**Blessed are the gentle**

**Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen**

**NPMC – July 21, 2019**

*Scripture: Matthew 5:5, Ruth 1:6-18, Luke 14:15-24*

*Hymns: StJ 94 – Blest Are They, StS 41 – Blessed Are They*

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. – Matt. 5:5

I have to confess something from the beginning this morning: this is not my favourite beatitude. In fact, I had kind of been wishing that Patrick had been assigned this one to preach on, cause I didn’t really want to go there. Maybe it’s just my own baggage around meekness and gender stereotypes talking, but that word isn’t exactly a compliment, is it? Do you ever have a great impression of someone and say, “Oh, he or she is so meek!”? I don’t think so. To our ears, meekness sounds like cowardice or timidity, like being a pushover or not speaking up. Not something we aspire to, as a rule.

 So maybe we need to do a little more digging into what this word means, because the meaning of this beatitude really depends on what we mean by meekness. Now the original Greek word here is *praus*, which can also be translated as gentle, humble, or kind. So on this basis, a few other translations put it differently than the New Revised Standard Version’s “Blessed are the meek.” The Inclusive Bible declares, “Blessed are those who are gentle: they will inherit the land.” Janet Morley translates it as, “Blessed are those who are not arrogant; they shall inherit the earth.”[[1]](#footnote-1) And the First Nations Version puts it this way: “Creator’s blessing rests on the ones who walk softly and in a humble manner; the earth, land, and sky will welcome them and always be their home.” So: gentle, not arrogant, walking softly. That starts to mean something altogether different than “meek” – something far more interesting.

If this is what we’re talking about – this gentleness, this non-arrogance, this unassuming approach – then I can think of all kinds of examples from our biblical text that speak to this way of being in the world. One of my absolute favourite books of the Bible is the book of Ruth, and she came to mind immediately when I was thinking of this broadened understanding of gentleness and kindness. As you likely know, Ruth is remembered for her loyalty to her mother-in-law, Naomi. When Naomi’s husband and two sons die, she and both her daughters-in-law are widowed – a situation synonymous with poverty in that patriarchal context – not to mention in a time of famine, as is the case in Moab, where they live. So Naomi tells her two young daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, to start over – to go find new husbands, so that they can be seen as respectable members of that society again. And she resigns herself to return to her hometown of Bethlehem, to see what kind of charity she can get from her extended family who still live there.

After protesting a bit, Orpah, the one daughter-in-law, tearfully obeys Naomi’s wishes. But here’s the kicker – Ruth refuses. She will not go back to her family of origin in Moab (we’re not told why). Instead, she clings to Naomi. And this is when she declares, famously, that she is bound to Naomi for life:

“Do not press me to leave you
    or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
    where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
    and your God my God.
17Where you die, I will die—
    there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me,
    and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!” (Ruth 1:16-17, NRSV).

 So here we have an example of insistent gentleness, of fierce loyalty, of love that is willing to step out into the unknown, of intentionally siding with a widow who had little or no social standing in that time and place. Interestingly, it is gentleness that is born of refusing to obey Naomi’s instructions, of refusing to abandon her!

 And the rest of Ruth’s story unfolds in a similar way. She accompanies Naomi to Bethlehem, and takes several risks to ensure their survival – she goes out gleaning, and then, in a scheme orchestrated by Naomi, manages to gain the attention of Boaz, whom she eventually marries and they have a son together, thus securing her and Naomi’s place in the community (not to mention, the economy). Ruth, it turns out, becomes an ancestor to King David, and also, eventually, to Jesus, the Messiah. Remember, this is Ruth – a woman, a widow, a Moabite, a newcomer or immigrant or economic refugee in Bethlehem, who becomes part of the royal and even messianic family tree. Talk about an underdog story! And it all begins with Ruth’s insistent gentleness, with her choosing to throw in her lot with Naomi, her widowed and destitute mother-in-law. And look what the two women accomplish! As African-American, womanist theologian Delores Williams would say, “God helped them make a way out of no way.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Or, Blessed are the gentle, for they will inherit the earth.

 Turning to Jesus’ parable about the banquet in Luke 14, we find a similar message of intentional gentleness, this time in a context of hospitality. Prior to the parable, we are told that Jesus is eating a meal at a Pharisee’s house. And he notices how the guests are choosing to sit in “the places of honour” (Luke 14:7) – now we don’t have as many etiquette rules around seating as they did, but think of a guest sitting, uninvited, at the head of the table in your home. It would be kind of frowned upon, wouldn’t it? Here, Jesus is maybe watching people scramble for places closer to the Pharisee who is their host – in a kind of subdued, awkward version of musical chairs – and Jesus says, come on, people. That’s not the way to do it. It’s not about scrambling for status and pushing others out of your way.

 And this is when Jesus tells his story about the great dinner. Someone was hosting a great dinner and invited many people. As someone who had household slaves, this “someone” would have been quite wealthy, and was presumably inviting other wealthy friends to this banquet. But none of them can actually come, and instead pass along excuses: “I have new land, I have to take care of it, I can’t come.” (This one hit kind of close to home with me as we continue to set up our new house!). “I have new oxen, can’t come.” “I just got married; sorry, still on our honeymoon!” So the host is angry, and tells the slave to invite people from the streets – the poor, those with disabilities, the outcasts of their society. And so those people become the guests at this great, fancy banquet.

