

"Empowered: Empowering Gentleness"

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Matthew 11: ²⁵ At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; ²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷ All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

²⁸ "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

This week our fruit of the spirit is gentleness. - most misunderstood fruit, and maybe the hardest to cultivate in our modern society, I think there's a few reasons it's difficult. And maybe it's hard to grow our gentleness because we don't really know what it is.

My dog, Maybelle thinks it means slowness. She is gentle with little kids and gentle with Grandma Donna and by gentle, I mean she may still knock into someone or something, just not so fast. And we cut her some slack, "It's not her fault, she's a dog." But she's not alone in getting it wrong.

Teaching Sunday school when I had a dad come yell at me, because the last week, we took turns holding Baby Jesus. And he didn't want his son to learn to hold a baby, because that would mean that he would grow up to be the kind of man other men didn't respect. Wow. Yea, there's a man who has misunderstood gentleness to be weakness.

We live in a world that values efficiency at all costs, which means we sometimes celebrate and uplift brutality and unnecessary roughness.

- Think about what we mean when we say "she is brutally honest" or "he doesn't pull any punches" - we almost always say them as compliments, as assets a person brings to the table.
- She gets to the heart of the matter- even if it hurts people.

But do not be deceived. There is a non-brutal honesty, a gentle honesty. We call it vulnerability. We call it authenticity. Sometimes it takes longer, it often takes effort and trust on both sides to create gentle honesty, but such a thing can exist.

That expression, “pulling a punch” or “not pulling a punch” as we use it most often is from boxing. All the way back in the early 1900’s when weight classes were not a formalized practice. If a boxer sized up his competition and then purposefully hit less hard so as not to injure that person, to let the fight go on for a while, to keep their opponent’s dignity intact, it was called pulling a punch.

Pulling a punch is by definition gentle. It gives thought and care to the other person. We should all be out here pulling punches, because just because we can overpower someone, decimate or dominate them - does not mean we should.

Let me be clear. Jesus would have pulled the punch. We see it all throughout scripture. He is literally God; he has all the power. And there are people Jesus encounters, from Zacchaeus, to the woman at the well, to the disciples themselves who end up in situations where they deserve the big blow. They deserve condemnation. They deserve brutality and harsh rebuke, they deserve the full weight of the hit and yet, Jesus chooses, “Go and sin no more.” He chooses, “I’m coming over to your house.” He chooses “the last shall be first.” Not fake, not less honest, but truth with care.

In today’s passage of scripture Jesus does this whole song and dance about the son revealing the father and the father revealing the son and the will of God and fullness of revelation to be only accessible to people who would come to it like a child. Then Jesus calls to his followers and to us, invites them, invites us, those who are tired- it’s been a rough year, and most of us are pretty tired. He calls to those who are heavy burdened - and who among us isn’t feeling weighed down?

Jesus issues this invitation to come to him and be yoked to him. I used to think this was about oxen. It’s not about oxen. It’s about discipleship. In the first century, to follow a rabbi was to be yoked to them, that is to say to make certain promises and covenants about how you will live.

Did you catch what Jesus offers as the “sell point” for being yoked to Christ? He doesn’t say if you are my disciple, you’ll be on the fast track for temple leadership, or you’ll make a lot of money, or you’ll be able to do super cool miracles. The why that Jesus offers is rest. It’s gentleness. It’s to follow a leader who is actively thinking about not causing pain or doing damage to the people following them. Is that not what we all want?

Let me be clear right now, gentleness is not being a door mat. It is not weakness gentleness, the way Jesus does it and the way we should do it is surrendering dominance or power over, in favor of connection with. It is Might restrained. Gentleness is strength that that knows its potential to do harm and is being careful to avoid it.

As we imitate Christ, let us too seek to be gentle, not out of weakness but out of care, not out of a lack of power, but out of the awareness that once we cause harm. We may be able to be forgiven, but we cannot undo the damage.

