

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany- February 11, 2007

Scripture lessons: Psalm 37:3-11 & Matthew 5:1-2, 5

BLESSED ARE THE MEEK

We listen again today to another of Jesus' beatitudes. Through his Sermon on the Mount, he gives us the core of his teaching about the reign of God. He begins it by naming those who are especially blessed by the coming of God's kingdom. In Matthew 5, verse 5, he says, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

Once more, it's not what we would expect. We don't readily think of the poor in spirit or those who mourn as particularly blessed. We don't usually think of "the meek" that way, either.

I hear "meek" and think instead of Caspar Milquetoast. You've probably heard of him, but might not know who he was. He was the main character in a popular early 20th century American comic strip by Harold Webster entitled *The Timid Soul*. Named after the sippy, milk-soaked toast that frequently was spoon-fed to people who were sick, Milquetoast was a highly proper, yet pathetically weak man. He was always dominated by others, and easily so, including by his wife.

Harold Webster's humorous portrait of him was vivid and memorable enough that even though the comic strip is long gone, the word "milquetoast" has worked its way into common English usage. It refers to anyone, but especially a man, who is *sooooo* easy to intimidate. If you're a milquetoast, you let others push you around. You let them use you as a doormat. You're mousy, wimpy, and spineless- unable to stand up for yourself. You're made fun of or whispered about behind your back or treated as though you're not there. Our usual sense of what it means to be "meek" has enough overlap with our idea of being a "milquetoast", that it's hard to see how Jesus can say that the meek are blessed. How is it that *they* will "inherit the earth"?

You've probably already guessed that the New Testament Greek word we usually translate as "meek" had a distinctly different meaning in Jesus' day than the one we usually give it. The Greek word *praus* had its roots in the context of training horses. Its basic meaning can be seen in a story from Greek antiquity in which a young soldier who's been fighting in the Peloponnesian Wars writes to his sweetheart back home to tell her of a white stallion he hopes to bring back to her as a gift. The soldier says, "He is the most magnificent animal I've ever seen, but he responds obediently to the slightest command . . . He allows his master to direct him to his full potential. He is truly a *praus* horse." Or as we'd translate it, "He is truly a *meek* horse."

Contemporary poet Mary Karr is onto this same meaning when she writes in a poem entitled "Who the Meek Are Not":

(The meek are)

"Not the bristle-bearded Igors bent under burlap sacks,
not peasants knee-deep in the rice paddy muck,
nor the serfs whose quarter-moon sickles
make the wheat fall in waves they don't get to eat

My friend the Franciscan nun says we misread that word *meek*
in the Bible verse that blesses them

To understand the meek (she says)

picture a great stallion at full gallop in the meadow,
who-at his master's voice- seizes up
to a stunned but instant halt.

So with the strain of holding that great power in check,
the muscles along the arched neck keep eddying,
and only the velvet ears prick forward,
awaiting the next order."

This is a different picture of meekness. It has nothing to do with being a milquetoast. This stallion, a model of the meekness Jesus is getting at, is strong, graceful, and free. But it finds its fullest pleasure and deepest delight in devoting those gifts in service to its master.

In recent years, you may have seen the movie *Seabiscuit* or read the book by Laura Hillenbrand that it's based on. In that story's climactic moment, Seabiscuit competes in a two-horse race against War Admiral. War Admiral is *the* dominant horse of his day. A tall, handsome stallion, he appears in almost every way to be superior to Seabiscuit. He's younger, faster, bigger, and stronger, but he's also *feisty*. In the starting gate, he jumps and bucks and strains against his jockey. He's rambunctious, headstrong, and willful. He wants his own way.

Seabiscuit, for his part, is nothing special to look at. He has a big lazy streak in him and loves to sleep. At the same time, however, he's perfectly meshed with his jockey. He loves to do his rider's bidding. He's the meekest horse on the track by far and, in his meekness, he defeats War Admiral.

In the Bible, there are only two people who are specifically called "meek". One is Moses (in Numbers 12:3). The other is Jesus. That fact, in and of itself, should remove any trace of "milquetoastishness" from our understanding of meekness.

Moses becomes *the* great leader of the Hebrew people. It's worth noting that as a young man he shows traits similar to War Admiral's. He's impressive in many ways, but also appears to be rambunctious, headstrong, and willful.

In a fit of righteous rage, he murders an Egyptian who was mistreating a Hebrew slave. To save his own skin, he has to flee, but God pursues and works with him. Over time, Moses learns to mesh his will with God's will. He comes to know the joy of doing God's bidding.

He becomes the divinely chosen instrument for God's liberation of his people from slavery in Egypt. He faces down Pharaoh by his faithful insistence on *God's* demand, "Let my people go!" Through his meekness, Moses is able to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt, into and through the wilderness, and to the very brink of the promised land.

Ironically, he's not allowed to enter it because of a lapse in his meekness. Late in the wilderness journey, he disobeyed God at the rock at Meribah. God punished him for his backsliding into this selfish willfulness by keeping him out of Canaan.

