

"FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT: GENTLENESS"

Galatians 5:22-23; Mark 10:13-16; John 13:1-5

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I suspect that most of us learned about gentleness in a hands-on kind of way – literally. Most probably, at some time when you were a young child, a parent or other watchful adult said, "Be gentle, now." Maybe you were holding a kitten, or a new baby, a firefly, or even a piece of treasured family china. Somebody showed you how to be careful, touch softly, hold lightly, protect, and cherish. Somebody helped you understand that there are things, and creatures, and people that are fragile and precious and require *gentleness*.

The word we translate as "gentleness" in Galatians 5:23 is sometimes rendered as "meekness" or "humility," which adds a little nuance to its meaning for us. It can also mean something like "courtesy" or "considerateness," which gives us a clue that it has to do with how we relate to others.

Sometimes gentleness is seen as a rather old-fashioned way to be, and, especially if you emphasize humility as part of its meaning, a hopelessly ineffective way of living in the real world today. I mean, you don't hear successful businesspeople attribute their profits to their gentle approach, do you? Gentleness isn't how politicians get things done, how competitive athletes win, how megachurches grow, how laws are enforced, how the entertainment industry prospers. Gentleness seems too naïve a way to be in the face of such realities as bullies, drug addiction, out-of-control kids, people who want to suppress the rights of others, scams that target the vulnerable. Don't we need to be tough to survive in this world?

It's a mistake to confuse gentleness with naïveté, weakness, or passivity, though. Jesus himself said of his disciples that we ought to be as "wise as serpents and as harmless as doves." For the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., this was central to his commitment to non-violence. Followers of Jesus don't pretend there is not violence, trouble, danger, conflict, opposition, and the like in the world. We know it's real. We try to understand it, do something about it. We don't minimize it or excuse it, and we stand firmly against it. But we don't seek to harm, to retaliate, to simply vent our anger or get our own way. We don't nurse bitterness but try to have an open-hearted compassion even for those who hate us. This "creative synthesis" of love and a passion for justice yields a gentle strength that is at the heart of non-violent resistance.

For King, the very nature of God suggested this. He said, "God has two outstretched arms. One is strong enough to surround us with justice, and one is gentle enough to embrace us with grace." (p. 15)

Some of the most powerful stories we have of Jesus' life are those stories where we see his gentleness. We are grateful for his courage, we cherish his challenging words, we appreciate how significant it was that he challenged his society with a radical vision of God's kingdom, we celebrate the power in his resurrection... but it's hearing these stories of Jesus' tenderness that we know we can trust him.

For me, there is something about Mark's account in particular of Jesus welcoming the children (who his adult disciples didn't count as important enough to take up Jesus' time). We know how vulnerable children are. We know how easily they can be hurt. We know how often they are pushed aside. So it really matters that Jesus seems to know this, too, and make time for them. Not only that, Mark tells us that he took them up in his arms and blessed them. I love that. It doesn't get Jesus any more popular support, as far as I can tell. It doesn't add any profound wisdom to his body of teaching. It doesn't advance any agenda. It's simply a moment of gentleness.

As is the time John tells us about, when at Jesus' last meal with his disciples before his arrest, he washes their feet. Such a tender and intimate gesture, it helps us to see how very much gentleness and humility are intertwined. It's nearly impossible, I think, to be gentle if you are full of yourself, because gentleness is all about this sense of care, and carefulness, for another. (Of course, you can be gentle toward yourself as well, but I'd venture to say that this, too, requires humility – at least enough to know that you need some care.) The picture John paints for us is a Jesus who knows that we need care and tenderness, maybe especially when something bad has happened, or is about to happen, when life is frightening or hard or disappointing. The message John leaves us with is that we need to care for each other with the same kind of humble gentleness we see in Jesus.

Gentleness, far from being weakness, *presumes* a certain kind of strength. It presumes that the opposite of gentleness might be an option, and that gentleness can be what you choose instead. So once again we see how the fruits of the Spirit are connected: gentleness requires some patience, and self-control. You can't grab the kitten or the fragile teacup with all the eagerness you feel or all the strength you have. You can't just march into somebody's life and "straighten them out." You can't act on any impulse or whim that happens to strike you with no thought for who or what you might be hurting in the process.

A hard truth here is that to embrace gentleness, we have to acknowledge our own power. Now, yes, I know that some of us have more power and some have less, and that how much and what kind of power we have is relative to the situation we are in at any given moment. Still, everybody has some power, and many of us have significant privilege and influence of some kind. And that means we have the capacity to do harm, if we don't take care. To be gentle you have to understand this, and willingly, humbly choose not to use that power to coerce, damage, threaten, dismiss, or overwhelm. This is true whether you are faced with the needs of a little child, a frail elder, an injured bird, a piece of land, a relationship, a grieving family, a troubled friend, a stranger in need, a person from a marginalized group, or a devastated community.

To be gentle is to know that you have power, and also understand that you don't have to use it. Isn't this *exactly* how we understand Jesus' life? To be gentle is to be strong, and to use that strength wisely, carefully, and compassionately. Isn't this a more healthy and faithful way of understanding strength than what our culture tells us?

"Gentle" might be hard sometimes: we want to be strong, fix things, have the answers, solve problems (including other peoples' problems, even when we shouldn't). It can be hard to refrain from trying to make other people do what you think they should do. A more coercive notion of what it means to be strong is deeply ingrained in us; that's hard to give up, even when we observe that it's not actually all that effective in solving real-world problems. We might fear that being less "tough" and more gentle will open us up to be taken advantage of, or thought naïve. "Gentle" is a bit counter-cultural... sort of like Jesus. "Gentle" can be a bit of an emotional risk.

But "gentle" is also healing, comforting, loving, respectful, empowering.

Gentleness has an open heart. Gentleness is attuned to God's particular concern for the vulnerable. Gentleness looks at, and listens to, and touches the world - and people - with a certain wonder and curiosity and gratitude. Gentleness also appreciates how easily the world - and its creatures and its people and its beauty - can be damaged. Gentleness recognizes the value and holiness all that God has made, and wants to treat it with loving care.

And that, friends, is really the heart of what gentleness means, and the reason that it's one of the fruits that show the work of God's Spirit in us: that God has entrusted us with responsibility for so much that is precious and fragile, for so much, and for so many, that matter to God. For this, we need the tenderness that Jesus showed us. We need the help of God's Spirit. We need the strength of gentleness.

Resources:

Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love*