Sunday March 9, 1980

"BLESSED ARE THE MEEK" Psalm 37:7-11, Matthew 5:5

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." Many of us want to laugh out loud at this beatitude. What a ridiculous idea we think! All the earth that the meek inherit is six feet in a cemetery plot. But that's a bad example to prove the point. In cemeteries those who have been the opposite of meek come to the same end as all of us.

In spite of this, most of us do not place a very high value on meekness. We are more likely to think like Benito Mussolini, who when asked what his ambition was, replied: "I am obsessed by this wild desire--it consumes my whole being. I want to make a mark on my era with my will, like a lion with its claw! A mark like this. . ." And, using his fingernail as a claw, Mussolini gouged a scratch in the back of a chair.

This certainly is not meekness, but it is not strength either. Compare this picture of Mussolini with that of another leader of another country in the same period of history. Here's what a young newspaper reporter wrote after first meeting this other leader. "He was squatting on the floor, spinning yarn. He greetly me warmly with a smile that lit up his face and made his lively eyes twinkle. The welcome was so disarming, his manner so friendly and radiant, that my nervousness evaporated before I could say a word. This was a man, inwardly secure, who despite the burdens he carried, the hardships he had endured, could chuckle at man's foibles, including his own."

"At age 61, he seemed terribly frail, all skin and bones, though I knew his appearance was deceptive, for he kept to a frugal but carefully planned diet that kept him fit. For exercise, he walked four or fives miles each morning at a pace so brisk that I at 27 and in fair shape could scarcely keep up. For so towering a figure, his humble manner at first almost disconcerted me. Most of the political greats I had brushed up against in Europe and at home had seemed intent on impressing others with the forcefulness of their personalities and the boldness of their minds, not being bashful at all in hiding their

immense egos. Yet here was the most gentle and unassuming of men, speaking softly and kindly, without egotism, without the slightest pretense of trying to impress his rather awed listener."

How could so humble and meek a man, spinning away with his nimble fingers on a crude spinning wheel as he talked, have begun almost single-handed to rock the foundations of the British Empire, arousing a third of a billion people to rebellion against foreign rule, and taught them the technique of a new revolutionary method, non-violent civil disobedience. This meek man was Ghandi of India, in 1931, as described by William L. Shirer, a young newspaper reporter who had met him for the first time.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Meekness of this kind is difficult for most of us to comprehend. Even so astute a figure as Winston Churchill could not understand it. In a speech to the House of Commons in 1931, he expressed his revulsion at the "nauseating and humiliating spectacle of this onetime temple lawyer, striding half naked up the steps of the Viceroy's Palace, there to negotiate and parley on equal terms with the representative of the King-Emporer of the British Empire."

Those of us who are overly proud cannot stand the meek. Furthermore, we like Winston Churchill, misunderstand meekness if we confuse it or equate it with weakness, or dullness, or being timid or bashful or backward. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

As we look more closely at the word "meek," and its meaning, we discover something quite revealing. In the Old Testament, Moses is described as "very meek, more than all men that were on the face of the earth." Jesus said of himself, "Take my yoke upon you, learn of me, for I am meek and lowly of heart."

When Jesus gave this third beatitude, he spoke out of the Hebrew Old Testament tradition. He reached back to the time of Moses when he said, "Blessed are the meek." The Old Testament meaning of the word "meek," meant to be molded or shaped by God. Meekness meant submission to the will of God, not submission to the will of human beings. So when the Old Testament speaks of the meekness of Moses, it means that he was molded by God. The Lord helped to

shape his purpose and destiny. He was fashioned and guided by the Spirit of God. How else could he have led that dis-organized group of reluctant people out of Egypt to a new land? Ghandi of India, was also molded and formed by the will of God. This was the source of his strength and power.. And this is what the beatitude means by meekness.

Now let's apply this to ourselves. What is our source of strength and power? Most of us are forever running around trying to do everything for everybody, desperately trying to please people so that we feel secure and liked. We want to make our mark on the world. Or our source of strength and power may come from an inflated idea of who we are, or the family we come from, or the army or navy that stands behind us.

Those who are meek, who are molded by God, on the other hand, know that their strength comes from God, and from being on the side of justice. Thus they are able to give of themselves in beautiful ways, and there is not that frantic, desperate anxiety that characterizes so many of us.

People who are meek in the Biblical meaning of that word can live with patience, gentleness and kindness, because they know that God is ultimately in control, and they know that they are working as much as they are able in accordance with God's will. Thus Ghandi knew that one day the British Empire would have to give up India--It was only a matter of time. In our own country, Martin Luther King, Jr. knew that in time segregation would go, and the blacks would more and more gain their civil rights under our constitution.

