Fruit of the Spirit Sermon Series

Gentleness

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TEXTS:

Galatians 5:22-23

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

**Matthew 11:25-30**

25At 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; 26yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. 27All 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. 29Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

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“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart…”

I have a very vivid memory in my mind from childhood. In first grade I remember that my teacher was crabby and frustrated with all of us. She sat at her desk and called us up one by one for us to show her our coloring sheets. And every time a kid came up to her desk to show her the coloring that they were supposed to be doing, she had nothing but criticism to give us. She told each one of us that we were coloring wrong. And then she would show us how we were supposed to be doing it. Not just staying inside the lines, but we were supposed to be following a nice and neat pattern of up and down and side to side. I can still remember standing next to her desk and seeing her frown and complain over my coloring sheet and then taking my crayon and showing me exactly how she expected me to color. It was intimidating.

As an adult I can appreciate that there might have been more behind my first grade teachers story. She was probably close to retirement, overworked, underpaid, and maybe having a bad day with a room full of rowdy kids. But considering that thirty years later I can still remember her rigid instructions and harsh criticisms, it is an example in my mind of how NOT to teach others, children or adults.

In contrast, I can remember one of my favorite teachers in high school. Mr. Miller. He taught American history and art history. And I loved every class I took with him. Make no mistake the teens in his class could be rowdy and misbehave and not get their homework done. But my memories of him are ones of a man who was even-keeled, unflappable, who did not lose his temper. He had high expectations of us, but did not demand compliance. And he had a brilliant way of making history and art so interesting. He was a dependable guide more than anything. I still remember so much of what he taught us in his classes. He was a gentle teacher for sure.

In our Gospel reading from the book of Matthew, Jesus is in the middle of his earthly ministry. And if you read all of chapter 11 and keep reading into chapter 12, you will see that Jesus is in the middle of critique and criticism and controversy and pushback from all sorts of people.

There are people who are questioning Jesus’ authority. Questioning his ministry. Jesus does respond to these criticisms, and he speaks difficult truths that are hard for the crowds to accept. But in the middle of all of these debates, he pauses a moment and says this section that we have for today.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

What kind of teacher is Jesus?

I think most people associate the last two verses of chapter 11 with personal hardship. Many people have found comfort in reading these verses when tragedy has happened in their lives. And that is well and good. But in fact, that is not what Jesus is specifically talking about here. The reason that Jesus says these words is because he is emphasizing what kind of teacher he is.

A gentle one. Our Messiah and Lord has come down to us here on earth to show us the path to the Father. “This way, this way”, he calls to us, “this way you will find life and love. Follow in my footsteps and you will find wisdom for life. Learn from me and I will show you God’s very heart.”

Jesus promises that this pathway is not a harsh one, nor a place of criticism, nor a place of fearful judgement. Jesus promises that he is a gentle teacher. Jesus assures us that our souls will find rest and relief in him.

Jesus has many truths to give people, truths that are hard for them to hear and accept. And yet Jesus our teacher never tries to manipulate us, or coerce us. Jesus never responds with force; he rejects violence. Jesus is no harsh disciplinarian. Far from it. Jesus embodies gentleness, especially for the weakest and most vulnerable people in the world.

The world is full of confusion and controversy. And there are many people in the world who use bullying, peer pressure, harshness, rigid demands, and even coercion and violence to force other people to comply to their demands.

In contrast, Jesus gives us a promise of gentleness. A teacher who will guide us in divine love.

Picture in your mind a loving parent of a young child who is just learning to use a spoon for the first time. A loving parent does not leave the child to figure it out on their own. Neither does a loving parent burden the child with harsh criticisms or impossible demands.

What does a loving parent do? They actually hold the spoon with the child. And together they gently move the spoon from food to mouth. The loving parent gently and with great patience shows the young child what it is to use a spoon. At times the loving parents’ hand actually covers the child’s hand, and **gently** they move the spoon together.

This is the kind of teacher that our savior is. This is how he shows us the Father and reveals to us the path of wisdom. Gently and with a loving heart. Guiding us into a life with God.

So if this is the kind of teacher that Jesus is for us and for all people, a gentle one, we might then ask the question, what kind of teachers and neighbors are we called to be with one another? The answer should be obvious. Gentle ones…like Jesus. As Galatians says, one of the fruits of the Spirit is gentleness.

Of course, I think most people would agree that gentleness is a nice quality for any person to have…in theory. But once you actually start to think about what it is like to live in community with other people then you start to realize how difficult putting gentleness into practice really is.

The call to gentleness is not something that happens in a vacuum. It is a call to gentleness in the midst of disagreement, in the midst of controversy, in the midst of personality clashes and trying times.

Gentleness can be a tall order. One that is difficult for us to fulfill with others. But the good news is that Jesus is gently leading us down the path of discipleship, and we pray that the Spirit work through us and inspire Christ’s gentleness in us. So that we might be gentle in our relationships with our children and our parents. With our neighbors nearby and far away. Gentle with our co-workers and with strangers that we meet on the street. Christ is leading us away from harsh judgment and rigid demands. Christ is leading us away from violence and coercion and guiding us towards a life of more gentle grace. For ourselves and one another.

Let this be a daily prayer with us all. That no matter the difficult circumstances or the arguments that surround us and test our patience…that the Spirit continue to work in us, inspiring the gentleness of Christ in our lives.

Because it is in the gentle love of Christ, that we find true rest for our souls. Praise be to you O Lord our gentle teacher and guide. Amen.