

Gentleness Rules

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“And what is a merciful heart? It is the heart’s burning desire for people, for birds, for animals, and even for demons. At the remembrance and at the sight of them, the merciful one’s eyes fill with tears which arise at the great compassion that urges the heart. It grows tender and cannot endure hearing or seeing any injury or slight sorrow for anything in creation.... Such a one continually offers tearful prayers, even for irrational animals and for enemies of truth and all who harm it, that they may be guarded and forgiven.” St. Isaac the Syrian¹

Paul’s lists tend to blur under our gaze. Reading the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22, we might ask how “kindness” differs from “goodness”? “Peace” from “self-control”? And for our purposes, what precisely is “gentleness”? How does it differ from, say, “patience”? Or from other virtues not in this list but in other New Testament passages, like humility?

Perhaps these are not so much entries in a catalogue as they are facets of the same jewel. Studied in the context of the whole canon and two contemporary exemplars, gentleness seems to me now to be a glimpse into God’s very heart. God’s way with humanity is not forceful or impatient. Instead God slowly woos us, entices us, and waits for us to return to God’s embrace. God is endlessly patient with Israel and church and world. God calls Abram and then waits for thousands of years for Israel to obey God’s law. God waits for us, church, to live as God shows us in the way of Jesus. It took the church some 400 years to hammer out the doctrine of the Trinity, which Christians agree with near unanimity is essential to our faith. The teaching is present in the Bible, but it took centuries of disagreement to see this clearly. (Do you remember what you were up to in the year 1616?) God is unimaginably patient with humanity. God will have the world God wants. But God isn’t going to use violence to bring it about against the will of such fickle creatures as us.

Thankfully, Scripture is not fickle. An exercise like this series of articles on the fruits of the Spirit can help us slow down and chew on each individual fruit for the sake of preaching to our congregations. Medieval interpreters borrowed from our Jewish forebears the image of a passage of scripture being like a particular spice. Those with a sensitive palate work to chew on the spice so as to crack it open in the best possible way to get all the flavor locked therein. As ever, a theology of creation is closely related to the practice of the interpretation of scripture. God has left that flavor for us in the spice just like God leaves a gift in every stroke of scripture. We do well to take our time and linger over these mysteries. Commentators both ancient and modern point out that Paul uses the singular here, *fruit*, not the plural, *fruits* of the Spirit. Each of these virtues is the full presence of the Holy Spirit, poured out among us in Pentecost, reconfiguring the world until it’s the one God wants.

What, then, is gentleness? One time tested way to approach a theological definition is to start with what something is not. Especially with regard to God, we cannot

positively say what God is; we can only properly say what God is not. Such negatives shape our not-understanding in fruitful ways.² I write this during the primary campaign for president of the USA of one Donald J. Trump. I write assuming his campaign will have faded by the time you read this, but that's what is commonly said about demagogues before they assume greater power. People are afraid, and Trump names names: it's the Mexicans, no it's the Muslims, no it's the liberals, no it's powerful women who are ruining America. Mexicans are rapists, and Syrian refugees are terrorists, and women say hard truths about him. His rivals are "weak," "low energy," "stupid," "losers." Trump's supporters say they appreciate that he's not "politically correct," that he's "ballsy," that he "tells it like it is." Americans have flirted with demagogues in high office before, from Huey Long to Joseph McCarthy to George Wallace. We just haven't done it recently for an office this important. But a generation of cable news and talk radio has coarsened our rhetoric. Whoever eventually displaces Trump on the right will not do so by repudiating him. White males feeling disempowered economically and socially feel they have a champion. Carefully stoked racism is no small part of the concoction. And the more the left yells its outrage at Trump, echoed by the media, the more his supporters rally around him.

One thing nobody accuses the Donald of is being gentle. Alpha male playground bullies don't moderate or they lose their whole *raison d'être*. His whole shtick is to keep the kettle of rage boiling. If he lets it off the heat or loosens the lid by showing even an ounce of introspection or second-guessing, he is done. Trump's aggressiveness is working. You see this in other areas of life—"the early bird gets the worm," the aphorism goes. A young 40-year old entrepreneur honored by *Vancouver Magazine* for his business acumen says his faith is "hustling"—he never lets a minute pass without developing his brand.³ And those who act aggressively (not recklessly) on the sports field or in politics or in dating or in warfare are often rewarded for their efforts. In this world, under current arrangements, gentleness is not the way to success.

