

Gentleness Rules

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
September 24, 2017
Text: Matthew 5:1-10

The Wind and the Sun. Two things we have an increased appreciation of after this past week's weather, I think. The wind especially has been quite something. Strong enough, consistent enough to get our attention. Severe enough that minor wind damage was widespread. On Thursday, the window screen in my office literally blew in while I was sitting at my desk – no worries I was fine! I think the most surprising thing the wind did this week was to tear the new “handicapped” parking sign in the parking lot off its post!

The wind also brought some interesting weather refugees to my home. I posted a photo on Facebook on Wednesday of a rather large spider who had taken up refuge in the window well of my living room window, spinning a rather large web. I've checked on him every day and he's still snuggled into the framing of the screen but his web is in tatters. I'm guessing he must be pretty hungry by now. Then, on the slider to our back yard, a huge praying mantis has taken refuge on the slider itself, trying to align itself with the exterior door handle for protection from the wind. He is quite something too, especially because he always

disappears at night. But, come morning, he's right back on the door, holding on for dear life.

As I wrote in the Weekly Email Update on Friday, I love windy days. Holy Spirit days, I call them, because the Holy Spirit is often associated with wind. The roar of the wind on Pentecost bringing with it the dancing flames over the disciples' heads is probably the best known of these stories. But there are stories throughout the Old and New Testaments that reference the "breath of God." God often makes His presence known in the rushing of wind. Although the story of Elijah's encounter with God is quite clear that God is NOT in the wind. Rather, in Elijah's story we are reminded that God is in the sheer silence at the core of the universe. Nonetheless the wind is to me a powerful reminder of the inbreaking, the coming into our lives in tangible ways, of the Holy Spirit. But what does that mean, exactly?

This is a question that our children's story for today, *The Wind and the Sun*, attempts to answer although not really from a Christian perspective. *The Wind and the Sun* is one of Aesop's Fables and it dates back to ancient Greece in the 4th and 5th centuries before the Christian Era (BCE). In case you don't remember Aesop or his fables, he was a slave who became famous as a storyteller. Originally an oral collection of stories, over time they were translated into different languages and became a popular topic of medieval art. Interesting to me is that Aesop's

Fables were originally intended for adults as an important form of moral and ethical instruction. Their use for the education of children dates back to the Renaissance of the 14th-17th centuries in Europe. This little factoid explains why the illustrations in the version of Aesop's Fable of *The Wind and the Sun* which Erin read for us seem to have an olden times European flair to them. But the power of this story is not anchored in either time or place. The power of this story is the lesson it teaches.

You all heard the story so I won't repeat it here. But I will ask you, what was the moral – the lesson – of the story? Do you remember? (pause for responses) "... it is easier to influence people with gentleness than with force." It is easier to influence people with gentleness than with force. The genius of Aesop's story is that it's not humans illustrating this point. It's two of the very basic elements of life – the wind and the sun. The wind believes it is stronger than anything or anyone and seeks to prove it to the sun by blowing the man's coat off. But, all the wind's efforts only cause the man to wrap his coat even tighter around him. Then the sun has his turn and shines as warmly as possible and soon the man removes his coat. Gentleness wins the day.

But is gentleness ever really about winning and losing? Or does that kind of mentality only perpetuate the human tendency to use brute strength to accomplish the current moment's desire? This is where Aesop's Fable and the teachings of Jesus in the New

Testament part company. The Beatitudes which we also read just a few moments ago from the Gospel of Matthew essentially teach the same moral lesson as Aesop's Fable of *The Wind and the Sun*. Gentleness rules the day when it is practiced consistently through the grace and strength of God. But it's not winning and losing in some cosmic game. It's just the way God wants us to live.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom.”

This one is powerful on the face of it but becomes even more so when you realize that “poor in spirit” is intended as an indictment of the debilitating effects of real poverty on one's whole life.

