

BLESSED ARE THE MEEK  
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Matthew 5:5  
John 9

There's few things with the power to put us in our place, remind us how small we humans are, like an earthquake. If the one that ripped across Japan, with a giant tsunami in its wake, and aftershocks continuing still – if all that didn't make you contemplate your meekness, I don't know what will. In a recent *Newsweek* article about the quake,<sup>1</sup> Simon Winchester writes that humankind “inhabits this earth subject to geological consent – which can be withdrawn at any time.” But if we know that God does indeed love this world, so much so that God lived among us in the body of our Christ, what can it all mean when the earth itself lays us low? And what does it mean for us meek humans when theologian Sallie McFague describes the world as “our meeting place with God?”

*Blessed are the meek?* This is certainly not what the world around us would say, where loud aggression is rewarded – but we've come to expect surprising turn-arounds from this Jesus guy. But who are the meek, anyway? There are plenty of different translations of this Beatitude, in different Bibles, all trying to get at the essential teaching. *Meek* – defined as ‘showing mildness or quietness of nature...’ Some translations say *gentle* – always a good thing. Others say *teachable* – this one I like. *Teachable* – knowing that you have more to learn. That's key.

How about *humble*? That's one we Brethren can get behind, right? “Blessed are the humble-minded, for they will possess the land.” Humility – not being all showy with our faith. Isn't that what we're all about?

This Beatitude is indeed about humility. But humility here is about more than just an attitude, more than just not boasting. Humility, meekness, in the worldview of this Beatitude, is an *orientation* to perceive the world with new eyes, and a *commitment* to live one's life according to that new vision. Meekness is not just an attitude or personality trait but an *identity*, locating one's own being in a radically humbler position in life – for the good of all the world... But let me explain.

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<sup>1</sup> *Newsweek*, March 21, 2011, 10.

With all the Beatitudes, the key to unlocking what the first part means lies in what the second part offers. Blessed are the meek, the humble – *for they shall inherit the earth.*

Take our word for *Earth*, the planet we live on. We call ourselves *people*, who happen to inhabit this planet called *Earth*, made of rocks and dirt and soil. In Hebrew, the word for soil was *adamah*, which was also where we got the name of the most basic human, *Adam*, the man made of soil and spirit, those many generations ago. This way of talking about ourselves is more like calling the people who live on planet Earth *earthlings*. *Adamah*, *Adam*; *Earth*, *earthlings*. When that's the way you talk about the world around you and the way you talk about who you are, you can be sure that you see yourself in nature.

But English lets us come a bit closer our Hebrew ancestors, when we call ourselves human beings. *Human* comes from the same root as that other word we're talking about today: *humility*. And *human* and *humility* also share a root with our word for the organic component of soil: *humus* – the dark brown, decomposed remains, that add nutrients to dirt, make it nice and spongy. Because to be humble is to recognize your place, just above the humus, the soil, the earth. To recognize that you are, in fact, still made of soil and spirit.

Meekness is to recognize yourself as Susan Griffin writes, “We know ourselves to be made from this earth. We know this earth is made from our bodies. For we see ourselves. And we are nature. We are nature seeing nature. We are nature with a concept of nature. Nature weeping. Nature speaking of nature to nature.”<sup>2</sup>

In short, to be meek, to be humbly human, is to be the sort of person who's thrilled about inheriting humus. Because, how are these humble humans blessed? More dirt!

*Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the Earth.* This implies two things: first, that the Earth being inherited is worth something, like inheriting the family homestead. All the escapist, Left Behind theologies that make it seem like we should be thrilled to be ‘raptured’ out of this world miss the point of incarnation: God lived and walked among us here on Earth, because here is where we belong, here is our home, Earth is a gift to us. And the humble ones among us will inherit it.

The second implication is that the reason the meek are the ones to inherit the Earth is that they will be the *best caretakers* for it. Humility is required for proper stewardship. And here's where the challenge is. Abstract meekness sounds fine, not too hard. In relative terms, meekness is easy: just be meeker than everybody else. But in this Beatitude, meekness is not relative

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Sallie McFague in *The Body of God* (Augsburg: Minneapolis, 1993), 26.

or abstract: it's practical. Quantifiable. Human humility is that which results in proper care for this world that is our home.