By contrast, gentleness is central to the gospel of Jesus. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light" (Mt 11:28-30). That burden doesn't *look* easy when Jesus is carrying his cross. And Jesus can get quite testy elsewhere in Matthew (see especially chapters 23-24). Whatever he means by *gentle*, Jesus doesn't mean infinitely pliable and accommodating, spineless, or "weak" in the Donald's sense. To cite one Old Testament passage that may have informed Jesus' own teaching, the psalmist says, "The meek shall inherit the land, and delight in abundant prosperity" (37:11). Jesus' more famous formulation in his Sermon on the Mount is that the meek are blessed, "for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). We Christians often spiritualize that promise, as if Jesus is referring to some otherworldly reality. But the land is as earthy as God's promises get, and so is the center of Jewish faith. It is what God promises to Abram and his children forever. Its loss is a devastating crisis in Israel's self-understanding. And a promise of regaining the land is what the psalmist and Jesus offer. "Gentleness" then has to do with waiting on God, putting ourselves in an attentive posture of anticipating God's making good on God's promises, not taking matters into our own hands. And those promises are as abundant as the Promised Land and Jesus' offer of a gentle yoke—life under his disciplining and joyful cross.

One of our most important reflections on the fruit of the Spirit is Phil Kenneson's *Life on the Vine*.⁴ He argues that the fruits are not individual accomplishments or feelings. The fruits are *economic*—having to do with how the whole household (*oikos*) of the church is ordered. The fruits are about how we all together can pursue the sort of poverty, affliction, humility, and lowliness to which Christ calls us. Virtues are never individually acquired. They are communally cultivated—partly by learning how, in the church, to make our lives with one another and to put up with one another. Any family or roommate or spouse knows how easy it is to become anything other than gentle. The persons we live with are also sinners. So are we. And only living in close, difficult, and graced proximity can we learn what sinners *we* are, how much grace we need, and so how gentle we ourselves have yet to become before we are fully human.⁵

Scripture describes humility as God's prescription for the tumor of our pride: "The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord, and the neediest people shall exult in the holy one of Israel" (Is 29:19). Humility is hard to find among humankind in general, and even in Israel and church—the priestly people between the rest of us and God. Israel instead is often described in scripture as "stiff-necked," that is, refusing to bow to God in submission to God's yoke and refusing to bow to the image of God in the neighbor (Ex. 32:9, Deut 9:6, 2 Chron. 30:6-8). Desmond Tutu says that whenever we see another person, we should genuflect. The other is a living icon of God, deserving of our full reverence. God will amend this stiff-necked situation one day in Israel and in us, the prophets promise: "On that day . . . you shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain. For I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord" (Zeph. 3:11-12).

Jesus' ministry announces and enacts a great reversal: the humble will be exalted, and the proud will be brought low (Mt 23:12, Luke 1:46-55 & 14:11). In John's gospel especially, Jesus offers us intimate access to the inner nature of God. There is a sort of deference within the very Trinity itself as we are invited into the mutual love of the Beloved, the One who sent him, and the Advocate (Jn 14:26, 15:26 & 16:13-15). The rest of the New Testament commends gentleness as a spiritual gift necessary for those who would risk leadership (James 4:10 & 1 Peter 5:6). The pastoral epistle elaborates, "The Lord's servant must be quarrelsome but kindly to everyone, patient, an apt teacher, correcting opponents with gentleness" (2 Tim 2:24-25). Clearly the danger of being in leadership is that of taking one's power as a personal privilege and then exercising authority with harshness instead of with Christ-like gentleness. But God's own power is most clearly seen in its self-outpouring in the flesh and cross of Christ (Php. 2:5-11). It is not *for* him. It is *through* him *for* others.

Kenneson takes a step beyond most academic books by offering actual steps toward gentleness. One, he suggests that we alter our posture through prayer, which is "the seed of gentleness and the absence of anger."⁶ Kenneson suggests that we kneel, as those aware we're in God's presence. My wife Jaylynn noted on a retreat to a Trappist monastery that we civilians stood for worship all kinds of disheveled ways—leaning back, hands on hips, etc. The monks' bodies, by contrast, are all bent, ready to bow, like a Swiss Army knife that won't quite close anymore. The monks bow so often—at the doxology, after every psalm, to pass the peace to guests—that their physical posture has been altered. Secondly, we should learn to yield. Paul appeals to his readers in Corinth "by the gentleness and meekness of Christ" (2 Cor 10:1). People

like me—relatively privileged straight white males—are accustomed to having our way. It is perhaps then especially important for us to look for opportunities to defer. Three, Kenneson suggests that we spend time intentionally with those whom the world considers of no account. Like Jesus' dinner party in Luke 14:12-14, we too should invite into our lives those who cannot reciprocate. The church not only teaches these practices. She gives us abundant opportunity to learn them by the simple practice of regularly gathering us with sinners like us. Gentleness, like the other virtues, is a communal practice on the way to becoming a sort of second nature.

One living saint who embodies gentleness itself is Jean Vanier, the internationally celebrated founder of L'Arche, a community for intellectually disabled people and others to live together in community where each is honored.⁷ Vanier didn't set out trying to develop an alternative model to house the disabled, though one was needed in mid-20th century France, where the disabled were often warehoused or kept in cages. Vanier just invited two men to live with him in his home. This is encouragingly doable, gentle even. It is nothing heroic, much less impossible, to invite other people into one's home. Raphael and Philippe and Vanier became what we now call an intentional Christian community, doing all the ordinary things families do together. Soon that community grew, other houses opened, and some 130 of them now exist in 35 countries on five continents. Vanier says of L'Arche, "Love doesn't mean doing extraordinary or heroic things. It means knowing how to do ordinary things with tenderness."⁸

I confess I've been guilty of thinking of L'Arche as a response to an "issue"—that of what to do with disabled people. But disabled people aren't problems to be solved. They're people—mysteries to be adored—without whom our communities are impoverished. L'Arche's ambitions are actually greater than I used to think, precisely by aiming to do nothing more than discern Christ in the neighbor: they're modeling a whole new way of being human.⁹ Vanier speaks of the assistants who work with L'Arche residents as those who have to grow to understand their own woundedness, for the "Holy Spirit in a mysterious way is living at the centre of the wound." Our enemies are also wounded people, like us, and until we see that about them, "gentleness is not possible." L'Arche is a grace-bearing institution, a chalice that contains something precious, to replace the shards of the shattered institutions that preceded it. And this has implications for the other sorts of institutions that stitch our lives back together—like colleges, hospitals, and parishes. Vanier says in his great book *Community and Growth*, "In the past, Christians who wanted to follow Jesus opened hospitals and schools. Now that there are many of these, Christians must commit themselves to these new communities of welcome, to live with people who have no other family and to show them that they are loved and . . . that they, in turn, can love and give life to others."¹⁰

Those who lead such institutions must be gentle. We might contrast this with Trump's vision of strength as loud-mouthed domination. We can also contrast it with the sort of feigned friendliness for which the mainline churches are known—one that wears a permanent false grin and avoids conflict at all costs. God's own strong-weakness is a cross. Christ is executed as a revolutionary for saying clearly things that rankled religious and governmental leaders both. He does not quietly slip away to save his skin or avoid substantial matters through small-talk. He speaks and acts and submits in a way that brings about his death as the inauguration of God's kingdom.

All leadership must show this sort of cruciform strength and weakness. Jesus' own gentleness shows us how to lead—his is a strength manifest on a cross, a power that brings itself low, that spends itself in honoring the lesser member. L'Arche has institutionalized this sort of slowly-cultivated gentleness in a way that shows the world something it cannot understand but desperately needs.

Another embodiment of this form of gentle leadership is the Order of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance, OCSO, often known as the Trappists. Their most famous son, Thomas Merton, describes their form of life unforgettably in his *Seven Storey Mountain*.¹¹ One small community of Trappists lived at Atlas Abbey in Tibherine, Algeria, until the brothers were kidnapped in the mid-1990s by Muslim extremists. They died under circumstances that are still uncertain, though evidence suggests it may have happened in a rescue attempt gone awry. The 2010 French film, *Of Gods and Men*, tells their story beautifully.¹²

The tragedy is the film's horizon, but the story the film tells is actually about leadership. It depicts the transformation toward gentleness of the community's abbot, Father Christian de Cherge. As abbot, his role is to moderate the community's internal deliberation about whether to flee in the face of threats from newly violent insurgents or to stay with the Muslim villagers who have grown up around the monastery. The monks' lives are wrapped up with the villagers with whom they work the land, to whom they sell honey, with whom they celebrate life events and exchange gossip. One brother tells the neighbors that the monks are like birds on a wire, not sure whether they'll stay or take flight. She corrects him: "We're the birds. You are the branch. If you go, we lose our footing." They are the presence of Christ for a people who honor Issa but do not worship him. How can they leave that? But given the risks, how can they not?

