<u>August 10: The Fruit of Gentleness *(Galatians 5:22-25)*</u>
Pastor Heather McDaniel

Welcome, my friends, to our summer sermon series on the Fruit of the Spirit, a way for us to explore some big questions about what it means to be disciples of Jesus in our modern world. We're looking at one fruit each Sunday, with the goal of offering some practical ways for us to grow in our faith. Today we've come to the fruit of gentleness, next to last on the list. We're so glad you're joining us for these conversations, and we look forward to continuing our deep dive with you over these last few weeks.

Before we begin, please take a moment to pray with me.

O Gentle Shepherd and Lamb of God, we come to you tired, weary, and bruised by the harshness of this world. Lead us to green pastures and quiet waters, restore our souls, protect us, and guide us along the right paths of gentleness that you walked when you were a human being in this world. Amen.

I kicked off my last sermon, on patience, with a story from the summer I was 6 years old and my family was in the United States on "home leave" – a strange term for a season of travel and displacement that felt nothing like home to me, a little girl who had lived in Bangladesh since her first birthday.

After a fun but exhausting period of being hosted in different houses, my family finally got to plant ourselves in one place for the last three weeks of our leave: a furnished high-rise apartment in Wheaton, Illinois, where the international development organization my parents worked for was headquartered.

The memories I have of that September in 1982 are magical – full of delight and contentment. And the one detail that anchors my recollections is how, each afternoon, my sister and I would curl up on the carpeted floor of that high-rise to watch *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*. I fell in love with the show and with its gentle host, Fred Rogers. He made me feel safe and grounded in the midst of displacement. He helped me get to know the country of my birth and made me feel a little less like a stranger, and a little more like I belonged in the neighborhood.

Now, let's fast-forward my life 30 years and many moves later to me as an adult, living in America and trying to find home in a church where the pastor would often stop in the middle of his sermons to remark, somewhat gleefully, that the Jesus of the Bible is "not a Mr. Rogers kind of Jesus." No – the Jesus we find in the Scriptures is untamed, rough around the edges, confrontational, and even a little dangerous – in other words, he's a strong leader we can respect.

Well, this portrayal of Jesus as a compelling role model specifically because he's "*not* a Mr. Rogers kind of Jesus" bothered me deeply, and it's not because of my loyalty to Mr. Rogers or because I think Jesus was tame. What was so troubling was the implication that Jesus needs to be "protected" from any kind of resemblance to Mr. Rogers, a man for whom gentleness was a predominant characteristic, because that kind of man does not command respect or loyalty. It felt like that pastor was trying to de-emphasize Jesus' defining gentleness in order to make him more appealing.

The pastor I heard was echoing some very influential thought leaders in American Christianity. John Eldredge, who wrote a bestselling book for men called *Wild at Heart,* faults churches for focusing on Jesus as a gentle shepherd who carries lambs and sits with children on his knees, a "Mr. Rogers with a beard." "Men can't relate to that, frankly," Eldredge stated in an interview. He went on to say:

"You look at that guy and you say, "He's a weenie!" This is not a man I would follow on the beaches of Normandy. This is not a man who would lead me in a protest against apartheid. This is not a man who would teach me how to romance a woman. I mean this guy can't even drive a car, I bet. So we've really misunderstood who Christ is. We've emasculated Christ and we've emasculated men in the church. It's a very inaccurate reading of Jesus. He's called the Lion of Judah, for heaven's sake…I think Jesus is a lot more like *Braveheart* William Wallace than Mr. Rogers."[1]

John Eldridge's tirade against a gentle "Mr. Rogers kind of Jesus" is taken up by David Murrow in his influential book, *Why Men Hate Going to Church,* which has hundreds of glowing five-star reviews on Amazon. Murrow decries the way churches emphasize so-called "Venus" or "feminine" values like gentleness,