Jesus is the Bible's other meek man. In Matthew, chapter 11, he says of himself "Come to me all you who are weary and . . . 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 . . . (verses 28-29). The Greek word translated as *gentle* in Matthew 11 is *praus*, the same word we translate as *meek* in today's beatitude.

Jesus' meekness is very different from the kind that's often supposed of him. In Christian history, and especially, for example, in the 19th century, there sometimes have been highly influential theology and art that have pictured his gentleness and humility far too sentimentally. References to him as "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" have been connected to images of a blonde man with flowing, curly locks, soft, almost delicate features, and an overall demeanor that makes it look like he'd get blown away by a stiff wind. That's *not* the Jesus of the New Testament and it's not the meekness he embodies.

It's true that the Bible portrays him as one who humbly sets aside divine power in order to lay down his life sacrificially for all. It's true that it shows him reaching out particularly and tenderly to those who were lowly and outcast- to women, to children, to the poor, and to sinners. It's true that it highlights him as a healer who gently and warmly embraces anyone who's brought to him that's sick or disfigured.

But it also shows him as capable of mighty indignation in the face of error or wrongdoing. His denunciation of Peter, one of his closest disciples, was fierce. The language he used to criticize the Pharisees and other religious leaders was often scathing. His action in heaving the moneychangers out of the Temple was shockingly forceful.

His great strength was also *quietly* evident in the way he laid down his life. Through the entire ordeal of it- at his arrest, in his questioning before Pilate and the Sanhedrin, in his exposure to the crowd that called for his crucifixion, in his suffering and execution at the hands of the soldiers- he maintained his poise, his dignity, his truthfulness, and his love. Before any of that happened, he made clear to his disciples how he would be able to do it. He told them, “No one takes my life from me. I lay it down of my own accord.”

His accord was in complete harmony with God’s will.

That’s the meaning of meekness in the Bible. Scripture defines it as spiritual and moral strength that is disciplined to do God’s will. It’s the mightiness of a soul that’s devoted intensely to God’s service. Being meek doesn’t mean being weak. It’s doesn’t mean being shy, retiring, or unassertive. It means having and using the power to do what God wants.

If God’s will requires tender and gentle outreach to the broken down and hurting, that’s what meekness does. If it requires bold and vigorous confrontation with the domineering and aggressive, that’s what meekness does. If confrontation with the domineering and aggressive requires getting angry to get the job done, that’s what meekness does.

Meekness gets righteously, but not self-righteously angry, when other people’s God-given dignity and rights are violated. It channels that anger not into self-serving payback but into God-honoring justice. It pursues that justice not with prideful self-assurance but with God-centered self-control. Its heart is summed up beautifully in St. Paul’s second letter to Timothy, chapter 1: “. . . God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power and of love and of self-control” (verse 7).

Meekness is not self-effacing or self-glorifying, or self-anything. Instead, in meekness we turn away from ourselves and towards God. We focus the fullness of our energies and abilities on what God wants. The image of the mighty stallion at a sudden halt with its muscles quivering and its ears pricked forward to heed the master’s call has it right. When we’re meek, that’s what we’re like.

Meekness *is* submission, but submission only to the One to whom our submission truly is due. It’s one that’s never forced upon us, but can only be freely given. As such, it never oppresses us, but only fulfills us. It fulfills us because it brings us into union with the true God, the God who is love.

So many brave and humble civil rights advocates from our nation’s 1950s and ‘60s show us how beautiful this meekness is. They got hauled off to jail for sitting at public lunch counters. They had snarling police dogs and whipping fire hoses turned loose against them when they gathered for peaceful protest. They had their churches bombed and their children killed because of their dignified insistence on standing up for their God-given dignity.

Who can forget those pictures of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.? He had been mercilessly jeered at, insulted, and spit upon by people who hated him. But even with the spit still running down his face he could look upon them in the power of compassion, mercy, and forgiveness.

He didn’t submit to them, but he did submit to God. In the strength of true meekness he fought for his dignity as God’s child, but only in the way that God commands: without violence, without retaliation, and without self-righteousness. His was meekness in action.

“The meek will inherit the earth,” Jesus says. He says they will inherit it, not conquer it. The picture he paints is of children standing ready to receive wealth and land freely and generously bestowed by their loving parent. In his first epistle Peter writes that God “has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you” (1 Peter 1:3-4).

Because this inheritance is eternally assured to us, we don’t have to compete over it or grasp after it or push others aside to get our share of it. We inherit the earth from the One who made it and to whom it still belongs. God gives it- we don’t have to grab it for ourselves.

As the meek blessed by the coming of God's reign we are those who simply and gratefully recognize, accept, and share God's many gifts. In the pleasure of them we may, as Mary Karr says, gallop like a great stallion full-tilt across the meadow of this life. But we enjoy those gifts truly only when, at the sound of our Master's voice, we, too, draw up "to a stunned but instant halt" and quiver eagerly to do nothing but God's precious will.

Jesus said it best, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." Amen.