

Marquand Chapel
Friday, September 9, 2005

Blessed are the Meek
Harry Adams

Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12; I Corinthians 1:18-31

The way of the meek has little attraction in our culture.

For example: athletic teams look to aggressive animals for their mascots - lions, tigers, bears, bulldogs. It has not come to my attention that any football team called themselves the sheep.

Go sheep go. Baa, baa, baa.

For ten years I was the Master of Trumbull College downtown, and as you might imagine the mascot of the college was the bull for the Tyng cup competition in athletics among the undergraduate colleges. Trumbull never managed to come close to winning the Tyng cup.

Trumbull - kept athletics in proper perspective. Story of Ferdinand, the bull with the delicate ego, who didn't like trampling over others with bull-like ferocity, but preferred to sit and smell the flowers.

The Trumbull intramural T-shirt. The Trumbull T-shirt is an aberration, of course.

The macho, not the meek are admired. Positions of power and prestige capture the imagination and attention---PEOPLE magazine. Yet here is the word of Jesus: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." It sounds like an oxymoron: the blessed meek.

The macho win. The macho get the rewards. The macho dominate. The macho get their way. Yet here is the word: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

As with almost any affirmation of scripture, this assertion of Jesus can be both misread and misused. The misreading: Jesus' promise to the meek is interpreted as sanctioning a lack of a sense of self-worth, or is interpreted to mean that people should be obsequious and subservient.

The misuse: Jesus' promise to the meek is used to keep the oppressed and the deprived in their places.

Jesus was surely not approving the exploitation of the weak by the strong, the crippling of the insecure by the aggressive. But I would suggest that even when we hear rightly what

Jesus is saying, we find it a hard word for us. "Blessed are the meek"???

Several years ago I got an irate letter from an alumnus because a mailing from this school had not been addressed to The Reverend. In no uncertain terms I was told that he had come to the divinity school so he could be ordained and be called Reverend.

At a meeting of the alumni during recently, the president of the alumna board reported that the board had spent a great deal of time that year trying to figure out what power they had.

At a meeting of the Ivy League chaplains at Brown, the vice-president of the University had breakfast with us, and in the course of the conversation, asked a probing question, namely: do you feel like you are peripheralized on your campus. With some regret, most of us agreed that we did feel that we were on the edges of things.

We like our titles, we want our group to have power, we want to be in the center of things. But the word of Jesus can grant a new perspective: Blessed are the meek. We really don't come to the Divinity School so that we can be called reverend.

To be honest about it, the alumna board is not set up to have power, and to ask "what is our power" is to ask the wrong question. The helpful question is: what can we do to serve and help the School. And as I reflected on the question of the Brown vice-president, it occurred to me that on the periphery is where most of us are called to minister.

We might note that the saints are most often found on edges. It takes an awesome grace indeed for a power person to be a saint.

What is the word to be heard when Jesus affirms: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth?"

The blessing on the meek comes to those who exert their strength in love rather than in coercion; who seek to heal rather than to dominate. The blessing on the meek comes to those who find their worth in being confirmed by God rather than in being exalted by others. The blessing on the meek come to those who are not driven to succeed but to serve. The blessing on the meek comes to those who find joy in being rather than in getting.

I suggest that if we can hear this word of the Lord, it comes as a liberating word: we don't have to worry too much about our title, our position, our prestige, our reputation.

The meek may be the powerless but they are not the weak, for they know the strength of love rather than the devastation of fear. The meek are not the helpless, but are those who know that whatever the limitations under which they live they can witness to the love of God and minister to the needs of others. The meek are those who know the awesome, transforming energy of suffering service.

Paul writes of the meek when he says to the Corinthians: CONSIDER YOUR OWN CALL, BROTHERS AND SISTERS; NOT MANY OF YOU WERE WISE BY HUMAN STANDARDS, NOT MANY WERE POWERFUL, NOT MANY WERE OF NOBLE BIRTH. BUT GOD CHOSE WHAT IS FOOLISH IN THE WORLD TO SHAME THE WISE; GOD CHOSE WHAT IS WEAK IN THE WORLD TO SHAME THE STRONG; GOD CHOSE WHAT IS LOW AND DESPISED IN THE WORLD, THINGS THAT ARE NOT, TO REDUCE TO NOTHING THINGS THAT ARE.

And then on the margins are the limitless possibilities of ministry. On the margins, we keep our identity with the vast host of God's children. On the margins, we are free to speak and act with less taint of self interest. On the margins, we can perceive with greater clarity the follies of the seductions of power.

On the margins, we can believe the word of Paul that in CHRIST THE POWER OF GOD...GOD'S WEAKNESS IS STRONGER THAN HUMAN STRENGTH.

On the margins, we discern that the joy is in the living not in the winning.

One year Trumbull got all the way up to third place in the Tyng Cup race. There is satisfaction in winning, of course, but I hoped that the joy of winning did not take the place of the joy of playing, a joy shown in the days when the students could produce a T-shirt with Ferdinand, the bull with the delicate ego.

Indeed, BLESSED ARE THE MEEK, FOR THEY SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH.