

Gentleness isn't fragile

Most social problems are rooted in the failure of the strong to be gentle with others.

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [December 6, 2017](#) issue



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He was a burly, muscular lineman for his college football team. He spent years going nose to nose with opponents on the field, but now he was standing at the altar with his petite bride, reciting marital vows. He said most of the traditional things like “in sickness and health,” but then he added a clause no one saw coming: “and I will always be gentle with you.” At that point, I started to tear up.

I’ve officiated at hundreds of weddings over my 36 years of pastoral ministry, but I have only heard that phrase once in the exchange of vows. Blessedly it came early in my service to the church. Since then it has inspired my understanding of how Christians should face each other: in gentleness.

If we think through our favorite virtues, gentleness might not be at the top of the list. Yet it is among the fruit of the Spirit identified by the apostle Paul. His point is

that it's impossible to be enlivened by the Holy Spirit without being gentle.

We tend to think of gentleness as a weak or fragile thing. But as a virtue it arises from strength, from strong people who choose to honor the sacredness of their relationships. The gentle don't find their strength in the ways society has privileged them, nor in the success of their pursuits on the many fields of competition. Among Christians the gentle find their strength in their identity as people created in the image of God, people whom Jesus Christ was dying to love. When we take seriously the holiness of our lives—lives redeemed from everything we've done to profane that holiness—we're made strong in the grace of God. And those who have attended to the grace they have received tend to want to be gracious to others.

The Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel claimed that when God's creatures come together, a holy space is created between them. It is in this realm that they can always find the Creator still at work. If they leave their relationships, they also leave behind that holy space. Jesus promised something similar when he promised to be in the midst of two or three who come together in his name.

There are many things individuals can do to nurture their own spiritual lives, but no one can absolve their own sins. For that we need a minister, a priest who is attentive to the Savior between us. As we encounter the Savior in our midst our souls are transformed from being weak and sin-sick to being strong and healthy. But the purpose of a strong soul has always been to care for the rest of God's creation—a gentle vocation.

We live in a time of deep suspicion of the strong for their temptation to become bullies. History provides plenty of good reasons for this suspicion. But when the strong abuse others, idolizing weakness is not the best response. The biblical call is instead to find the holy between you and me, the holy that makes us both stronger than we can be without each other. As Martin Buber claimed, we are always dealing with the sacred *Thou* when we approach the other. How can we not be gentle when approaching the holy?

In these days of intense factionalism and demonizing partisanship, few of us are aspiring to gentleness. I think that is mostly because we're afraid. We're afraid because instead of thinking about the holy between us, we think about the "them" who are to blame for our problems. The last thing we want is to be gentle in dealing with them.

The harsh reality is that since the day Cain rose up against Abel, we have never been as careful with each other as we were created to be. The Bible's first story of life outside paradise is about violent conflict between brothers, and we haven't done much to improve on the plot. Pretty much every social problem we know has roots in the failure of the strong to be gentle with others.

But within our unjust history the gospel has embedded these redemptive words: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited . . . And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:5-8). That's not a story of the weak being victimized; it's a story of the strong choosing humility. To live in Christ is to find this same gentle calling. Later in the same epistle, Paul says, "Let your gentleness be known to everyone" (4:5).

Those of us who find ourselves in positions of influence and privilege face a pressing calling: to be humble and gentle toward others. If we don't give ourselves to the poor, not only will we fail to do the justice required of us, but we'll also never find the Christ who is waiting to enter the holy space within our embrace.

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