

Sermon: "Blessed Are the Meek."

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Christ Church, Shaker Heights

Epiphany IV Year A: Matthew 5:1-12

The American humorist and journalist, Donald Marquis, once quipped, "Pity the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." Marquis's tongue-in-cheek comment plays off of one of Jesus' beatitudes we have heard this morning; "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

Humor is the high-pressure valve God designed in us to allow for a safe release of our anger, fears or frustration in times of difficult circumstances. Marquis, died in 1937. Certainly the world he knew in the first third of the 20th century was not an earth anyone would have been eager to inherit. Think of the devastation wrought by World War I, the Great Depression and the rise of Fascist and Communist regimes in Europe and Japan, bringing the threat of yet another major worldwide conflagration. It is no wonder Marquis felt pity for those meek who would be inheriting a messy world.

Sitting here in the second decade of the 21st century we may also find release for our own frustrations, angers and fears in a bit of gallows humor like Marquis': pitying the meek who shall inherit a world that seemingly continues to deteriorate in a downward spiral.

After all who is going to want to own a world where the majority of the natural resources, wantonly being plundered from the earth, are used to benefit a tiny fraction of the world's population, while billions suffer and struggle to live?

Who is going to want to inherit a world where potable water is so scarce that's its value will be that of liquid gold?

Who's going to want to live in a world where you can't venture outside a climate controlled building without a protective suit and facemask because the air's not only too hot for human life, it's un-breathable?

Who is going to want to live in a world where rogue states with irrational governments like North Korea and Iraq have nuclear missiles?

Who is going to want to inherit a United States that is mired in crippling debt beyond our imagination because we who live now have through greed and lack of self-discipline, mortgaged the hope of future generations?

Who is going to want to inherit a world where racism, ethnic and tribal rivalries, language disputes, religious intolerance, the subjugation of women and homophobia continue to ignite ignorance, fear, hatred, violence and death?

Maybe pitying the meek who will inherit that earth is the only response we can muster in the face of such a broken world; and all the more so because those meek are our children, our grandchildren and us.

But are the pitiable meek that Don Marquis refers to in his quip the same people that Jesus had in mind when he told the crowds gathered on the mountain, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth?"

In modern English the term meek is loaded with negative baggage. It carries the idea of being spineless, submissive, and ineffectual. Those were the meek Marquis envisioned inheriting a broken earth, but was that Jesus' vision as well?

Just who are these meek that Jesus refers too? Is Jesus blessing the spineless, submissive and ineffectual?

The Greek word that the New Testament uses for meek is *praus*. In Greek *praus* is a word that describes great ethical character; meekness is a virtue. This is the exact opposite of our modern understanding of meekness.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle defined every virtue as the mean between two extremes. So on the one hand there was the extreme of excess; on the other hand the extreme of deficit; and in between there was the virtue itself, the happy medium. To illustrate this idea let's take the extreme of being a spendthrift. The opposite extreme is the miser. The happy medium, or better put the virtue, is the generous person. Aristotle then defines *praotes*, or meekness, as the mean between excessive anger and excessive angerlessness. Meekness is the happy medium or the virtue between too much and too little anger.

It is this Aristotelian understanding of meekness that Jesus seems to apply to the beatitude, "Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth." Or put another way, of putting it "Blessed are the people who are always angry at the right time, and never angry at the wrong time."

Certainly it was that virtue of meekness that Jesus embodied in his own life and ministry.

Jesus was never angry at insults or injury done to him; that wasn't the right time for anger. Frequently in the scripture we hear of those who opposed Jesus and who looked for ways to trip him up, even destroy him. Each time this occurred he did not react with either excessive or violent anger. Jesus was never angry at the wrong time. To do so

would be selfish anger, which is pride and vanity. Anger at those moments when we are insulted or injured is the wrong time for anger.

But Jesus did become angry at the injuries and injustices done to other people. In Mark (3:1-7) we have an example of Jesus' right time anger. We read, "[Jesus] entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. And they watched him, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come here." And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. *And he looked around at them with anger*, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored."

In this story Jesus is role modeling the blessedness of always being angry at the right time. To everything there is a season he seems to be saying. So in the Beatitude he is actually blessing those who follow his example, doing likewise. Following Jesus is *praus*, the meekness *that* leads to inheriting the earth.

What about that earth though? Is Jesus saying that the virtuous meek are going to find themselves in possession of badly damaged goods? Or is there a greater goal that Jesus has in mind by giving the broken earth to the meek?

I believe that the later is what is at play in this beatitude.

Understanding what Jesus means about what meekness actually is offers us incredible hope in the midst of our own challenging and troubling times.

It is no secret that we have no shortage of people in our own time who fail to be meek in addressing our nations difficult issues. Rather express excessive anger or excessive angerlessness seems to be the *modus operandi* of most leaders these days. On the one extreme are the people who express themselves in uncivil, disgraceful and vituperative ways and on the opposite extreme are those who cower before this assault and remaining silent.

A prime example of these two extremities is the polarization our elected leaders in Congress. Despite their recent attempt to project camaraderie by mixing up the seating at the President's State of the Union address on Tuesday, the reality is that there is a dearth of people in that body who exhibit much of *praus*.

Just three weeks after a heinous assault and attempted murder on one of their own members, as well as the murder of six other people and serious injuries incurred by many more, no one in Congress can manage much *praus* on the issue of gun control. Rather the norm seems to be expressing extreme inappropriate anger on behalf of the

National Rifle Association in defense of the Second Amendment “right” to bear arms or expressing little or no anger because of the fear the powerful NRA lobby – with it’s deep pockets - instills over most of Congress.

Where in Congress is the anger that is spoken at the right time? Where is the *praus*; the anger of righteousness spoken in defense of the American people who are infected by a culture of guns with high capacity magazines firing thirty bullets in just moments, that repeatedly are the cause of grotesque massacres of innocents in our country? Where is the well-timed voice of outrage lifted up for the loss of nine-year old Christina Green and the countless of other innocents caught in the path of bullets fired because of a distorted right to bear arms gone awry?

My friends we need more of Jesus’ meekness in addressing the ill of our reckless gun culture and all the ills that sicken the earth and God’s children. We need it in Congress. We need it in all leadership. We need it in the halls of government and the boardrooms of corporations. We need it in our banks and in our schools. We need it in our religious leaders and institutions. And most of all **we need to be meek**, lifting our angry voices at the right time when we encounter the injuries and injustices done to other people. We need to do this so that others may see the truth of God . . . and in so doing heal the broken world that Jesus has given into our care.

My sisters and brothers do not pity the meek, praise the meek! Praise those blessed people who are inspired by Jesus and who are angry at the right time. Praise those people who become angry at the injuries and injustices done to other people. Praise those bearers of God’s truth who face up to the voices of excessive anger and the silence of the angerlessness.

Blessed are the meek, for they will surely inherit the earth in God’s Kingdom.
Blessed. Blessed. Blessed.

May that blessing of meekness be ours today as well.
Amen.