Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
August 19, 2018

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The Fruit of the Spirit: "Gentleness"
Galatians 5:22-23

We are continuing a sermon series on Paul’s, “fruit of the Spirit,” found in Galatians 5:22-25. Today we come to the fruit of gentleness. Paul writes;

22 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.

* I was in Linville Friday and Saturday playing golf with a friend. He asked what I was preaching on today. I said, “Gentleness.” “Really! What you going to do with that?” What am I going to do with that? Gentleness doesn’t exactly rock your boat. Makes me think of a baby and a soft blanket. An elderly woman knitting by the window with a warm cup of tea. Nothing wrong with all that, but it doesn’t sound like anything that would change the world.

No one in the Roman Empire, where Paul lived, would think of any god as being gentle. You feared the gods. You did things to appease the gods. You needed a powerful god; a god who would show up, defeat the enemy, provide for all your needs, rule the kingdom and speak with an authoritative voice. Gentle gods would lose the battle.

If the Search Committee came back with a candidate and said, “He, or she is a very gentle person.” What would be your first thought? “Well, thank the Lord they’re not like Steve!” Gentleness is a good thing, but you’d have to wonder if they could get the job done. Sounds a little soft.

* Paul is saying God is gentle. Not exactly my image of God. Is that true? Jesus makes a very interesting statement to his disciples in his farewell discourse. He said, “‘Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.’” (John 14:9b) That’s an
odd statement. Does that mean Jesus and God are the same thing? That’s what the Jews heard. That’s what got him crucified. No human being could be God.

If Jesus of Nazareth was who he said he was, then in him we see the nature and character of God. If Jesus was only a teacher, then we should have no interest in his personal traits, only in the content of what he taught. On the other hand, if Jesus was God in human flesh, we had better pay close attention.

Where do we see the fruit of gentleness in Jesus?

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He was in Jericho on his way to Jerusalem for what would be his trial, death and resurrection. That timing is what makes this story so memorable. Matthew reports...

> Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.” And he laid his hands on them and went on his way. (Matt. 19:13-15)

You’ll never read a story about a Roman emperor stopping for children, though from time to time you may see a presidential candidate kiss a baby! To allow your busy agenda to be interrupted by children could be seen as a sign of weakness, soft, emotional, lacking drive and power. And yet, Jesus, on his way to the cross and resurrection, stops and lays his hands on children and prays for them.

This story tells us a lot about who he is. There’s a gentleness about him. There is a unique form of power being displayed here. There is a vulnerability, a humility and openness to the life of another that we see in Christ.

Gentleness implies a receptivity to others. It’s open. It’s welcoming. When gentleness is present there is room for someone else. When it is not present, there can be aggression, hostility or violent behavior; dominance, or power over others.

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There were other times when Jesus was direct, even forceful, turning over the tables of the money-changers in the temple. There is a time for confrontation, for disagreement and even anger. Sometimes things matter too much for a gentle approach. But even when things matter deeply, gentleness has its place.

I think of Jesus’ analogy of the “log and the speck.”

> ‘Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take
the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.’ (Matt. 7:3-6)

Consider what it takes to remove a speck from someone’s eye. You do that gently. Maybe that’s his point. If we did the hard work of removing the logs from our own eyes, we’d be more gentle in dealing with our neighbor’s issues. We would know firsthand how painful that can be.

You don’t just stick your finger in someone’s eye and go plowing around in there trying to pull out a speck! You take care not to wound the other person. That’s the gentleness of Christ. He deals with the logs. He deals with the specks, but he does it with a value on human life. You can confront the issues without aggression and insensitivity. There is a place for gentleness even in confrontation.

You remember the story of the woman they caught in the act of adultery and brought her to Jesus? The penalty for adultery was stoning the person to death. It was the law. They were trying to trap Jesus, but he turned it back on them when he said; ‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’ (John 8:7b)

All the elders dropped their rocks and went home, because no one was without sin. And then this happened;

Jesus straightened up and said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ She said, ‘No one, sir.’ And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.’

(John 8:10-11)

Forgiveness is an act of gentleness. He treats her with respect. He treats her gently when he could have allowed the aggression of stoning her. He’s open and receptive to the valuable part of who she is, yet doesn’t condone what is harming her.

God is gentle. Not exactly my image of God. And yet, consider a world without gentleness. Who would want to live in that world? I wouldn’t leave gentleness to babies and elderly women. The world desperately needs this fruit. The fruit of gentleness.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Congregation: Amen.