true freedom. And in the service of the God made known in Jesus, I have found perfect freedom.

“Blessed are the meek!” That is, blessed are those who have learned to master their strength, channel their strength, under the guidance of the Spirit! True happiness, indeed bliss, can be found by being meeked! But Jesus says something more which is just as surprising! Jesus says these people are going to inherit the earth! Not heaven!

I’ll confess to you, I get the “meek” part. I understand the necessity of putting ourselves and our gifts in the service of the One who is greater than us all. I struggle, however, with the meaning of “inheriting the earth.” Again, it’s the paradox of what Jesus says that goads us. The meek aren’t happy – and they aren’t supposed to inherit anything! Maybe we’d all agree if Jesus said “The meek shall inherit the kingdom of heaven!” We would understand if Jesus said that their reward would come in the “hereafter.” But there’s no “pie in the sky in the sweet bye-and-bye” in this teaching. Jesus, to his credit, is talking about the here and now, not some distant dream. But inheriting the earth? Come on! What could he possibly mean? By the way, Jesus wasn’t alone in saying this! The psalmist said it, too!

Perhaps the way to understand this is by means of contrast. We sometimes are tempted to think that the wicked will inherit the earth – but that’s not what Jesus said. Or we think that the strong and the mighty, or the aggressive might inherit the earth. Not according to Jesus! For the earth is the Lord’s. I know when I’m tempted to despair, I think only those who are unethical or greedy will prosper. Still, that’s not what Jesus tells us! Those who have mastered themselves; those who have placed their strengths and abilities into God’s hands; those who no longer seek only their own advancement or gain; they shall be blessed, they shall find true joy, they shall know bliss – now!

One final nugget from this marvelous teaching. That Greek word we translate as “meek” – “praus” – is actually used in the plural here. Praeis! So Jesus is not speaking of us as individuals. He’s not speaking of people who, on their own, become isolated, marginalized individuals. Jesus is speaking of us as the community of those who have together become one in the service of God. You might just say that Jesus is speaking of those who will become his church! “A new family is being birthed, and the meek inherit the earth together as one family or not at all. But,” says James Howell, “we would expect this of the meek, for they do not advance their own private agendas, they are not competitive, they aren’t trying to

get ahead.”^[6] They know they are being formed, and being employed, for the kingdom of God!

I hope you remember this as you come today to the table of our Lord. You are not invited to come alone, but to join God’s people. You are not invited here for your own advancement or power, but to lay aside all things but the desire to serve God. To come to this table is not an act of pride, but an act of humility by those who seek first God’s kingdom, God’s righteousness and God’s peace.

No: this is not “Arthur’s round table,” and we can be thankful for that! For you need not be a knight to feast here – your meekness is all that is asked.

[1] *Numbers 12:3.*

[2] *Matthew 11:29-30.*

[3] *Quoted by Ellsworth Kalas, The Beatitudes from the Backside, page, 38.*

[4] *Ellsworth Kalas, The Beatitudes from the Backside, page, 37.*

[5] *Matthew 26:39.*

[6] *James C. Howell, The Beatitudes for Today, p. 53.*