A Gentle Reminder

TEXT: Philippians 2:1-11

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on May 11, 2025

Of all the traits on Paul's Fruit of the Spirit list in Galatians 5, the one that I've found the hardest to pin down is "gentleness," or as some translations have it, "meekness."

Jesus says the meek will inherit the earth. Jesus is described as being "meek" when he rides into Jerusalem on the donkey's back on Palm Sunday; and in Matthew 11:29 Jesus describes himself as he says, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls."

First Peter 3:4 gives us a tiny clue in saying "But let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is, in the sight of God, of great price."

So, there's a lot of dancing around it, but it's hard to get at what gentleness (or meekness) actually is. Look up "meekness" and it says it means "gentleness," and vice versa. There is no "Parable of the Gentle Shepherd" or other story I could find that shows the word in action.

So, I keep asking myself, "what IS it?" If you're not riding a donkey into Jerusalem, what does it look like in human life? And how is it different than something like kindness, which is a different word on the list?

I've left it for last in this series as I've struggled with that question; and, while there's likely still more nuance, I think I can now come closer. I found it a bit easier to grasp if I put off thinking about gentleness or meekness in humans and see where we do and don't use those words for other parts of the natural world.

Once I did that, some things came into better focus. In nature, we use the word gentle when something powerful is not exhibiting its full power: A gentle breeze, a gently flowing stream, gentle ocean waves. But we don't talk about gentle grass, because—unlike wind and water—grass doesn't rise up and kill you when it gets in a mood.

There are whole classes of animals that we associate with gentleness, like deer, because even though every animal has some built in defense mechanism, and it's not unknown for a strong buck to kill a person when threatened, deer are prey, not predators.

There aren't poems about gentle tigers for the same reason there aren't poems about fearsome rabbits, unless you're watching *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Tigers are predators; rabbits are prey, and it's the prey animals we tend to call "gentle, at least as a species." Gentleness has an inverse relationship to power in some way.

When we get to domesticated and working animals, we begin to notice that, unless severely restrained or ill-treated, many powerful animals make choices on when to exercise their full power or hold back.

We will use the adjective "gentle" for a particular horse on specific occasions, but not as a rule for the species, because a horse can be very much not gentle when it decides to be. Same with dogs. Same with elephants.

What all of that tells me is that a core element of gentleness is tied to self-control, which the word sits next to on Paul's list. If you're talking about gentleness as a virtue, it doesn't seem to exist outside of a relationship that has a power differential, with the word "gentle" only valid when exhibited by the one with the greater power, at least in the moment.

When I put all of that together with my understanding that all fruit of the spirit are, at their core, an expression of love, my working definition—at least for now—is this:

Gentleness—as a spiritual fruit rather than an innate characteristic—exists when something is free to unleash its power but holds back in order to help something it loves which would be harmed by that power's full expression.

A very common example is teaching a young child to be gentle with a new baby—whether it's a new baby brother or a puppy or baby bird. Even three-year-olds are stronger than quite a few precious things and could do harm if they let their full power loose on them.

Often love, self-restraint, and gentleness are taught together with children, especially if they're in the "Why?" stage.

We first interrupt a show of strength that is too much for the situation and model holding back. "No, honey, we don't slap the puppy, we pat the puppy or stroke the puppy. Why? Because we don't want to hurt the puppy. Why? Because we love the puppy. Why? Because God made the puppy." And on it goes.

All gentleness involves restraint; self-control. But it's also, as all spiritual matters are, about relationship. If your three-year-old is punching the wall, a conversation is necessary. But, while it might be a gentle conversation between you and your child, it would be unusual to use the word "gentle" when explaining about how to deal with walls.

Gentleness might come up if the child's wrath has broken a family heirloom—as a number of objects signify a relationship of some kind; but most walls have functional, not sentimental value and we are more likely to talk about being "careful" with objects rather than being "gentle" with them.

Gentleness involves restraining our power in relationship, but there are two other key elements. First, we must do so freely. It must be self-control, not outside coercion.

If exercising my power puts me at risk, and I restrain myself out of fear of consequences, I'm being careful, not gentle. If my right to exercise my power has been stripped from me—legally or illegally or under threat—I am not being gentle; I am being constrained.

To be "gentle" requires being free to act and to make a self-directed decision to limit the force of that action. Gentleness is an act of love; and love cannot be forced and still be called "love." Whether we're constrained by guilt or by threat or by handcuffs makes no difference in terms of the definition. Gentleness as a spiritual fruit is a form of love and must be freely chosen to count.

The second key element is that we are not being gentle unless we have the greater power in the relationship. Gentleness is always a form of descent; it is bending low to lift up someone or something else that has less power than we do.

That might be a power differential *inherent* in the relationship—a boss to an employee for example, a parent to a child, or a guard to someone in prison. It also could be a temporary difference—a healthy person to a sick person; a person lending aid to someone buried in the rubble of an earthquake.

When it comes to the sinful relationship inherent in the power of the privileged over the oppressed, it may well be that it is gentleness alone on Paul's list that can restore right relationship and heal the wounds, because I think gentleness is, perhaps, the key that opens the door to humility.

Which brings us to the passage from Philippians that Cathy read earlier. Philippians 2:1-11 is generally believed by scholars to contain an ancient Christian hymn—the earliest anyone has yet discovered.

The actual hymn part is in verses 6-11, after Paul has encouraged the church in Philippi to have the same love and the same mind as Jesus did. Paul sums up that mind of Christ in verses 3-4:

"Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."

Privilege only exists when some people think they are more inherently worthy of life's joys and benefits than others and then use their power to bake that into the structures of social and political life.

If each of us counted others to be better than ourselves, in all times and places, it would be impossible for privilege and entitlement to take hold.

