

Matthew 5:5; Numbers 12:1-16
Strength in Meekness
Grace United Methodist Church
July 26, 2009

An ancient story is told of a Persian shepherd who was promoted to the position of Prime Minister because of his great devotion and faithfulness to his king. The other ministers were angry that one of such lowly origins should be so highly honored. In their anger and jealousy they sought to find some damaging information to bring to their ruler some evil report that would place the Prime Minister in disfavor. After watching him closely, they found nothing objectionable except that once a week he would enter a little room which he kept locked and would shut himself in for an hour. The noblemen informed their monarch of this, declaring that they were certain he must be gathering there a secret hoard of his master's precious possessions. The king doubted their story, but gave them permission to break in and search the room. The only thing they found was a small bundle containing a dilapidated pair of shoes and an old robe. Brought before the ruler, the minister was asked why he kept them, and he replied, "I wore these things when I was a shepherd. I look at them regularly lest I should forget what I once was and how unworthy I am of all the kindness and honor your majesty has bestowed upon me." This shepherd turned Prime Minister is a picture of meekness.

In the third Beatitude, Jesus says, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

What is this meekness, Jesus calls us to embody? First, let me say it is not weakness. It is not false humility or passivity. Meekness is having a right understanding of who we are and whose we are. To help paint a picture of meekness let's look at Moses. In Numbers 12:3, God's Word says, "**Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.**" The word translated here as *humble* is the same word which is translated in the King James Version as meek. "**Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth.**"

There are at least three incidents in Moses' life which point to this character trait of meekness and show us its real meaning. First we see Moses' response to his calling. After 40 years in exile Moses is suddenly confronted with a miracle he doesn't understand. God speaks, telling Moses that he has been chosen to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. In response Moses asks honestly, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

To this God responds, "I will be with you." Again Moses asks, "Who shall I say sent me?" God replies, "I Am who I Am." Moses continues to argue, saying they would not believe him and that he was slow of speech. God overrides each of Moses' objections and Moses is commissioned to go.

What is significant for me is the contrast between Moses' response at the burning bush and his actions 40 years earlier. Then Moses had found an Egyptian beating one of his fellow countrymen, and he immediately rose up and killed the oppressor. Exile resulted

and during those forty years God taught Moses very carefully that there are many battles that cannot be won with brawn. Moses learned by hard experience the futility and frustration of taking things into your own hands and trying to right wrongs with his personal power. Now, he simply stood before God and plainly admitted he was nothing. Friends, this is real meekness.

Jesus says, "Blessed are the meek." Happy are those who know who and whose they are.

When we don't know who and whose we are our insecurities push us to prove to others and, most of all, to ourselves that we have value; if only we can get to the top of the ladder of success, we could finally feel we have real worth. In contrast, the meek are gentle with themselves. It's not that they forsake all aspirations for self-improvement or success. But their aspirations and achievements flow out of a relaxed center. They basically accept themselves as they are, and don't have to prove their worth by coming out on top.

Now how does that happen? It happens when we have a right understanding of who we are and whose we are. This understanding is God's gift to us. In Ephesians Paul writes, "I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness. Similarly, in Colossians we are exhorted to "put on then, as God's chosen ones...meekness (3:12). In both of these passages the Apostle Paul connects meekness with the electing grace of God. We can be gentle with ourselves when we realize that we have been called, not because of our accomplishments or personal goodness, but because of God's searching, claiming grace revealed in Jesus Christ. God has adopted us, made us part of a family bound together by bonds of eternal love. It's by virtue of God's decision, God's action that we have worth. Because of God's electing grace we have an unfading honor independent of what the world may think. It's ours whether we win, lose or tie; it's ours whether we come out on top of the heap or find ourselves suffocating at the bottom. God has chosen us, lifted us to an eternal glory, and that necessarily means we are God's. The meek realize this. This is the lesson Moses learned at the burning bush when God told him his name and when God said, "I will be with you."

There's a second incident in the life of Moses which demonstrates what meekness is. Moses had married a woman distrusted and hated by his sister and brother. The Bible says, "Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite. The important thing to note here is Moses' reaction during this time of personal crisis and severe criticism. He did not react violently or spend time defending himself. Rather, he continued his work for God and let God work out the problem.

As time passed, the Lord suddenly spoke to Miriam, Aaron and Moses and called them before himself. As they entered the tabernacle Miriam and Aaron were called forward and God sternly says, "Listen to my words: **When a prophet of the Lord is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to**

face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?"