Now what about our Gospel lesson? That man, sightless from birth. There's some tricky stuff going on here: It's the blind man who recognizes Jesus for who he truly is, the Messiah. He doesn't need physical vision for spiritual insight, even in a sight-prejudiced society. And it's the sighted religious leaders who can't perceive Jesus' truth. Who are so invested in their social and religious systems labeling who's sinful, who's not, who's in, who's out, which actions count as holy and which aren't allowed, that they can't see the need for compassion right in front of their noses. The suffering of the man right in front of them is not enough to disrupt their theologies, not enough for them to creatively respond to the new situation they are faced with. All they can do is fall back into their inherited habits: theologizing how a man's suffering must be because of some person's sin. It couldn't be natural, genetic, accidental. It couldn't be a systemic problem - pollutants in the drinking water around immigrant neighborhoods, perhaps, or inadequate medical care for poorer families. It couldn't have multiple causes. No, the blame must fall on individuals for personal sins against a punishing God. That's all they can see.

Jesus cuts through all these institutionalized excuses and just does what faith in our Creator should make any of us do: offer compassion when it's asked for, when it's needed, whether or not that's the way things have been done before. He doesn't justify inaction, apathy, keeping his distance. Just heals the man. Doesn't excuse looking the other way - he simply sees the man for who he is as a beloved child of God.

And so he does something simple, yet remarkable. He picks up a handful of clay, mud - soil from the ground, *adamah*, humus, that stuff from which we are all made and shall return - spits into it, and rubs it on the man's eyes. The man washes it off, and he sees. It's **earth** that heals him, helps him see for the first time, helps him know.

Now it's no coincidence that it's sight - vision - that Jesus offers this man. In our culture as well as Jesus', sight is the sense that we most associate with understanding, ideas, opinions, and knowledge - it's a basic metaphor we live by.<sup>3</sup> (After all, you don't usually say, "Sniff here! You need to smell things from my point of aroma!") It's seeing, looking, views, perspectives, we use to describe *knowing*.

This story raises the perhaps frightening idea that we might not know everything there is to know - and that we might not even know we don't know it. That there may be different layers of knowing: things we don't even know we don't know. In the infamous words of Don Rumsfeld, *known knowns*, *known unknowns*, and *unknown unknowns*.

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<sup>3</sup> See Mark Johnson and George Lakoff, *Metaphors we Live By*.

The religious leaders thought they knew everything there was to know about sin and sight and Sabbath – but Jesus revealed that they didn't know nearly enough. They overestimated the power of their vision, ignored the possibility of unknown unknowns. The man born without sight, however, lived in the understanding that there were whole realms he hadn't accessed, whole senses he hadn't used – that there was a lot more to know about the world around him than he'd been even able to find out – until, that is, the Truth walked by, in the form of a law-bending, love-wielding Jesus.

Knowing what you don't know, or can't know, is at the very heart of this meekness. It's about confessing the known unknowns. For what else is humility in the face of our Creator than the seemingly simple admission that we are human, not divine; limited, not all-knowing? Powerful indeed, yet unable to control the course of our own lives let alone the course of the planet's future? And so here is where meekness becomes our lens for being proper heirs to this Earth we inhabit. I think of it as **ecological agnosticism**: belief in our human inability to know everything about our world, a posture of humility about our power, confession of human limits. This sort of 'agnosticism' is not the opposite of faith, but actually essential for it: it must be the bedrock of our relationship to God's Creation.

For as terrifying as the earthquakes were that rocked Japan, even scarier was the breakdown of the reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. Earthquakes – natural disasters – are known unknowns. We don't know when or quite how they will strike, but we know they will. But human industry, when it reaches the scale of impacting our global environment, becomes a force with unseen consequences. Our optimism about our human inventions often allows arrogance to trump caution, tricking us to think we know all there is to know. Human industry, not the shifts and quakes of the earth, is what we have a say over. Yet, we let our industry grow to a scale that it damages the world around us, for short-term profit, tarnishing the good world we inherited from our Creator, leaving less and less for future generations.