So, this week, there are a few kinds of gentleness I'd like us to try to cultivate. Let's strive to be gentle in our actions. This is the one that it feels like I shouldn't have to say. If you are doing physical damage to people in your life, if your actions are hurting people around you, focus here first. Being gentle in the way we physically interact with each other. Don't hit, don't physically dominate, don't hurt people, seems pretty obvious right? Even people who seem to deserve it, even accidentally or not meaning harm.

Let's be gentle in our words. This one is so much harder to manage, and it always has been! And even the writers of scripture knew that people were going to struggle to tame their tongues. Proverbs alone has more than 30 verses dedicated to how we talk! And some of them are gems.

Proverbs 15:1 includes both, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." and 16: 24 says. "Kind words are like a honey comb; they bring sweetness to the soul and health to the body." Make no mistake about it, scripture tell us to be gentle with our words, not to tell half-truths or falsehoods, but to be thoughtful about the way we use our mouths.... and lately our fingers.

When I say gentle with our words, I don't just mean our spoken words that we say to people we see face to face. The internet has made us cruel. There's something about the combination of feeling like we need to "win an argument" or "score points" or "drop a sick burn," there's something about the internet culture that loves snark and sass, and there's something about interacting with people you don't know in real life, don't care about or have a relationship with, that makes us all worse. And then, as if that wasn't bad enough, that we are being cruel to strangers, that cruel voice that "dominating culture" comes leaking into to our real-life relationships. No, you're probably not dropping sick burns on your grandma, but maybe it's a little easier to be less than gentle with your weird aunt, or a little harsh to the cousin you only see twice a year, or a little cruel to that guy you went to college with.

If we are going to embody Christlike gentleness it can't just be a sometimes thing. We can't just be gentle with people who are kind to us, think the way we do, or already have strong trust bond with us. Before you click send or post, before you go off on the family member or co-worker or friend, stop to think, what is my reason for saying this? If it's to dominate, control, or silence them, if it's to "win" it's ok to leave it unsaid. If your words pass that test, even if they are to encourage, educate, communicate, or any other helpful and loving purpose- still double check that you are being as gentle as

possible. Edit for love, edit for gentleness. We need to learn to tame our tongues... and our typing fingers.

Let's be gentle with ourselves. This might be the hardest one. Many of us are harder on ourselves, and crueler to ourselves than we would ever be to someone else. We are aware of our mistakes and missteps, so we are quickly frustrated with ourselves. We have this inner voice that berates and belittles us, that is quick to jump on every shortcoming, every mess up, every time we come up a little short, we let ourselves have it.

Remember that the greatest command is to love God, but the second is to love our neighbors, as we love... ourselves. We cannot give to others what we do not have.

We had a woman at a church I served who was known for being prickly/crabby. "I only say to you one tenth of what I say to myself." Her cruelty was coming from the inside; she couldn't see how hard she was being on other people because it was nothing compared to the way she was treating herself.

This may seem like an invitation to let yourself off the hook for sin. It isn't. Remember that gentleness doesn't mean you are passive or permissive. It doesn't mean you have no boundaries, gentleness means you are not needlessly cruel. We can be accountable for our actions. We can repent and turn without berating ourselves or beating ourselves up.

Recently a study was done at the University of Washington. They created three groups, one who was trying to stop smoking, one who was trying to lose weight and one who was trying to stop swearing. Then they divided each of those groups into three. Each category had a sub group who checked in with a written reflection every morning and then was given harsh feedback about what they needed to improve on, one group who submitted a check in that no one read or responded to, and one who submitted a check in and was offered empathy and encouragement, even when they messed up or backslid. Not only was the last sub group the most successful by far, they were the only subgroup to not lose any members, whereas more than half of the harshly criticized group dropped out of the study. It didn't matter what behavior the scientists were looking at, in all three smoking, dieting, and swearing, a gentle hand yielded better results. In contrast, we are more likely to change and grow, the people around us are more likely to be able to change and grow, if we want to be able to be like Jesus, and grown in our knowledge of and relationship with God, we need to choose to cultivate gentleness in our actions, in our words, and in ourselves.

This is how people will experience the love of Christ, this is how we will build the kingdom of God, brick by brick, pulled punch by pulled punch, handling each other with care, loving like Jesus loved. This is how we change the world, gently. Amen.