“***The Meek Will Inherit***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Feb. 2, 2019

**Sirach 4:7–11**

7 Endear yourself to the congregation; bow your head low to the great. 8 Give a hearing to the poor, and return their greeting politely. 9 Rescue the oppressed from the oppressor; and do not be hesitant in giving a verdict. 10 Be a father to orphans, and be like a husband to their mother; you will then be like a son of the Most High, and he will love you more than does your mother.

11 Wisdom teaches her children and gives help to those who seek her.

**Matthew 5:1–10**

1When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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

5 “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

8 “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

What great promises, but what counter-intuitive ones! It doesn’t seem at *all* apparent that the poor in spirit, or those who mourn, or those who are meek are *blessed*, or that the kingdom of heaven belongs to them. What’s going on in these sayings, the “beatitudes,” the blessings?

In the first four, Jesus is expressing sympathy and understanding for the spiritually needy and honest people who yearn, who seek, and who mourn. Then he switches, I think, to expressing support for *leadership* virtues. Let me spell this out a little. He starts by comforting the poor in spirit, which probably means the spiritually needy; next he supports those who mourn for others, who have compassion; then the meek, that is, those who are deeply devout; and fourthly, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. These are all tender and sincere values. Then he switches to some virtues that those in leadership need to have. He affirms those who practice mercy; then the pure and honest in heart; the peacemakers, who can bring people together; and finally those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake. It seems that he first affirms four *pious* virtues, and then four *active* virtues. I think he wants us to combine these, to be both gentle and strong, both reverent and energetic.

Now, verse 1 says “his disciples came to him.” These early disciples become leaders and apostles. The beatitudes are really aimed at *teachers*. He is telling the apostles to notice the spiritual struggles and strivings they will encounter when they meet people. These sayings are meant to help the apostles to build up hope and unity in the believers who will be converted through their preaching. The beatitudes are principles for preachers and teachers, but, for us, that can probably include highly *informal* teaching like the influence of a teenager upon a younger friend. If the teenager has learned to be kind and merciful, it provides a wonderful example for the younger person. Children admire their slightly older friends or siblings, and the qualities they see there, *rub off* on them. Parents are teachers, too. What if parents could really appreciate the saying “blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness”? That would enable them to respect and understand their children’s own spiritual striving and hunger, and help them to not feel ashamed of their spiritual questions.

The beatitudes have done great good for many people who follow these principles. It is precisely the spiritually *hungry* and *needy* people whom these teachings are meant to help. The meek and considerate teacher needs to be sensitive to the meek and quiet student, to draw out their strength.

The beatitudes show that Christian teachers should be sensitive to spiritually hungry people. A pastor should be ready for the fact that some adults feel they were bossed around or disrespected when they attended church as young people, yet they still hunger and thirst for righteousness. A Christian leader should not equate meekness with weakness, nor should a leader be rigid and dogmatic, which is very unlike Jesus. Pastors and deacons should be alert and perceptive of those who are pure in heart, or are peacemakers. These are the character traits that we value. They are balanced and service-oriented virtues. We can only be of service if we are spiritually sensitive and kind.

Now, are they realistic sayings? When do the meek ever inherit? Aren’t they usually robbed and mocked and kicked to the curb? Well, the meek will certainly not inherit if they are timid, nor will the pure in heart are if they are weak and wavering. Only if we are spiritually aggressive will these principles have an effect. The early Christians turned the Roman world upside down by being spiritually bold and brave. For us, that would mean having faith in the fulfillment halves of these sayings. We need to *believe* that we will be comforted, that we will be filled, that we will see God.

“Meek” is sometimes understood to mean “mild, passive, compliant,” but in Greek the word *praus* means “peaceable, gentle, polite, considerate.” As Jesus uses it, meekness refers to the person who is receptive to God and peaceable to their human fellows. It does not mean being compliant and passive. Jesus calls himself *praus* in the passage where he says “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart” (Matt 11:29 NIV). Jesus was meek like a lion! So it is the gentle, peaceable, inwardly strong, and spiritually *receptive* people who will—ultimately—inherit the earth.

Jeremiah was a meek man, who told God he was not a good speaker, yet God empowered him to speak (Jer 1:6, 9), and he is the most heroic and admired figure to emerge from the whole story about the siege of Jerusalem, the ending of the kingdom of Judah, and the beginning of the Babylonian Exile. He suffered greatly. His enemies lowered him down into a miry cistern to die, but a servant went to King Zedekiah and got permission to rescue him; after that, the king drew him aside and asked his advice (38:6–24), advice he did not follow. Zedekiah was killed by the invaders, but Jeremiah survived. The king would have survived if he had followed the meek man’s advice. Although Jeremiah was meek, he was not weak or passive. He was the true leader of his people, rejected in his own day, but admired by a handful, and appreciated in hindsight.

Although Jesus is the greatest articulator of these values of compassion, purity of heart, and mercy, they were also present in the Jewish Scriptures, and we see them in Sirach: “Rescue the oppressed from the oppressor; and do not be hesitant in giving a verdict. Be a father to orphans” (Sir 4:9–10). Psalm 68 says God is the “Father of orphans and protector of widows” (68:5). This was surely an inspiration for Jewish believers to take in orphans and to help protect vulnerable people like widows.

There were many unsung heroes among the meek and devout Jews, and it was *those* people who flocked to Jesus. He would encourage men and women whom the stuck-up people despised; he uplifted and healed the woman who timidly touched his cloak; he healed the blind beggar, of whom the apostles asked whether it was he or his parents who had sinned, that he should be born blind, and Jesus answered “neither” (John 9:3). He wanted his followers to be sensitive to people’s spiritual striving, their “hunger and thirst for righteousness.” And it is his openness to people of all kinds—rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, educated and uneducated—that holds the hope for peace among people of different personality types and backgrounds. He is the great peacemaker, but only if we let his character shine through.

We see his compassionate and sensitive character in these sayings. We see that he gave a positive promise at the end of each saying. Through you, let the mercy of Jesus be seen. Let the comfort of Jesus be heard.