Many people, naturally, want to help the people of Japan in the wake of this disaster. And we should, and we will. The youth have already invited us to collect hygiene kit supplies for disaster relief, on Youth Sunday. But that's not all we can do. We can also do our part to *prevent future disasters* – at least, the disasters of human projects. We can apply our faithful humility to our daily living to be more worthy heirs to this blessed home. In solidarity with the people of Japan, we can use less energy, period, in all our lives, so that there is less demand upon industry in any nation to resort to nuclear power.

While we're at it, we can use less energy in solidarity with the people of West Virginia, so there is less demand for power plants burning coal, which pollutes their air and demands dangerous mining. In solidarity with the people of the Gulf Coast, we can use less energy, so there is less demand for deep-sea

oil drilling that can explode and seep across the ocean, onto shorelines. From our personal choices to our political voices we can demand a new future for the energy economy, away from the oil and coal and nuclear power that now dominate the field.

We cannot excuse inaction with protest that ‘this environmental justice stuff isn’t what church is about’ – no, it hasn’t always been, but it should be. We must allow the need for compassionate action to stare us in the face. We cannot justify looking away.

Around the world, the biggest challenge we face as caretakers of this earthly inheritance is global climate change: that huge, abstract threat we would much rather not have to see and know. One of the most threatened continents is Africa, where the poor of the land have the fewest resources to cope with the changes they were least responsible for causing. (The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates 80 to 120 million people put at risk of hunger by 2020, with 70-80% in Africa.) Africa already has upwards of 16 million environmental refugees.<sup>4</sup> But in some places, people are turning their humble humanity into a sign of hope: recognizing that while Africans may be more dependent on nature than industrialized nations, that interdependence also empowers them to be on the cutting edge of turning back climate change.<sup>5</sup>

Land-locked Niger has suffered desertification since the 1970s: the Sahara slowly widening, turning fertile farmland and forest into dry desert landscapes. But in recent decades, Niger has pushed the desert back, by reclaiming the power of humble humus. They celebrate Arbor Day and mean it: the government ordered every citizen to plant a tree in the nineties. Farmers dig holes and ditches in crescent shapes, and make low fences with stones and wood, to catch the drifting soil, keep it there long enough to catch water and bugs and seeds and slowly become fields and forests again. They’ve added 200 million trees since 1975. The trees increase rainfall. Their shadow shelters fruits and vegetables. Hunger has decreased. **Simply because they took soil seriously.**

There is much to be done. But at the deepest level, we must start by confessing and blessing our core human identity as humble, meek: delighted to inherit humus, proud even to be few degrees above the soil, content to be inextricably part of the world that is our home and is our meeting place for God, happy to take part in the incarnation with our every breath, every glance, every step. “We are nature seeing nature.”<sup>6</sup>

Know it! Love it!

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<sup>4</sup> Figures and quotes from TIME Magazine, ‘Land of Hope,’ by Alex Perry.

<sup>5</sup> One United Nations official described the potential for Africa to lead the way through climate crisis as “a whole new green trajectory for Africa,” and in turn, for all of us.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Griffin, quoted by Sallie McFague in *The Body of God* (Augsburg: Minneapolis, 1993), 26.

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Joan Chittester writes, “Humility is the foundation of our relationship with God, our connectedness to others, our acceptance of ourselves, our way of using the goods of the earth and even our way of walking through the world, without arrogance, without domination, without scorn, without put-downs, without disdain, without self-centeredness. The more we know ourselves, the gentler we will be with others.”<sup>7</sup>

Who we are is Earthlings, still made of soil and spit and spirit. Humble humans. Blessed be!

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted by Rev. Anne Howard, *Claiming the Beatitudes* (Alban Institute: 2008), 51.