

On Gentleness

Isaiah 6:1–8; Luke 5:1–11

I'd like to follow up last week's sermon about anger by preaching on gentleness. As an opening prayer, I'll read my mentor Brian Doyle's poem:

The kindergarten bus bounces past me this morning as
I shamble out to my car and a little cheerful kid waves
To me shyly and whatever it is we are way down deep
Opens like a fist that's been clenched so long it did not
Think it would ever open again and for a moment I am
That kid and she is my daughter and I'm waving to her
Hoping she will wave to me and we think that we can't
Write that for which we do not have words but actually
Sometimes you can if you go gently between the words.¹

To begin, we have already heard Mike and Wendy's watchword, James 3:13—
Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.
Believing that Jesus was all-wise, I consider our text in terms of his gentleness. His catch of fish displayed miraculous power, but gentleness has its own power. Gentleness is part of the Fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23) and evidence of God's way in the world.

Jesus's wise gentleness is most evident when it came to Simon Peter. You didn't have to be the Messiah to know that he was having a difficult day or, more specifically, had a frustrating night. His nets were empty. Simon Peter must have felt deflated not only from exhaustion but also from having nothing to show for his effort. We've all been there. Despite your best efforts, things just don't turn out your way. Jesus offered him a gentle invitation to put out his boat into the deep.

I want to stress that gentleness is not weakness. 2 Timothy 2:25 reads that we should reprove or correct others with gentleness that we might bring them to the truth.

I think of the Right Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde, who recently delivered a sermon to a congregation that included our most powerful elected officials. Toward the end of her sermon, Bishop Budde directly addressed President Trump. She was powerfully gentle not only in her calm demeanor and measured words but also in her message. She appealed to mercy, what Brian Doyle called "whatever it is we are way down deep."

There is a deep resonance between gentleness and mercy. I think of this congregation when we offer prayers on behalf of ourselves, our loved ones, and our beloved country and world. We appeal to the Lord's mercy in our prayers. We are saying that we need the help of the Lord of the Deep.

And so, there is a further connection between gentleness and humbleness. Indeed, Paul links these two as part of *walking in the calling of the Lord* (Eph. 4:1–2). In this morning's readings, both Isaiah and Simon Peter acknowledge and confess, "I am a sinful man." Isaiah adds that he comes from a sinful nation. I cannot even save myself, much less the country or the world. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayers.

Thinking of prayer, our reading about boats reminded me of the ancient prayer of an anonymous Gaelic fisherman, who lived more than a thousand years ago: "O God, thy sea is so great, and my boat is so small."

Like the greatness of the sea, there is the undeniable vastness of suffering and need, as well as cruelty and abuse. *And* there is also our little boat. Like Simon Peter, we are invited onto the water. We can make a ripple, and perhaps, by God's Spirit, this will have more of an impact than we might even imagine. Though our boats are little, they are part of so much more. Poet Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer wrote the truth: "Even the smallest acts can be part of the greater change that infuses everything."²

Gentleness, then, and kindness, yet more Fruit of the Spirit. Our resident poet extraordinaire, Mary Barnard, wrote this week, "I wonder now, why does one become kind? Perhaps when an oath spoken longs to go beyond the words—and comes straight from the kingdom." Jesus calls us to put our little boats out in the deep, like Mary's friend, Daphne, who brought her groceries after Mary had broken her leg, and now returns to share tea and stories "of the four men who wrote the gospels according." Such gentle, kind strength.

Despite the people who deny it, February is still Black History Month, and all of us would learn valuable truths from the experiences of our Black members in the body of Christ. People have suffered much, yet still overcome their exhaustion and frustration to put their boats out there or, in the language of the King James read in many Black churches, *let us not be weary of well doing* (Gal. 6:9). Indeed, do not mistake gentleness or kindness for weakness.

My friend, Jasmin, works with the unsheltered population in Asheville. She wrote about her calling to this ministry that was born out of a childhood awareness of so-called “pariahs.” Melanie was a fourth-grade classmate with dishwater blond hair, chubby cheeks, and faded clothes. Melanie sat alone during lunch, and team captains only picked her for P.E. and recess as a last resort.

During one such P.E. class, as all the children sat on the gym floor waiting to be chosen by team captains, Jasmin noticed Melanie sucking her thumb, refusing to look up, her stringy hair as a curtain over her face. Jasmin scooted across the slick floor to sit next to her and held her free hand. She not only showed her mercy, but Jasmin says that such gentle kindness is actually “a force of nature, like ocean waves crashing against the shore.”³

Humbly we pray, “Thy sea is so great, and my boat is so small.” Yet, there is more power and strength in your little boat than you realize, for as we read in the ancient creation poem found in Genesis 1, though the water is dark and deep, God’s Spirit is there. That same Spirit works through us, producing *good works of gentleness born of wisdom*. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayers.

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¹ [“Lily,” a poem by Brian Doyle | The Christian Century](#)

² Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer, “Even the Smallest Acts,” [A Hundred Falling Veils | there's a poem in every day](#)

³ [Floating - Jasmin Pittman Morrell — The Porch](#)