[1] "Godly Men Shouldn't be Weenies," Interview with John Eldredge, October 2002, *Beliefnet:* https://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/2002/10/godly-men-shouldnt-be-weenies.aspx

complaining that "our very definition of a 'good Christian' skews female," and that churches disempower men when they suggest that to "'be like Christ' means always loving, always caring, always compassionate, and always gentle.'"[2]

Murrow writes that Jesus' personality had two sides – a fierce lion and a gentle lamb – and that we focus too much on Jesus' gentle lamb-nature. "Modern pastors," Murrow grumbles, "consistently preach the Lamb of God and emphasize Christ's grace, gentleness and humility…People grudgingly acknowledge that Jesus had a few lionlike moments, but believe Christ is, at his core, a lamb… The church likes the Lamb of God because he's more acceptable in modern society… Lambs are easier to control than lions. They're docile and easy to lead."[3]

In contrast, churches need to be preaching Lion-Jesus – who, in Murrow's words, had a volcanic temper, "hurled stinging insults at friend and foe alike," and lost his peace, gentleness, and self-control in the temple. In fact, when measured against the Fruit of the Spirit list, Murrow writes, Lion-Jesus, who is the rule rather than the exception in the Gospels, "flunks on almost every count." However, Lion-Jesus is needed in our churches because he builds muscle, particularly in men. "Men may say they want the Lamb of God, but something in their hearts yearns for the Lion of Judah," asserts Murrow, and if churches persist in preaching Jesus as a gentle Lamb, they are "creating and worshipping a half-Jesus" – in fact, "the more Christians follow this half-Jesus, the more feminized Christianity becomes" as it increasingly reflects "the gentle side of God – and only his gentle side. As God becomes softer, so does our theology."[4]

It's a good thing I was reading that book on the internet, or I might have engaged in a very un-gentle impulse and hurled it against the wall.

The Fruit of the Spirit are not a set of optional, gendered character traits that we pick and choose from depending on who we are or what situation we're in. Jesus didn't have a "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" personality, where he was sometimes the gentle Lamb who displayed the fruits of the Spirit, and sometimes the out-of-control lion with a volcanic temper who flunked them all.

---

[2] David Murrow, *Why Men Hate Going to Church,* Revised edition. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2011, p. 6, 8.
[3] Murrow, *Why Men Hate Going to Church,* p.49.
[4] Murrow, *Why Men Hate Going to Church,* p.48, 52, 51.

Jesus was a fully integrated person aflame with the Spirit of God, and everything he did and said was in step with the Spirit and full of the fruit of the Spirit. Jesus showed us what the fruit of Spirit looks like when it's perfectly lived out in a human life. Anybody who preaches a "Lion-Jesus" who flunked the Fruit of the Spirit is preaching a false Jesus. Period.

Did you know that there's only one time in the entire New Testament when Jesus is named as a lion? It's in Revelation 5, when Jesus' disciple John, in a vision, was weeping because there was nobody worthy to open a divine scroll, and an elder with a crown told him to stop crying and see the Lion of the Tribe of Judah who had triumphed and was worthy to open the scroll. So John looked, ready to behold the fierce messianic lion he'd been expecting all his life – but what he actually saw wasn't a lion. He saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne – and it was this gentle, bleeding Lamb who was worthy to open the scroll and receive all power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise. Jesus is described as the Lamb 28 times throughout the book of Revelation – and he's not a "docile, easy-to-lead" lamb, but a lamb who protects and leads and triumphs and strikes fear into the heart of kings and emperors who cling to worldly power.

From the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, when his cousin John the Baptist pointed at him and yelled, "Look, the Lamb of God!" (John 1:29-36), to the very end of time when he takes up his throne in the center of the City of God, Jesus was and is and always will be the Lamb of God we are called to worship and follow – which means that in his eternal nature, Jesus embodies gentleness. And walking in Jesus' footsteps means walking his path of gentleness – a path that was countercultural in Jesus' day and remains countercultural today.

