

Sermon: The Gentle People
Scripture: Philippians 4
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
Date: June 19, 2016

The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians says “Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.” It’s interesting that he pairs those two things. Apparently the proximity of the Lord to us should not produce pride, judgment, tumult or fear but rather gentleness. This is one of the good news revealed by our New Testament scriptures that God is not a God of wrath and smiting and violence but a God of gentleness; infant born of a poor family, an itinerant healer, a lamb to the slaughter. It’s a remarkable claim – that gentleness is God’s nature - given the massive, tumultuous and violent nature of the cosmos, and the world at times, yet that is what our scriptures declare. And this declaration requires of us a response of gentleness as well if we are to be followers of the lamb. “Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is very near.”

These words are particularly striking this week in contrast to the violence of the Orlando shootings that occurred this morning a week ago now. The truth is that tragedy, violence and suffering is a part of this world – we watched it in Orlando and we acknowledged it at the funeral service of Jena Roy yesterday, a beloved member of this congregation torn from this life by cancer far too soon. But in both instances what we witness as a result of these tragic deaths chaos and despair and misery having the last word but rather this up rising and flooding of gentleness, tenderness, love washing over the pain, the

sorrow, the hurt. It is evidence of the truth of what our scriptures declare: the gentleness and love of God is at the heart of it all and will always have the final word.

I mentioned during the Tuesday night vigil on the Town Common for the Orlando massacre a legend that comes out of the Jewish mystical tradition - kabbalah. Last weekend, a few of us went to Karen Swyers art studio in Cambridge where a display of the artwork of her artist mentor Kate Ransohoff was being held. There were a number of beautiful large pieces of textile art that expressed the African American experience of oppression and transcendence in this country. One of them that caught my breath was called "The Gentle People" and was a beautiful piece made out of a worn monk's habit and prayer shawl, rubbed worn by his praying day and night. In the description of it she referred to the Kabbalah legend that says there are always 36 people in every generation on the earth who through prayer sustain the world and without whom our world would not be. They are called the Tzadikim Nistarim, or "the *hidden* righteous ones" for no one knows who they are. In fact they themselves do not even know who they are and if they had a sense, it is said, that they would be too humble to believe it of themselves anyway.

It's a beautiful image I think, these 36 people protecting and sustaining the world in their gentleness and it is an image that we Christians might benefit by meditating on because the one we follow after all, was a man whose gentleness even extended to the forgiveness of his executioners. "Let your gentleness be known to all," Paul encourages us, and know that in a world where Omar Mateens can

cause such destruction and pain, that it's the Gentle People who have the true power, the final say, and ultimately sustain the world.

But I'm not so sure gentleness is a quality that we highly value in our culture. Is it? Don't we have more of a survival-of-the-fittest culture, where the strongest and most aggressive tend to be the ones to rise to the top? The theologian Ronald Rolheiser reminds us that we have a religion that demands we work for the survival of the weakest and gentlest... in part maybe because it's the gentle people who protect and sustain the world, not the strongest.

And if it is true that our culture does not place a high value on the quality of gentleness of character then I'd say it's doubly true in the male subculture of our society. To be a "real man" as defined by our culture one must practically renounce gentleness. And so then should we be surprised to hear of the prevalence of rape on college campuses and should we be surprised when one more man picks up weapons to assert his dominance and lay waste to those he deems his enemies?

So on this Father's Day, let me take a moment and say as a Father of 3 daughters to you Fathers of sons, let me say "thank you" to any of you who go out of your way to encourage within your sons gentleness. I am sure it is not easy in this culture to raise a gentle male, but for the sake of our daughters, in fact for the sake of this world it is essential that somebody does and that we foster a sense of manhood defined not by callousness but by sensitivity, not by who we defeat but who we can help build up, not by our toughness but our gentleness.

"Let your gentleness be known to all. The Lord is very near." Paul says. And then he goes on to describe the central activity of the Gentle

People – prayer. That is how they protect and sustain the world, through prayer. How else could they, how else can any of us get beyond the self-absorption, anxiety, and posturing of our egos except by emptying ourselves before our Higher Power in prayer? At our essence is the Gentle One, the Christ. It is only our egos that convince us we must use force to get what we need and we must climb over others to get to where we need to be and others must lose in order for us to win. But the pathway beyond the ego, to our gentle core, is one of prayer. And I don't just mean *asking* God for stuff. That's ok, Jesus and Paul both encourage us to do that, but I'm talking about something bigger and deeper than that, which they also encourage in us. They say that we must pray beyond words, beyond what we even know we should be saying - "let the Spirit pray through you with groans too deep for words" Romans 8:21 - prayer that involves entering into silence and listening and waiting, prayer that's at least as much about listening for what is being requested of us as it is about what our requests are of God. Out of that kind of prayer we move beneath the level of ego to the level of Christ within and the Christ within is not a presence of war but of peace, not one of anxiety but of stillness, not one of noise but of quiet, not one of separation from others but communion, not bullets flying but candles lit, not cancer tearing down but love building up.

Let us pray in that way until through our gentleness we realize that the Lord is near, in fact so near as to be within us... in the spirit of the 36 Gentle People and in Jesus' name, amen.