It's what Jesus was trying to illustrate when he told the parable of the banquet in Luke 14, warning his listeners that when they were invited to a banquet they should not jockey for the best seats, because someone more important than they are may well come in and they'll be humiliated by being asked to move down.

Instead, Jesus says, assume that you're the least important person there and take the least important seat and then there's a good chance you'll be invited to move up.

Jesus ends that parable by saying, "For every one who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." It's a theme with Jesus, expressed in other places as the first will be last and the last will be first.

That humility, that descent, that willingness to take the lowest place, if it existed in everyone, would end hate and supremacist groups overnight.

But for Paul, that descent doesn't mean self-debasement, since he follows the instruction to see others as better by saying, "Let each of you look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." He doesn't say don't look to your own interests; he says don't look ONLY to your own interests. Others share this planet with us. Include them in your thought and actions.

And then, starting in verse 6, Paul quotes from what is believed to be the hymn—that presumably the congregation in Philippi knew well—to illustrate what living with that attitude looked like, saying that Jesus, "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of mortals.

"And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

This hymn in Philippians, I think, is the corrective to those who hear humility, gentleness, meekness, and the like as negative words. Many equate those words with those who are oppressed, poor, weak, or deemed to be without value in society—as if it's humility and gentleness that got them there.

But the downtrodden condition of those Jesus called "the least of these," are not who Paul is describing as having the virtue of humility, because the poor, the foreigner, and the hungry have no choice. They are, by definition, blocked from bettering their situation by those a particular society favors and who now profit from keeping them underfoot.

The humble are not the ones suffering at the bottom of the ladder; the humble are those guaranteed a spot at the top who willingly give up that place to go down and help the others.

Verses 6-7 are critical here. Jesus was not humble because he was born into a poor family in an occupied country. Jesus was humble because Jesus was God but freely chose, not just to limit his power, but to actually take the form of a lesser being—a human being; and not a human king either, but someone toward the bottom of the social ladder of his time.

And then, even from that state, Jesus kept descending, hanging out with women, tax collectors, sinners, lepers, Samaritans, and every kind of outcast and marginalized group, until he finally allowed himself to literally be made nothing—to be executed as a common criminal for the sake of the world.

Humility requires that a person be fully aware of their own value and inherent worth and voluntarily accept a lesser status for the sake of being in solidarity with others.

A very recent and public example of humility was in the living quarters for Pope Francis. He was the Pope and was expected to live in the apartments set aside for those who hold that office—a lavish residence—the Apostolic Palace it's called.

Popes have lived there for centuries. Pope Benedict XVI lived there and now Pope Leo XIV will live there as well. The papal apartment has more than a dozen rooms, staff residences and a grand view overlooking the city of Rome.

The apartment is adorned with a golden altar and works of fine art. The Sistine Chapel is merely one chapel that is part of the Pope's official house, to give you an idea of how much of a Palace the place is.

Pope Francis not only could have chosen to live in the papal apartment inside the Apostolic Palace; he was expected to live there. But he did not. Instead, he lived in the Vatican guesthouse—called St. Martha's House.

If you go to a site called Popehistory.com, you can find pictures of the ornate papal apartment in the Apostolic Palace versus the simple room in the guesthouse where Pope Francis chose to live instead.

St. Martha's House is the place meant for clergy having business with the Holy See and is where the cardinals who participated in last week's conclave stayed. It has been described as intentionally a three-, rather than a five-star hotel so that clergy are reminded not to get too comfortable there.

Staying at that guesthouse is not a sign of humility for the cardinals or other clergy, because they don't choose it. It is their assigned housing. But living there was a true sign of humility for Pope Francis because his assigned housing was the grandest living arrangement in all of Vatican City, but he chose St. Martha's house to be in solidarity with those who had less and had no choice in the matter; to practice what he preached.

In the Philippians hymn, it says that in becoming human, Jesus emptied himself; not out of loathing for himself but with the full knowledge of his own power and value. We see the same trait in Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, in the third chapter of John's gospel.

John the Baptist had his own set of disciples, and in the second half of chapter three, John's disciples come to him worried that Jesus was getting more disciples than John. Indeed, it seems that some of John's disciples themselves moved from John to Jesus. John's poll numbers were slipping.

John responds to their concerns in 3:29-30 with something no politician would ever say in such a situation, "He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full. He must increase, but I must decrease."

Learning to say that is the essence of humility, which well may be the full flowering of all of the fruit of the spirit together. Certainly, learning to be gentle—choosing to restrain our own power in order to be able to love and nurture someone or something that struggles—is a stepping stone to be able to say, with joy no less, "I must decrease."

It is, I think, one of the key lessons of ageing and, ultimately, of gracefully giving our earthly bodies back to the earth's embrace.

Gentleness, meekness, humility are not signs of weakness, but of strength. If you have ever tried to limit the expression of your own power for the sake of others; you know it is much harder to hold back and accept less than to forge ahead just because we can or because it's expected or because we have earned a right to it.

To force someone to empty themselves—through exploitation, oppression, humiliation, violence, theft, guilt, or other subtle or obvious means is soundly condemned by Jesus, and the arc of the entire Bible shows a growing awareness of God's disapproval and finally rage at such behavior.

But when the powerful empty themselves, by their own free will, giving up something they have every right to take for themselves, out of love for another; *that* is the model of Jesus, the mind of Christ.

And the counter-intuitive message of the Gospel is that such emptying is what fills us with the power of the Holy Spirit to save the world. It is the Good Friday that leads to Easter.

As best I can tell, cultivating the fruit of gentleness—by learning to tap into love to restrain our power, lest it break something more fragile, is the first step toward salvation. Amen.