When you are constantly scrambling for a place to live, to put food on the table, to care for your children and other loved ones with scarce resources, the overwhelming exhaustion and futility of the seemingly endless cycle of poverty, faith in God does not come easy. It is these for whom Jesus is asking prayers, and a response from all of us.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

Yes, so important to know this when our hearts are aching for a loved one lost, last week or decades ago. Those empty places never fill up. Rather, we learn to live with the holes in our lives that loved ones lost once filled. And we need to remember that we don't just mourn for people who have died. We mourn for life changes that we can't control – like job losses, dramatic changes in our physical health and well-being, friends and family once

close by who now live far away. Even changes in the way things happen in our culture that are joy and progress for some are also heart-wrenching loss for others. All of these are losses for which we mourn and for which Jesus promises comfort.

“Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.” Now this one just doesn’t make sense at all. How can somebody meek inherit the earth, come into a position of power? And meekness, in our society is NOT seen as a virtue. Meekness in our society is seen as a problem because if you are meek, you are just asking to be walked on, beat down, ignored or worse. Except meekness isn’t weakness. Meekness is just humility – an awareness of just how tiny a speck each one of us truly is in the vastness of God’s universe. And yet, still God loves us, God knows us, God treasures us – so much so that all that God has created is ours to love and to cherish just as God loves and cherishes us.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be filled.” Okay, hunger and thirst we get. But how can you thirst for righteousness? What does it mean to hunger for it? Well, this means that all those people who are paying attention to the have nots in our society – the people without homes, without enough food, access to health care and so on – these are the people who hunger and thirst for righteousness because they are rising above and moving way beyond their own personal needs being met. These are people who know that

justice for some and not for all is never justice. These are people who get that injustice can never be defined by its perpetrators but only by its victims. Jesus is promising these folks that their quest for righteousness will be ultimately successful though the road ahead for them will never be easy.

“Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy.” This one almost speaks for itself. It echoes Jesus’ “golden rule” of doing unto others what you would have done to you. But it goes further. Mercy is extravagant forgiveness, extravagant response to life-threatening need, extravagant actions toward someone in need without first counting the cost. Cost counting has no place in the granting and receiving of mercy. One’s worthiness for mercy also has no role in whether it is granted. We see this simple truth every day in our lives, on every news broadcast where it seems we are being told that some people are worthy of mercy and others are not. That is never mercy. And those who claim it is will never, ever possess it.

“Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God.” But what does it mean to be pure in heart? That’s a tough one. For me, I think it means learning to look deeper into what’s happening around you. It means learning to look for God in all kinds of situations, and in all kinds of people. It means setting aside our preconceived notions of who and what God is so that we can discover God in the midst of everything we experience each

day. This is the work of a life time with the promise of seeing God face to face if we remain diligent in the task.

“Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.” Now this one seems so simple, so obvious. And yet you have only to listen to the news for 5 minutes on any given day to see how truly elusive peace is in our world. Why is that? Because humans, left to their own devices, are self-centered and willing to do whatever it takes to get what they want, do what they want. Poverty, that’s your own fault they say to the poor. Mourning your losses, that’s just being weak they say. Meekness, that’s just an invitation to someone to walk all over you. Righteousness, there is no such thing. Not really. It’s everyone for themselves, they say. Mercy? Don’t make me laugh, they say. People don’t need mercy. They just need to stop being so lazy and do something to pull themselves up by the bootstraps! Pure in heart? Please.... Peacemakers? What is peace anyway? A lot of us have no idea, walking around as we do always plugged in to something blaring in our ears or telling us what to buy, what to think, who to respect, who to believe. Blessed are the peacemakers? How do we even begin to claim our destiny as the children of God!

So, the last of the Beatitudes can come as no surprise.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Yes, the sad truth is that if you work hard to bring these beautiful words of Jesus to life each day,

you will undoubtedly pay a price for it. You will be criticized for being naïve, easily fooled into believing poor people, sick people, refugee people, *other* people are worthy of your efforts to treat them as equally beloved of God. You will be accused of being weak yourself for believing kindness, mercy, humility and justice for all matters. Of that, I have no doubt. So, why do it? Why is it worth the effort? Well, Aesop gave us that answer in the story of *The Wind and the Sun*. “... it easier to influence people with gentleness than with force.” We’ve known this to be truth for literally thousands of years yet still it remains elusive. That’s why continuing to pursue it is so very important. It is quite literally our task and challenge from our God who holds the universe in His hand. May our prayer always be, “Let it be so, God, and empower us, enable us, strengthen us, embolden us, to do our part to bring your gentleness into the world, no matter all the reasons there are not to. Amen.”