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Abington Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 8

Matthew 5:5

Romans 12:14-21

DESIGNER CLOTHES: MEEKNESS

The term, ‘the roaring twenties,’ describing the decade of the 1920’s brings to mind a certain style of music, dancing, and clothing, along with the rise of early film and sports stars during what were thought to be good economic times. Quite in contrast to the boldness of that era came the beginning of a cartoon strip that was called “The Timid Soul.” Its main character, drawn by H. T. Webster, was a man named Caspar Milquetoast. The character’s last name came from a bland, inoffensive food that is appropriate for someone with a weak stomach. The creator of the strip described this character as “the man who speaks softly and gets hit with a big stick.” He not only spoke softly, he was very, very cautious in whatever he said, trying to never upset anyone. ¹

Caspar Milquetoast is the mental picture I tend to get when I hear the word ‘meekness.’ Words like timid, spineless, and faint-hearted also come to mind. If it is anything close to cowardice trying to pretend that it is forbearance, then why is meekness listed as one of the positive qualities for Christians to dress themselves in as recorded in the Book of Colossians in the verse printed on our bulletins, as something worth focusing on during a sermon series? (3:12)

You might guess and you would be right that the word used for meekness in scripture, *prautas* in the original Greek, carries quite a different definition and connotation than it does in our current English usage. Jesus was meek in the biblical sense. As he challenged religious and political leaders who were more interested in their hold on power than on what was loving and just, he was quite unlike Caspar Milquetoast. He was far from being timid, spineless, or faint-hearted. A writer named Giovanni Papini described the meek who follow Jesus in this un-milquetoast way: “They are like water which is not hard to the touch,

which seems to give way before other substances, but slowly rises, silently attacks, and calmly consumes, with the patience of the years, the hardest of granites.”²

I’ve been reading again about the civil rights movement in the 1950’s and 60’s, which was led primarily by people of faith. In their struggle against segregation, in their standing up for the right to vote, they used non-violent tactics. This often infuriated their racist opponents, who quickly resorted to the use of billy clubs, fire hoses, bombs, police dogs, church arson, slanderous lies, illegal arrests, financial pressure tactics, hate speech, beatings, and murders. As you can imagine, there was great temptation for people of color to respond to the violence with violence, or to back away from the struggle and settle for things staying the way they were. But instead, people who had been beaten, threatened, and put in jail, kept coming back as part of peaceful demonstrations that showed a similar kind of meekness with which Jesus clothed himself as he loved his enemies enough to peacefully show them a better way for themselves and for those they were oppressing. Jesus never lowered himself to use the vile tactics that were being used against him. And he showed a love for God and neighbor, which included his opponents, that would not retreat or give up. That is what biblical meekness means.

Our reading from Romans 12 does not use the word, ‘meekness.’ Rather, the whole passage conveys the concept that does not live by the eye-for-an-eye adage. It does not need to resort to strong-arm tactics because of confidence in the greater strength of God that will in God’s time overcome evil with good. Meekness also relates to living out who we are called to be. Psalm 8 focuses on God as the creator of our world and on humanity as stewards of that creation. The issue of climate change calls for us in meekness, to honor our creator and our own role in caring for creation.

There are many concerns that show the need for meticulous meekness living out love for God and neighbor. The challenges of an evolving pandemic have led not just to physical sickness, but symptoms of societal sickness that have to be diligently addressed as we seek to use truth-telling, along with the best of scientific and caring practices that lead to greater societal and global wellbeing. Partisan

hatred of opponents threatens to tear this nation apart. Meekness does not attack the adversary, but relentlessly works on the problem while demonstrating love for opponents. The list is long for needed action, and positive results will not come easily when the inequitable status quo is well-entrenched. I dare say many of us are inclined to give up too easily even when we are met with less stringent pushback than met the civil rights movement workers. Using imagery from our Colossians passage which is the basis for this sermon series, when we wear the garment of meekness, it does not wear out quickly.

Nineteenth century abolitionist and minister Theodore Parker wrote in a sermon: “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but a little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.”³ That’s the kind of resurrection faith and confidence in God that enables one to be meek in a similar way that Jesus was.

Meekness focuses less on the big stick that an opponent is wielding, and more on the big stock of love that God pours out upon us and our world. At times we have had difficulty receiving it and allowing it to remake us. There are plenty of people who out of anger, hurt, or fear find it difficult to respond to a similar kind of love, but the meek keep pouring it on with the confidence that something as soft as water can eventually wear away granite, even if it resides in an individual’s or a society’s heart. As one of Jesus’ beatitudes indicates, in living out our call to biblical meekness, we can experience the blessing of inheriting the best that life on this earth has to offer, which is the opportunity to reflect in goal and in tactics the dedicated love we have received from God. If Caspar Milquetoast reminds us of food for a weak stomach, Jesus Christ reminds us of another kind of food – bread and wine, an offering of his own body and blood, given in love peacefully, diligently, with a meekness that is redemptive. By God’s grace, let’s follow our Lord’s definition and demonstration of meekness. Amen.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caspar_Milquetoast

² Papini, Giovanni, *Life of Christ*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1923.

³ The popular saying: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice," originated from this longer quote from an 1853 sermon by Theodore Parker, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129609461>