We make a mistake, though, when we mischaracterize gentleness as weakness, docility, or passivity. True gentleness is powerful, and can only come from a place of strength. And not only that – true gentleness is a fruit that we crave, and it is desperately needed in today's culture.

So – what is true gentleness? Merriam-Webster defines it as "mildness of manners and disposition" – which, I have to admit, *is* pretty weak-sauce. I wouldn't want people to remember me as mild, and I wouldn't be inspired by a mild Jesus. If that's how Murrow and Eldredge defined gentleness, I don't blame them for trying to protect men from it. Happily, that's not the Biblical sense of the word *prautes,* which is translated as gentleness in the Fruit of the Spirit list.

In Greek, *prautes* was a character trait that meant humility, courtesy, and kindness – its opposite was roughness, violence, bad temper, sudden anger, and arrogance. Aristotle said that gentleness was the mean, or the balancing place, between out-of-control rage and indifference to evil. In the Bible, *praus* (or gentle) is used to describe Jesus as he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday – instead of arriving on a fierce warhorse, Matthew wrote that Jesus was "gentle [*praus*] and riding on a donkey" (Matthew 21:5). Jesus also used the word *praus* in his Beatitudes: "Blessed are the *praus* [the gentle], for they will inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). That verse usually gets translated as "Blessed are the meek," but it's just as accurate to read, "Blessed are the gentle."

When I preached on the fruit of patience, I said that patience doesn't mean complacency in the face of injustice – it means that we refuse to use the coercive, violent, and dehumanizing tactics of the oppressor in our response. Instead, we respond with action rooted in gentleness, or *prautes:* action that doesn't center the self and respects the personhood and agency of the other, no matter how wrong they are. Gentleness seeks and trusts in *shalom,* or holistic peace and justice, and is willing to take a humble, sacrificial road to get there. Gentleness seeks to heal, connect, and make whole rather than dominate or get even or assert personal rights. Perhaps my favorite definition of gentleness is that it's power under control. And make no mistake, gentleness has tremendous power to disarm and transform – Colossians 2:15 says that it was Jesus' lamb-like self-sacrifice that "disarmed the powers and authorities and made a public spectacle over them, triumphing over them by the cross".

Like all the Fruit of the Spirit, gentleness has to be lived out: consistently embodied in our words, attitudes, our actions, and how we use the power we have. And because gentleness notices and values the personhood of every single individual, it's uniquely tailored to each person. Gentleness can look like tenderly cuddling a baby or applying firm pressure to calm an out-of-control child. It can look like assuring an out-of-place little girl that she is special and likeable, just the way she is, or it can look like having a tough conversation with somebody about their hurtful actions. It can look like deescalating a scary situation or courageously standing our ground in the face of injustice.

It's important to understand that walking in gentleness doesn't make us docile pushovers who never challenge or lead others. It does mean that we challenge and correct without shaming, berating, or belittling; that we lead and encourage without dominating and forcing; and that we invite somebody to grow or change without coercing or imposing our own agenda.

Responding to conflict with gentleness is really hard, for two reasons: First, it requires calm courage and self-control. To be gentle, we must go beyond a knee-jerk, fight-or-flight response to a trigger. We must be in mastery of our own emotions and operate from a place of security. That's not easy. I wish I could go back and redo some of my not-so-proud parenting moments, when I lashed out in frustration and harshness, because I know I wounded the very children I so deeply wanted to protect and guide.

The second reason that gentleness is so difficult is that even though it takes tremendous inner strength to live out, it's not always seen as strength, nor does it make us look like winners. Jesus' path of gentleness was misunderstood as weakness and impotence; he was mocked and taunted, and even his followers disowned him. And from what I read at the beginning of this sermon, it's clear that gentleness continues to be mislabeled as weakness and impotence today by a culture that rewards aggression.