Early in the film, Father Christian summarily dismisses an army offer to post a guard at the abbey. Such militarized defense is not consonant with a way of prayer that worships with psalms seven times a day and seeks to live in silent contemplation and gentle regard of neighbor. The other monks are angry, not with the decision, but with the unilateral way it is made. Leadership does not mean skipping over difficult internal deliberation. One monk says to the abbot, "The very principle of community is compromised by your attitude We did not elect you to decide on your own." As the area's safety deteriorates, the brothers slowly realize they each feel called to stay. They do so uncoerced by Father Christian, who has learned his lesson. He makes space for others to decide rather than lean on them to decide his way. Finally, only when ready, they vote, and the camera lingers as each brother raises his hand to stay. Then they vote again. Unanimous again.

Father Christian already had a long prayed-for gentleness in his own soul. He had left his family and profession and secular hopes for a new name and country and language and rule totally dedicated to prayer—and was trusted by the community enough to be named abbot. The film shows how he learned to lead, not just to pray, with gentleness.

Abbot Christian left this extraordinary letter to be read in the case of his death:

Should it ever befall me, and it could happen today to be a victim of the terrorism swallowing up all foreigners here, I would like my community, my church, my family to remember that my life was given to God and to

this country. The unique master of all life was no stranger to this brutal departure. And my death is the same as so many other violent ones....I've lived enough to know I am complicit in the evil that, alas, prevails over the world and the evil that will smite me blindly. I could never desire such a death. I could never feel gladdened that these people that I love be accused randomly of my murder....My death of course will quickly vindicate those who called me naïve or idealistic. But they must know that I will be freed of a burning curiosity and, God willing, will immerse my gaze in the Father's and contemplate with him his children of Islam as he sees them. This gratitude which encompasses my entire life includes you....my friend of the last minute, who knew not what you were doing....May we meet again happy thieves in paradise if it pleases God the Father of us both. Amen. Inshallah.

There are oceans of wisdom and gentleness here. We too live in a time of tension between Christians and Muslims. These are exploited by figures like Mr. Trump and leaders of ISIS for petty gain. Father Christian shows us how to meet those dangers in a way that is Christlike: courageous, not naïve, cruciform. Amidst all the noise of recrimination, there are communities of actual people who would rather live in peace and friendship. Those communities need leaders like Dom Christian, like the Muslims in Tibherine, who see God in one another and are changed. This is the sort of gentleness our age desperately needs. And as Father Christian's words show, the gospel can make even us provocateurs of such gentleness.

Notes

1 I take the quote from Isaac from a bookmark printed by Eighth Day Books in Wichita, Kansas: <http://www.eighthdaybooks.com/?page=shop/index>

2 I take this formulation from Lewis Ayres. A common objection to this sort of apophatic formulation is to ask how one can hold a doctrinal conviction like the Trinity and also insist on negative theology. The "answer," such as we have, is that the Trinity faithfully names the God we don't know. See my *Trinity: The God We Don't Know* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2015).

3 Ryan Holmes, founder of Hootsuite, a tech startup in Vancouver, is #27 in this year's Power 50. The God of the Jews would suggest occasional and regular Sabbath rest. It's been known to make folks even more productive....

4 Philip D. Kenneson, *Life on the Vine: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit in Christian Community* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1999).

5 I'm echoing here Steve Fowl's argument in his "Making Stealing Possible: Criminal Thoughts on Building an Ecclesial Common Life," in *Engaging Scripture* (Eugene, Or.: Cascade, 2008), 161-177.

6 These paragraphs all draw on Kenneson, 199-221, this quote from 212.

7 I draw here on Stanley Hauerwas's essay "The Politics of Gentleness," in *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness* in *Resources for Reconciliation*, ed Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2008), 77-99.

8 Hauerwas, "The Politics of Gentleness," 77.

9 See Vanier's book *Becoming Human* (Costa Mesa Ca.: Paulist, 2008).

10 Vanier, *Community and Growth* (Costa Mesa, Ca.: Paulist, 1989), 271. I'm grateful to Tim Dickau of Grandview Calvary Baptist Church here in Vancouver for pointing this passage out to me.

11 Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Mariner, 1999).

12 A longer treatment can be found in John Kiser, *The Monks of Thibirine: Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria* (New York: St. Martin's, 2002).