

Gentleness

Ex 3:1-8a, 13-15

Psalm 103

1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12

Luke 13:1-9

We live in a very aggressive and violent world. We read, see, and hear in the news about extreme acts of violence every day—wars, shootings, stabbings, rapes, etc. Even more frequently, we experience an attitude of violence and aggression in the most routine events of our lives, like driving, chewing food, playing a game, doing laundry, reprimanding a child, or brushing our teeth... the list could go on and on. The aggression within us might also manifest itself in such things as—being in a hurry, sarcasm, shortness with other people or avoiding them, anger, selfishness, apathy, callousness, or despondency. Such aggression and violence has seeped into almost every corner of most our lives. This violence and aggression stunts our spiritual growth, which requires gentleness.

The concept of “gentleness” has become an important one in many spiritual circles these days, probably because of the culture of violence and aggression we live in. Gentleness is essential for our spiritual growth, because it is essential for love. Authentic love is never aggressive or violent. Therefore, if we want to grow spiritually and become more loving, we must cultivate an ever gentler disposition in our hearts.

In our first reading today we heard about Moses, who was known for his gentleness. In the Book of Numbers we read, “Now, Moses himself was by far the meekest man on the face of the earth” (Numbers 12:3). Some translations use the word “humblest” or “gentlest” instead of “meekest.” In fact, Saint John Chrysostom understood this Scripture verse to be an explanation of Moses’ amazing gentleness. Saint John, in his *Catecheses*, wrote, “Moses, Scripture tells us, was more gentle than all who dwelt upon the earth.” He then explained how Moses’ gentleness was a foreshadowing of the gentleness of the “new Moses,” Jesus Christ. Saint John wrote, “We can rightly say the same of the *new Moses*, for there was with him the very Spirit of gentleness, united to him in his inmost being” (Liturgy of the Hours, *emphasis mine*).

We were given a beautiful example of Jesus’ gentleness in the Gospel reading today through the parable of the fig tree. In the parable, the owner of the orchard was a severe man. Since his fig tree was not producing fruit, he wanted to cut it down. The gardener, who is an image of Christ, was much gentler. His words demonstrate a beautiful humility, meekness, peace, and gentleness, “Sir, leave [the fig tree] for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; it may bear fruit in the future” (Luke 13:8b-9a). God is gentle and patient with us, as the gardener was with the fig tree. What are some ways that you and I can cultivate within our hearts the gentleness we see in Moses and Jesus?

Adrian Van Kaam, in his book, *Spirituality and the Gentle Life*, mentions several things in life that can evoke within us a deeper gentleness. The **vulnerability** of people and situations can evoke gentleness within us. For example, a newborn baby, a puppy, or an elderly person can move us out of an attitude of aggression and into an attitude of gentleness. The **purity** of people and situations can also accomplish this change in our inner disposition. Von Kaam gives several examples of such purity, citing, “the bright wonder of an idealistic young man, the innocent questions of a child, the unsuspecting spontaneity of an adolescent girl.”¹ We usually approach **beauty**, too, with an attitude of gentleness because we are all-too-aware of how easily beauty can be marred.

¹ Adrian Von Kaam, *Spirituality and the Gentle Life*. The Epiphany Association, 1994, pg. 17.

Another thing that can evoke gentleness within us is prayer. Prayer is actually *essential* for growing in the gentleness of Jesus Christ. There is nothing gentle about a dry sponge. In fact, it doesn't soak up water very well. It tends to push spilled liquid out of the way rather than absorbing it. However, a *moist* sponge receives water very well. Our spirit is like a sponge and prayer is what keeps it moist in gentleness. Without the gentleness that happens through prayer, we tend to go through our day like a dry sponge, except instead of pushing water out of the way, we push people, situations, time, love, concern, and compassion out of the way. Conversely, the gentleness that is born thru prayer allows us to be receptive and loving toward the people and situations in our lives.

Cultivating gentleness through prayer can happen in a lot of different ways. It might involve meditating on an experience of gentleness that we had the day before, like the experience of holding a newborn baby. Or, it might involve meditating on a vulnerable moment in the life of Christ, like His birth in Bethlehem or His agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. It could also entail practicing the Consciousness Examen from St. Ignatius of Loyola or simply sitting quietly, peacefully, gently in the presence of God in contemplative prayer. Regardless of the form our prayer takes, it is always an opportunity to become gentler. Let's pray that part of the fruit of our Lenten journey will be a new depth of gentleness.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control.

-Galatians 5:22-23

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:

- ✚ Read Mark 10:46-52 and notice the difference between Jesus' gentle receptivity and the crowd's aggression/violence toward Bartimaeus. What qualities of Christ in this story do you most desire in your life right now?
- ✚ The Book of Isaiah contains numerous prophetic passages about Christ. Read Isaiah 53:4-7 and reflect on the gentleness of Christ described in the verses.