 So what is this parable telling us? Well, it would seem that the original, invited guests were too caught up in their own stuff to accept the hospitality offered to them. They have their own agendas that leave no room for the time of fellowship and community that the host is offering. So, the host concludes that they no longer deserve it – their arrogance has made them uninvited, and instead, the humblest of guests are now invited: people living on the streets, people experiencing homelessness and ostracism and marginalization in that context. They become the worthy guests. They become those who are offered extravagant hospitality, even though they have no way of paying the host back. So the host, like Ruth, makes a choice to walk alongside the marginalized, and to be in relationship with them, even though it will do nothing for his status. This is decidedly not a “networking” dinner – at least not anymore! And that’s Jesus’ point. Offer hospitality to the “least of these” – they’re deserving of it. Blessed are the gentle and humble, for they will inherit the earth.

 So what does this beatitude mean for us today? Well, as my initial distaste for the word “meek” indicates, this is quite a counter-cultural statement in our world today, with its emphasis on consumerism and instant-gratification. Brian Walsh, who wrote a series of “corrections” to the beatitudes, writes the following next to this one:

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

*I don’t know what world you are living in!
Blessed are the graspers;
they wait for nothing, they have everything they want,
and they have it now.[[3]](#footnote-3)*

It can certainly seem like it’s the “graspers” – the most aggressive – who get ahead these days. But that logic is exactly what Jesus is questioning with his banquet parable – the idea that life is about “getting ahead” in the first place! Later in the gospel of Matthew, he will say, “Take my yolk upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt. 11:29). In order to find peace for ourselves and others, we must be “meek” – gentle and humble in heart – the way that Jesus was. I find this especially striking because Jesus wasn’t always gentle – he had some harsh words for the Pharisees or for Herod or for tax collectors or others who were abusing their power – but he intentionally chose to relate with gentleness and mutuality with those who were on the margins of his society – women, people with disabilities or illnesses, children, those lacking “status” in that time and place. And that took courage – the courage of Ruth, his great-great (etc.) grandmother, the courage of the banquet host who opens his table to a bunch of strangers, the courage of going against a culture that rewards arrogance and aggression, the opposite of gentleness. Blessed are the gentle, for they will inherit the earth.

One of the ways in which this hits closest to home for me – and perhaps for many of you, too – is in thinking about the children in our lives – be they our children, grandchildren, nieces or nephews, neighbours, or the children who are part of our congregation. How is it that we convey the sense of this beatitude to them? That’s where my mind initially went when I was thinking about meekness versus gentleness. Do I want to raise my children to be meek? Probably not. We’re no longer in the “children should be seen and not heard” era! But do I want to raise children who are kind and gentle? Yes, that’s more like it. That’s the kind of inheritance I’d like to pass on. I read somewhere recently that “how you talk to your children will become their inner voice,” and that certainly made me think about how I do that in the day to day.

 Cindy Wang Brandt writes about exactly this in her book, *Parenting Forward: How to Raise Children with Justice, Mercy, and Kindness*.[[4]](#footnote-4) As someone who is recovering from an authoritarian and fundamentalist Christian upbringing – in which she was scared into faith by the threat of hell and eternal damnation – she sets out to parent her two children – and teach them about faith – differently. Part of this, she says, has to do with changing how we view children and their place in our communities. She gives an example of current New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, who “was giving a speech in Parliament when a group of school children walked in, at which point she stopped her speech to welcome them. Smiling and gesturing with her arms for the children to come to the front, she asked the politicians in the room, ‘No one minds if the next generation joins us for a moment?’” In Wang Brandt’s view, this is a reversal of our expectations – here a politician models how to include children rather than ignoring them or assuming Parliament is too “solemn,” “reverent,” or adult for them. She calls instead for us to “experiment… with whether [children’s] spontaneity and noise is as disruptive as we fear, or whether perhaps, instead of detracting from adult spaces, they actually add their energy and imagination to expand adult paradigms.”[[5]](#footnote-5) At the funeral that was held here last Friday, Patrick did something very similar – held a children’s time for, in this case, the great-grandchildren. I’ve never seen that at a funeral before, but of course children’s time didn’t used to be part of our worship services either. This is a way of choosing to include not ignore the children in the practices of the church.

It’s similar with faith, for Wang Brandt. Rather than viewing faith as a pre-determined set of beliefs and doctrines that children need to accept and obey unquestioningly, she proposes that children be invited into the unfolding story of faith alongside adults and youth. She says, “If we can think of faith not as something that teaches children propositions but something that tells them a story, it could relieve a lot of our anxieties of ‘getting it right.’ No one teaches a story – they tell it, share it, and invite listeners into it.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Or, in the words of Madeleine L’Engle, “Stories are like children. They grow in their own way.” And this includes their spiritual growth. In this way, children are trusted to think through their own spirituality and even theology, rather than simply being told what to believe. When it comes to our beatitude, they have the ability to learn and also teach us adults what it means to be gentle. Part of this is through cultivating the practice of parenting or caring for them gently, and part of it through the gentleness they exemplify in their own relationships with other people.

I invite us to ponder our relationships with the next generations as one way to intentionally practice this beatitude in this very community – not as meekness, but as gentleness in the way of Jesus, in the way of Ruth, in the way of a host who opens the table to the humblest ones. Blessed are the gentle, for they will inherit the earth. AMEN

1. Janet Morley, *All Desires Known*, Third Ed. (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2006), 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, 20th Anniversary Ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2013), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Brian Walsh, <http://empireremixed.com/2017/07/19/beyond-smugness-beatitudes/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cindy Wang Brandt, *Parenting Forward: How to Raise Children with Justice, Mercy, and Kindness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Wang Brandt, 53-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Wang Brandt, 69, 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)