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"If We Want to Inherit"

THE READING - Matthew 5:1-12

When 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.

11 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely* on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

SERMON

Icebound is a 1923 play set in Veazie, Maine, near Bangor. It tells the story of the Jordan family. After their grandmother's death, three of her children are gathered for the reading of her will. Henry, Sadie, and Emma have greedily speculated about who will get what from the estate. To their astonishment, Judge Bradford tells them that the farm and all

the money has been left instead to a distant cousin, to Jane Crosby, who had been brought to the home eight years earlier to care for their grandmother!

One way to understand the Beatitudes is as the reading of a will – God’s will. This list of blessings itemizes God’s ‘estate,’ if you will, what the realm of God looks like when the Creator is ruling. So this passage gives us sound insight about what God wants and who is in actually in line with the Divine’s desires; each blessing is like a bequest. Thus, as in the reading of wills in novels and movies, when the people hear Jesus preach, the suspense mounts because the stakes are high, and he announces unexpected names. They couldn’t have anticipated, for example, that God intends for *the meek* to inherit the earth!

We’re naturally surprised by verse five because most of us have learned by osmosis that if we want something, we will have to be ambitious, even aggressive, to target it and work hard to procure it for ourselves. The history of the world is replete with examples of people who were mighty and mean as they pursued ‘happiness,’ going after wealth, property, and power. Some not only wanted to inherit the earth; they wanted to conquer it. In the new show *Britannia*, for instance, the Roman Emperor Claudias sent General Aulus Plantias to conquer the Celts and the Druids in 43 AD, just after the time of Jesus. In this TV drama, as he sets foot on this foreign soil, Plantias pompously declares: “Behold, gods of Britannia. I am Rome, and where I walk is Rome!” So from colonialization projects of all kinds, even those of the church in the past, to current disputes over the Holy Land, the mindset of ancient Rome is still alive and well in the human race.

And I don’t know if it’s a joke or a threat, but a contemporary cartoon makes fun of this beatitude, saying: “The meek shall inherit the earth -- but only after we’re done with it!” In his 2010 book, Bill McKibben intentionally misspelled the title of “Earth” E-a-a-r-t-h to get across that human actions have fundamentally altered the planet.¹ **It is against this conquering mindset that Jesus is declaring the blessings of God’s kingdom.**

So at this reading of the will, Jesus overturns regular expectations and pronounces blessing on the least likely candidates. Those that he claims will inherit the earth are not the mean and mighty, but the meek!

We obviously have to investigate this word. In Greek it is “*praos*,” which suggests the taming of a wild animal,² or as some of today’s followers of St. Francis define it: “strength under control.”³

¹As pointed out in Jim Antal’s *Climate Church, Climate World* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 13. Bill McKibben, *Eaarth – Making a Life on a Tough New Planet* (New York: Times Books, 2010).

²Dr. Robert Meyers, “The Beatitude We Joke About,” Sermon preached at University Congregational Church, Wichita, Kansas, Feb. 19. 1995.

³Found at website, Saint Francis Third Order Confraternity of Penitents, July 28, 2017 on Meekness.

Meek is not weak, and certainly not being a whimp. Both Moses, the Great Liberator, and Jesus the Prophet Savior have been described as meek,⁴ so the meek are not at all people who are passive or who let others treat them as doormats! When I buy Stop 'n Shop Kleenex boxes, for instance, I think of those who are meek, because the tissue label reads "strong and gentle." In fact, "gentle" is maybe a better synonym for "meek" in this scripture context.

Most importantly, to be meek in the truest sense of the beatitude, is to know your true identity and place in relationship to God and others. A rabbi in Fayetteville, NC explained to our Vacation Bible School kids the reason why Jews wear a yarmulke: "in order to always remember that you are *under* God." So the way to keep the commandment and tame your covetousness is to turn toward your covenant with God. This is what the meek do daily.

And cultivating this kind of character and integrity also carries over into the treatment of the earth. Those who are meek are not going to despoil the earth – their inheritance! They will consider God and others than themselves, leaving to subsequent generations an earth that is worth inheriting!

In still other words, then, the meek are the people who know their real identity as *heirs* – gentle heirs of God's will. Gentle heirs know that it is God who blesses; it is God's earth, God's to give and not ours to grab! As Psalm 24 definitively says: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." **If we see ourselves in this manner, the beatitude finally makes sense.**

And if you and I still think of ourselves as more often greedy and grasping, today we need to hear that we, too, can be *gentled*. **If we want to inherit the blessing of God's will, we can develop this character over time; the Holy Spirit can transform us.**

The other day, as one example, I was gentled by our backyard garden. Steve and I watch the miracle unfold daily – particularly the zucchini squash. (I described them to my son as "adorable," and he laughed.) I'm sure that this small experience will lead to others that make the two of us more meek in relationship to the earth.

John Grisham tells another tale of an unlikely heir. In *The Testament*,⁵ billionaire Troy Phelan overlooks his greedy children and leaves his estate to his illegitimate daughter, Rachel, a missionary living among the Ipica in a remote region of Brazil. Phelan's attorney, Nate O'Riley, is sent to find and notify her. In so doing and spending time in this context, he comes to understand her faith and her choice of service in such a way that helps him deal with his own issues. We could say that in relationship with her and God, he was gentled.

⁴Numbers 12:3 for Moses. Matt. 11:29, 21:5, 2 Corinthians 10:1, and Philippians 2:7-8 for Jesus.

⁵John Grisham, *The Testament* (New York: Bantam Dell, 1999).

Nate wins her case in the contesting of the will. Then upon Rachel's death, the siblings receive sizeable settlements from her will, but the lion's share is distributed to charities of her choice. Possibly the largest inheritance, however, is the difference her meekness made in O'Riley, who elects to rebuild his relationships with his own children and finds new purpose in his vocation. Blessed are those who see themselves as heirs in God's will!