

# Gentleness

Dr. Lal Hmingliani Browne

John 8:2-11

Eighteen years ago I led a mission trip to India. One participant was a 19 year old college student. He was unprepared for the experience of a totally different culture. He expressed his opinion at great length about what Indians ought to do differently. The whole group was annoyed with him and his arrogance. On one part of the journey, we made a stop at a government guesthouse. On the porch was a tiny terrified kitten. Suddenly, this arrogant college student was on his knees. He talked the kitten into his arms, gently picked her up and patted and whispered to her until she was calm and playful.

It struck me that he was like the kitten. He found himself in a place he did not know, with people he had never met, in a culture that was completely foreign and he was, at some level, afraid. I realized that instead of telling him to be quiet, we needed to talk him close, and calm his fears.

Anyone can be the kitten in need of gentleness and help. The Sunday I candidated here – almost two years ago - I told how Mother Teresa gently cupped an old dirty dying homeless man's face and told him, "I love you because God loves you."

Even Mother Teresa needed gentleness. Our own Dr. Bob Windom here was privileged to give Mother Teresa that gentle care. When Mother Teresa was President Reagan's guest, Dr. Windom gave her a check up as she was not feeling well. He has the picture to prove it. That picture, of two gentle people I know, is on the front of our bulletin cover today.

I see that gentleness, here at the Church of the Palms:

- as Stephen Ministers and Leaders listen to their care receivers;
- when Shepherding Deacons pray for their flock each and every day;
- while the Elder and Deacon teams serve communion to the home bound members; and
- whenever we reach to people in need in our community through Food Pantry, Day of Hope, and tutoring,
- when we support our troops serving in places of danger, and
- as we support missionaries like Jeannine.

In all of this we understand that gentleness is not weakness. It is an action of restrained power. It recognizes the other's fragility and need.

Once I went to visit a man who had just had surgery. He said something funny and then I said something funny and soon we

were both laughing hard. Later the nurse discovered his incision needed to be re-stitched. She asked what had happened. His roommate said, "A short Asian pastor came in and made him laugh." I was banned from visiting him until he was discharged. I learned gentleness requires restraint of all kinds. I am now very careful about making people laugh in the hospital.

One of my favorite gentle heroes is Hagrid from the Harry Potter movies. The movie begins at night in an ordinary looking British suburbia. We hear the noise of a great motorcycle. But, rather than coming down the street, it is descending through the air, headlight on and coming fast. It lands with a roar and off steps the huge... bearded... heavily-bundled ... giant. He is carrying the newly orphaned baby Harry. Hagrid gently takes Harry to the door of his aunt's house, worrying about the baby's sniffles. He places him in a basket, knocks on the door, and leaves. And so we are introduced to Harry Potter by the gentle giant, Hagrid.

Part of what Hagrid, and other characters of gentleness, helps us see is that a gentle person isn't worried about him or herself. He is absorbed in addressing the baby's need. That is only a movie, yet we see the truth that gentleness is great power – intentionally restrained.

Many scripture passages tell us that God and Christ are both gentle.

Isaiah 40:11 reads *[God] will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.*

Matthew 11:28-29 Jesus says, *'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.'*

James 3:17 *But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.*

Some passages on gentleness call us to be gentle with others:

The Apostle Paul tells us in Philippians 4:5, *"Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near."*

1 Peter 3:15 *Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.*

Titus 3:2 *Speak evil of no one, avoid quarreling, be gentle, and show perfect courtesy toward all people.*

Finally there is the passage behind our sermon series, "Fruits of the Spirit" Galatians 5:22-23a: The Apostle Paul says, *By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*

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Today's Bible story (in John 8:2-11) is a story of gentleness in a setting of conflict. The religious authorities feel threatened by Jesus and seek his arrest. They bring a woman caught in adultery and ask Jesus if she should be stoned as the law commanded. They push Jesus to a decision of power in order to trap him. If Jesus approves the stoning, she will die and Roman law will be violated. If Jesus opposes the stoning, he will violate Jewish law. Either way, the leaders think they win.

Yet Jesus gently turns their trap back upon them. He says, ***“Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone.”*** He writes in the dirt ... and, starting with the elders, everyone slips away. Jesus chooses not to judge the woman but tells her to go and sin no more. With gentleness Jesus saves the woman from the crowd ... and he saves the crowd from their own sinful judgments.

We all need gentleness and we are called to practice gentleness in our daily lives. When we do this, we imitate Jesus.

Today we come to the Lord's Table for Jesus said, (Luke 22:19) ***“Do this in remembrance of me.”*** We do remember that the Lord:

- is the God of all power;
- created the heavens and the earth;
- fashioned every creature;
- sent the flood and the dove;

- intervened in history;
- raised up the downtrodden and put down the mighty; and with his infinite gentleness, sent Jesus to love us into salvation.

**W**e remember the words from 23rd Psalm ***“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”*** God gently feeding us while God's strength protects us from enemies large and small, known and unknown.

Today we come to this table because the Lord is not just near, the Lord is here! The Lord is here with us in this sacrament, in the breaking and eating of the bread and in the pouring and drinking of the wine.

Jesus is God's incarnate gentleness given for us. Thanks be to God. Amen.