

5th Sunday of Lent
March 21, 2010
Fr. Tom Elliott

Gentleness with Others

Isaiah 43:16-21
Psalm 126
Philippians 3:8-14
John 8:1-11

Two weeks ago, we looked at the importance of gentleness in our spiritual growth. As a fruit of the Holy Spirit, gentleness counters the ego, pride, and willfulness that all of are frequently enslaved to. Last week, we looked very specifically at the importance of our being gentle with *ourselves*, especially in the midst of our sinfulness. This week, we are going to finish our study on gentleness by looking at the importance of being gentle with *other people*.

While I did some studying weeks ago in preparation for this homily, I actually worked out the details of it in the car on my way to Little Rock for a meeting Friday. As I mulled over the importance of being gentle with other people, I found myself getting angrier and angrier with the people who were driving slow in the “fast lane.” Completely missing the irony of the moment, I found myself feeling put-out that I was going to have to cancel my sacred cruise-control because another driver wouldn’t move out of the way. As I inched closer to the car, the irony finally struck me. Good heavens! My reaction to the situation was anything *but* gentle. So, instead of getting even angrier, I turned my cruise-control off and eased my car into the slow lane; I let go of my expectations and willfulness and decided to simply reverence my inability to change the situation.

There are some situations in our lives when we want to change other people’s behaviors simply because they inconvenience us. In such moments, finding inner gentleness usually means our letting go of our own expectations and willfulness. This is an extraordinarily difficult thing to do and most of us are going to find ourselves struggling with it for the rest of our lives. The ego doesn’t die quietly!

There are some situations in our lives that we might find even *more* challenging—situations when we have been *invited* to help change someone’s behavior. For example, parents are invited by their vocation as parents to discipline their children and to mold and shape their words, actions, and character. There are other times when we might be invited by a co-worker, spouse, or a friend to help them to change or grow. Still other times, God might invite us to help someone to grow or change. Regardless of whether we were invited by our vocation, another person, or God, the help we offer to other people must always be gentle. In order to be gentle, we must remember a few important things.

First, no one changes or grows as quickly as we want them to. We live in a fast-paced world, yet there are some things that, by their very nature, need to take time. Personal growth is one of those things. It’s like weight loss—if it happens too quickly it is probably an indicator that it won’t have longevity. Instead, personal growth should be steady and deliberate. This requires us to be patiently gentle.

Being gentle with other people also requires us to deal with our disappointment in others in a healthy way—primarily by taking our disappointment to God, rather than the person whom we’re disappointed in. Such moments are always opportunities for us to grow. It is extremely difficult for us to gently express our disappointment in the people we are trying to help grow.

Also, it is important that we love people before we accept the invitation to help them change. Love has a way of quieting our aggression and expectations. If we simply want to help someone change because they irritate us, then it will not come across as gentleness. However, if our words and actions are rooted in our love for the person, then gentleness is possible.

Lastly, it is also important for us to be gentle with people who have hurt us. Usually, such gentleness is rooted in our humble awareness of our own sinfulness and the awareness that all judgment and justice belongs to God.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:

- ✚ Read John 8:1-11, about the woman caught in adultery. Compare the level of gentleness in the Pharisees' response to the woman and Jesus' response to the woman. How have you experienced the gentleness of Christ?
- ✚ Who is one person whom you have been invited to help change/grow because of your vocation, their request, or God's request? How has your help been gentle? In what ways do you need greater gentleness in your interactions with this person?