And that's why it's so important to know that God's got our back when we choose the path of gentleness, meekness, and humility. In Paul's letter to the Philippian church, he wrote, "Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near" (Philippians 4:5). We can risk being gentle because God is near to affirm us, justify us, protect us, and strengthen us, no matter what happens or how we're seen. We can be gentle, even when we don't end up "winning", because we believe that God is in control, and that our gentle action is not in vain.

The gifts of true gentleness are profound, because gentleness creates a space of safety and possibility where people can grow and be challenged and change. In 1969, Mr. Rogers gave a gentle but passionate testimony before a skeptical Congress where he defended the inner needs of children and successfully secured full funding for PBS after President Nixon tried to cut it in half. The gruff senator chairing the committee slowly softened as he listened to Mr. Rogers, finally remarking that even though he was supposed to be a pretty tough guy, he had goosebumps.[5] It's hard to imagine that happening today. There's so much harsh debate and ugly rhetoric in all our spaces, and all it does is entrench us more securely in our own opinions and alienate us from each other. Nobody wants to be forced or shamed into anything, but gentleness has a power to change hearts and work transformation.

[5] "Mr. Rogers and the Most Famous Defense of CBP Funding," https://cpb.org/aboutpb/mrrogers

Our broken world makes it impossible to practice gentleness perfectly. One of my very earliest memories is from the monsoon season in Bangladesh, when I was 3 or 4 years old. A powerful flood had washed away a pretty good portion of a local bridge, and my father and I, along with a few hundred other people, walked out on what was left of it to see the damage more closely, the swollen river raging just a few feet beneath us. Suddenly, as we neared the broken part of the bridge, it began to collapse even further, and a stampede ensued. My father seized me up into a death grip and ran. I remember that so clearly: not because I was afraid, but because I was hurt and furious. My father is a very gentle man, and he had never handled me so roughly before – and even though I yelled out that he was hurting me, he didn't loosen his grip or put me down until we got off the bridge. I felt wounded and violated.

And of course, I've been able to look back on that memory for a long time now and feel glad that my father protected my life like that – it was a true fight or flight moment, and he was right to overrule my agency and use coercive force. I would have done the same. And like my father, most, if not all of us, will face moments when our best option involves overriding the agency of somebody else, perhaps even using coercive force, because we're protecting life or health. But it's important to remember how violating those moments feel, even when they're necessary, so that we don't take such action lightly.

The truth is that each one of us sits here wounded and exhausted because of the harshness of this world: harshness we experience, and harshness we perpetrate. Sometimes, we are the least gentle with ourselves, beating ourselves up ruthlessly for our failures. And to all of you who are bruised and tired, to you who long for refreshment and safety, I've been saving my favorite gentleness verse for you. Hear this invitation directly from Jesus, recorded in Matthew 11:28-30:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle (*praus*) and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Does that call to you? Jesus never responded harshly to anybody to came to him in brokenness and need, and he never will. He won't break a bruised reed or snuff out a smoldering wick (Matthew 12: 20). Jesus invites us to come and receive his gentle acceptance, rest, and guidance, and to hear that we are deeply loved, just the way we are. He will never belittle or shame us for our failures, and he will gently teach us to walk his path.

Over the next week, I invite you to read one of the gospels and focus on the gentleness of Jesus, and how he expressed it differently with different people. Imagine how he might receive you and talk to you if you came to him, and hear his words of invitation and love.

I also invite you to ask somebody that you trust, who is close to you, to tell you when they experience your words or actions or tone of voice as harsh or ungentle. And then, if they do that, don't defend or justify or explain or tell them how they're also being ungentle. Simply apologize and trust that God is near, ready to strengthen and guide and grow the fruit of gentleness in you.

I want to close by reading Jesus' invitation to us one more time; and as I do, I invite you to take a deep breath in and let it out slowly, trusting that your broken, bruised, beloved self is safe in Jesus' gentle care and presence.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Amen.