

Near to the Heart of God: Blessed are the meek...
Psalm 37:1-13, Romans 12:1-3, Matthew 5:4
First Presbyterian Church
January 28, 2018

Introduction to the Psalter (Psalm 37)

The psalmist had been taught that material prosperity and political power and military success were indisputable signs of faithfulness to God's way. That being the case, what are you to think when you return from exile to re-inhabit your own land (the land God gave you) only to find that you are no longer the "top dog" but the "underdog"?¹ What do you do when you are faithful to God's commandments... and yet everybody BUT YOU are prospering? This was the real-life struggle for our ancestors in faith. I dare say it remains a struggle for us today. And in our psalm this morning we find the poet resolving this dilemma by taking the long view and by affirming the mysterious ways of God.

Psalm 37.

¹Do not fret because of the wicked;
do not be envious of wrongdoers,
²for they will soon fade like the grass,
and wither like the green herb.
³Trust in the LORD, and do good;
so, you will live in the land, and enjoy security.
⁴Take delight in the LORD,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.
⁵Commit your way to the LORD;
trust in him, and he will act.
⁶He will make your vindication shine like the light,
and the justice of your cause like the noonday.
⁷Be 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.
⁸Refrain from anger and forsake wrath.
Do not fret—it leads only to evil.
⁹For the wicked shall be cut off,
but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land.
¹⁰Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look diligently for their place,
they will not be there.
¹¹But the meek shall inherit the land,
and delight themselves in abundant prosperity.
¹²The wicked plot against the righteous,
and gnash their teeth at them;

¹ The meaning of "anawim"

¹³but the LORD laughs at the wicked,
for he sees that their day is coming.

Romans 12

12I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. ³For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

Sermon

For me – three weeks in to this series on the Beatitudes – one of the obvious takeaways how remarkably “out of step” with prevailing values Jesus was. It was true then, it is true today. He said that the rich and powerful are potentially in deep trouble with God and need to watch out... and that the poor and forgotten are honored and welcome in his kingdom. He didn’t say the rich and powerful weren’t welcome... only that they would have to leave their baggage at the door to fit through.

You see, the call of Jesus is extended to everyone... and is good news to everyone... but it goes to everyone on the same terms. Both rich and poor sin... both devout and derelict need to repent. Everyone needs to put their trust in God and let go of whatever is holding them captive: whether it be money and pride... or worry and hopelessness. The rich and powerful are asked to humble themselves before God... the poor and lowly are asked to believe they are honored and exalted by Christ. And all of us are invited to live our lives in Jesus’ upside-down, out-of-step kingdom.² This morning we focus on the third beatitude according to Matthew: Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

The dictionary defines “meek” in two major ways: 1) humble and patient; not inclined to anger or resentment; and 2) overly submissive; easily imposed on; spineless; spiritless. At first glance, it’s this second definition that is probably the most common, isn’t it? “Meek” not only rhymes with weak but means “weak.” Meek means passive... timid... unassuming... “doormat” material. Some of you surely remember the old cartoon character Caspar Milquetoast. Well, “meek” like that is clearly NOT a compliment... it’s not an asset. And if this is what Jesus is talking about, we’ve got a BIG problem. Because we pity the meek... avoid the meek... maybe even poke fun at them behind their backs. For centuries critics have mocked Christianity as a religion of weaklings... and even now this is offered as the reason there are not more men in the church. It’s just not macho enough... it’s too meek.

² Arthur Simon, *The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth* in *How Much Is Enough? Hungering for God in an Affluent Culture* (DIVISION, 2003), 175-183.

So, if Jesus didn't mean what WE initially think of as "meek," then what DID he mean? Of course, I don't exactly but surely, it's closer to the first definition: the meek are humble and patient... they are not inclined to anger or resentment... they are not pushy or aggressive... and yet, I think it's even more than that. And this morning I hope you leave with at least a better understanding of what may be the most misunderstood beatitude.

To do this we'll need to reach back several hundred years to Psalm 37... which moments ago we sang and which Jesus quotes almost verbatim here. The backstory for Psalm 37. is an all too common situation. The psalmist looks around his world and sees all the wrong people prospering. Wicked men get all the promotions... unethical businesses reap huge profits... people climb to the top using other people's backs like steps. And the ones who OUGHT to be doing well seem completely helpless before them. Well, the psalmist sees this and is totally confused... it makes no sense in his theological world. He was taught that the righteous are blessed... that the good are rewarded... that those who obey God prosper. So, the poet wrestles with how this old teaching fits his new reality... and as I mentioned earlier he ends up gaining at least some understanding and maybe a little comfort by taking the long view... and meditating on the mystery of God's purposes.