The Greek meaning of the word which we translate into "meek" also helps our understanding of this beatitude. The Greek word for meeks means to tame a wild animal. When the Greeks used the word they envisioned a wild horse that was caught, haltered, bridled and finally tamed. To be meek then in the New Testament sense is to be "God-tamed." It is to be God-molded, God shaped. To be meek is to have our disorganized selves tamed and controlled by God.

Most of us know that we are usually trying to be several selves at once, without all of our selves being organized

by a single, centering Life within us. Each one of us tends to be, not a single self, but a whole committee of selves, and we are [redacted] trying to go in many directions at the same time, and our committee of selves lacks a chairperson.

To be meek, is to know and experience life being lived from a Center, a divine Center. God pulls our various selves into harmony. To be meek in the Biblical sense does not mean to be weak or shy or slow or backward. To be meek does mean to be humble, unassuming, patient, one who relies on God's strength and guidance as well as our own. To be meek is to realize that we do not have all the answers. To be meek is to be a searcher for truth.

Another way of understanding this beatitude is this. You've heard me speak before about Type A and Type B persons. After more than 30 years of studying coronary heart disease in the consultation room, at the hospital bedside, and in the laboratory, some researchers are convinced that even though we have been given information about what to eat, about exercise, about the dangers of smoking, we have been denied the most important information of all--the facts about what may be the major cause of premature coronary heart disease. Two researchers have for lack of a better name called this the TYPE A personality or behavior.

Their research shows that in the absence of Type A behavior patterns, coronary heart disease almost never occurs before 70 years of age. But when this behavior pattern is present, coronary heart disease can easily erupt in the 30's or 40's.

What is the Type A behavior pattern? It is the opposite of meekness as the Bible describes it. According to the researchers, "It is a particular complex of personality traits, including excessive competitive drive, aggressiveness, impatience and a compelling sense of time urgency. Individuals displaying this pattern seem to be engaged in a chronic, ceaseless and often fruitless struggle with themselves, with others and with circumstances, with time, sometimes with life itself. They also exhibit a free-floating, but well-rationalized form of hostility and almost always a deep-seated insecurity."

The person with the Type B behavior pattern and personality is exactly the opposite. He or she is rarely driven by desires to keep obtaining a wildly increasing number of things or to participate in an endlessly growing series of events in an ever decreasing amount of time. His or her intelligence may be as good or better than that of the Type A person. Type B's ambition may be a great or even greater than that of Type A, and Type B often accomplishes much more in his or her lifetime. It's no wonder Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." He was talking about the Type B person.

Blessed are the meek. In other words, blessed are those who are humble and patient. Your life will be much happier and you will live longer. "Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing. . .Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own troubles be sufficient for the day."

One New Testament translation of this beatitude puts it this way, "Happy are those who claim nothing, for the whole earth shall belong to them." And another translation says, "How blessed are those of a gentle spirit, for they shall have the earth for their possession."

I like that translation, "How blessed are those of a gentle spirit." We've all met persons like that, and when we do, we are the ones who are blessed by their presence. The meek person, the one with the gentle spirit, like Jesus or like Ghandi, has an equanimity, a tranquility, an ease of mind and peace of spirit in the face of circumstances that for most others would be extremely stressful, if not overwhelming.

How else could Moses have stood up to Pharaoh or even to his own people? How else could he have led them through the wilderness toward the promised land? How else could Ghandi with incredible patience have worked and waited and led his people to freedom over a period of more than 20 years? Both learned and knew that there is a God who can sustain and lead and control and tame. This is what made Christ the towering figure that he was. When you give yourself to God, you learn to exercise your power and focus your anger and use strength you did not even know you had!

Then one can endure insults, pain, gossip, persecution, set-backs and more, for as Paul said, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Where shall we find true happiness? Will we be content to fill our lives with the glitter of the times and spend our days screaming inwardly because we cannot stand what we've given ourselves to? Or will we be one of the blessed meek, one who shuns hypocriscy and falseness; one who is skeptical of the values of most of the world's prizes, especially the material ones?

To be meek is to cultivate an inner strength, to be tolerant of others. And to be meek is to stick to one's own beliefs and values when you are convinced they are right, never selling them out in exchange for personal gain or out of cowardice; yet seeking to let them grow and daring to change them in the light of experience and of whatever new wisdom comes your way.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Jesus was not explaining how to acquire real estate. To inherit means to be given a gift or legacy. It comes that way to the meek because they never seize it. And to inherit the earth means much more than land--it means that the meek receive all sorts of wonderful surprises which they never expect. Amen.