Miriam was struck with leprosy and her punishment for her insurrection was known throughout the camp.

But notice Moses then prays for his sister and after seven days she is healed. Again, we see no malice in the heart of Moses because he had been attacked in an area of life where most of us would have screamed with pain. Moses' attitude of meekness before God was such he did not need to defend or avenge himself. Because Moses was meek before God and had settled his personal fears and frustrations, he did not need to defend himself or aggressively pursue his rights. Rather he was able to be gentle with those who had spoken against him. So it is with those who are meek. Because they are controlled by God, they have no need to control others or avenge themselves. Knowing they have received God's mercy, the meek offer it to others.

How many of you recognize the name of Booker T. Washington? He was a black man who became President of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. One day as he was walking in an exclusive section of town he was stopped by a wealthy white woman. Not knowing the famous Mr. Washington by sight, she asked if he would like to earn a few dollars by chopping wood for her. Because he had no pressing business at the moment, Professor Washington smiled, took off his coat, and proceeded to do the humble chore she had requested. When he was finished, he obediently carried the logs into the kitchen. A servant girl recognized him, and later revealed to her mistress his true identity. The next morning the embarrassed woman went to his office in the institute and apologized profusely, saying, "I didn't know it was you I put to work." Washington meekly replied, "It's all right, Madam, occasionally I enjoy a little manual labor. Besides, it's always a delight to do something for a friend." Hearing this, the woman shook his hand warmly and assured him that his meek and gracious attitude had endeared him and his work to her heart. Not long afterward she showed her admiration by persuading her wealthy acquaintances to join her in giving thousands of dollars to the Tuskegee Institute.

Friends, this is meekness. It is not weakness but true strength. A meek person has the strength to accept himself or herself, the strength to resist avenging oneself, the strength to avoid controlling others, and most of all the strength to trust the grace of God.

The third incident in Moses life came after he had displeased God at Meribah and for this was not permitted to go into the Promised Land. This was one of the greatest blows Moses received. He had longed for the time he could lead the people into their destined homeland. For forty years he had half led, half driven a nomadic nation toward home, but in his old age, he could not go in. Needless to say, his heart was crushed and his disappointment deep. Yet, in all of this Moses did not strike out at God, but accepted his punishment like the great man he was. In meekness he exercised absolute trust and reliance on the great wisdom and mercy of God.

Jesus says, "Happy are the meek." Friends our happiness does not come from trying to be our own gods. It does not come from trying to tell God what ought to be done for us. Happiness does not come from prolonged arguments with God in which we demand our rights. Happiness comes from meekness, in humility thanking God for grace and mercy and blessings we never deserved. Happiness grows as we in meekness relate to others, showing them the true strength of a life that depends on God.

Jesus says, "Blessed are the meek" but he doesn't stop there. He continues, "for they will inherit the earth." What does it mean that the meek will inherit the earth? It's easy to hear these words and not think about their true meaning. To our modern mind set, the meek inheriting the earth is an oxymoron! We might expect them eventually to gain heaven, but the earth? In contrast to Jesus' teaching, the gospel of the world says, "Blessed are the aggressive, for they shall inherit the earth." The question is which gospel do you and I believe?

Jesus promises that when the Kingdom finally comes in all its fullness, the meek shall possess the earth." The truth is a great change is coming. A revolution will take place so far exceeding anything the world has thus far experienced. When the Kingdom of God comes to fulfillment there will transpire a complete turnaround of worldly values. Those who have elbowed and kicked their way to the top will find themselves thrown off the ladder, while those now on the bottom will ascend thrones to reign with Christ forever and ever. The first will be last and the last will be first. Then Jesus' words will be fulfilled: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

At present none of this is very obvious. It still seems the aggressive have the advantage - that self-assertive go-getters will indeed go further and get more than anyone else. But Jesus makes a promise in this Beatitude, and we either believe him or we don't. One thing we can't deny - he believed it. He was content to live in meekness, to entrust himself to the ultimate victory of the God who had called him. And according to scripture, that humility led Jesus into great blessedness. "He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Jesus invites us to follow in his steps. He promises to all who do that they will find true happiness, not the fleeting happiness of self assertion, but the lasting happiness of knowing who and whose we are, knowing that we are accepted and love by a gracious God, and being at home in God's presence.