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Allow me to try to summarize. When seen from the point of view of faith, the world is God's world... it is subject to God's rule. And in the world, that is God's and is subject to God's rule two things are true., First, there is no future for the wicked... none. In fact, God laughs at the wicked with all their arrogance and pretensions... for God knows that soon they will fade like the grass and be no more. And second, in this world that is God's and subject to God's rule the meek are blessed and will inherit the land. Therefore, they have no need to be angry or jealous or resentful of others.... no reason to take matters into their own hands or resort to aggression or violence... no need to control or manipulate. The important thing is for them to enjoy the Lord... to trust him completely... to keep on the right path and always do good... and to patiently wait for the Lord knowing that everything will fall into place in God's good time. This doesn't mean relinquishing all power... or as we might say today, giving up our "agency." It's not talking about letting yourself be trampled by your boss or enduring years of abuse at the hands of a dominating spouse. It's simply referring to a different kind of power... a different kind of agency. We don't have to be big and loud to get things done. We don't have to be impatient and aggressive to make a positive difference. Consider the sheer power of humility. If I can be humble it means I get out of the way so that others see God at work in me. What about the power of kindness? There is a reason we say, "Kill them with kindness." How about power that comes with being teachable? As Paul writes, the meek "do not think more highly of themselves than they ought" – which means they are able to receive direction – that they possess a certain weakness that makes them leadable – which is just the opening God needs to use them. To live near to the heart of Jesus means having what John Calvin called a "teachable spirit." We don't need to be assertive to make a relationship with God happen. In fact, we can't MAKE it happen at all... just like we can't MAKE friendship or love or hope or peace or forgiveness happen. Some things cannot be forced or taken, they can only be received. And for this reason, the meek are blessed, for they can receive blessing.³

And then, let us never underestimate the power of weakness when employed in the service of God. Many of you may have read J.R.R. Tolkien's well-known books, *The Hobbit* and the *Lord of the Rings*. They tell the fictional story of hobbits – Diminutive and unassuming characters who are involved in an epic to reclaim their stolen treasure. Hobbits are childlike in stature... quite content to remain in the Shire. They live not in towering fortresses, but in small earthen huts. They are not consumers but give presents to others on their own birthdays... they are unfailing in their friendships... which is a good thing since they are so small. They don't want to acquire a lot of stuff... they don't want political power because they know how it corrupts the Big People whom they see only want to be bigger and bigger.

Well, the story turns on these unlikely heroes who have none of the trappings of power, but who find themselves on a history-making quest to reach their destination. And when they do Elrond., the elvish king, speaks in admiration of them; "Such is often the course of deeds that

³ James C. Howell, *The Beatitudes for Today* (WJK, 2006), 50-51

move the wheels of the world: small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere.”⁴ Tolkien is speaking here of the mysterious way of God - who is constantly tapping the least expected people – to do some of the most impressive things. Consider Moses. He chuckled over God’s choice of the Israelites... who were selected NOT because they were MORE in number than any other people but were the FEWEST. Scripture says that Moses himself was “humbler (or meek) than anyone else on the face of the earth.”⁵ No wonder he could hear God speaking so clearly and so often. What about Samuel... and how he passed over the older, bigger and stronger brothers before anointing little David? And how about Mary – was she not the epitome of meekness? Her simple, calm life... suddenly invaded by an uninvited angelic message, disrupting her plans, requiring her to be open to the unimaginable?⁶ It was Paul who said, “the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. He said, “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being may boast.”⁷ Friends, in the upside down, out-of-step world that God has made and still rules, blessed are you when you keep the faith... blessed are you when you trust God’s timing... blessed are you when you experience the quiet strength that doesn’t need to control or manipulate... that doesn’t need to be aggressive or violent during a violent society... that is content with the basics of life in a possession-hungry world. Blessed are you who patiently trust that God WILL act in due time... taking delight NOW in the gifts of God and the many comforts of faith. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Amen.

⁴ Tolkien, *Fellowship of the Rings*, p. 283

⁵ Numbers 12:3

⁶ Howell, p. 50-51

⁷ 1 Corinthians 1:25-29