

Let's play a word game.

Gentle. What's the first thing that comes to your mind when I say the word 'gentle?'

Now, share with your neighbor what came to your mind.

The first thing that came to my mind as I began working on this sermon about the fruit of the Spirit 'gentleness' is this story.

It's about my grandpa.

It's about a tomato.

It's about gentleness.

STORY

Early in summer, when more and more tomatoes were changing from shades of green to shades of red, my grandpa and I set out first thing one morning to check on the ripening fruit.

When you're a farmer, there is a thankfulness deep inside of you when the growing is almost done and the harvesting is about to begin.

You yourself are in the crop, and the crop is in you.

I came across a tomato that was developing a dark, soft spot on its skin. This tomato was much smaller than the other tomatoes on the vine.

It was at the bottom of the vine and very nearly touched the ground.

"Pepa," I said, "I'm gonna pick this one and throw it out. It has blight on it."

"Don't pick that tomato, Trevor," he said. "Follow me."

I followed him.

We walked out of the garden and into the work shed at the back of the yard.

That place was a place of wonder to me.

Inside of it were mason jars filled with nuts, bolts, screws and nails.

There were all sorts of tools hanging on the walls.

And at the center of it all were the things I will always remember him by - Duck Tape, baling wire, WD 40 and aloe.

Not only could these things fix the stalled engine of a tractor, a sputtering faucet in a sink, or a dangling clothesline on a pole.

They could also create a basketball rim (he wove one out of baling wire and hung it above the door of the shed for me), assuage arthritic knees (he used to spray WD 40 on his knees in the early morning to help him get around), and cure the common cold (he would drop a mixture of aloe and water into my nose to sooth my scratchy throat).

If you are looking for a miracle, find a farmer with those things and you will find one.

“Hey,” he said, “That tomato is small, broken and at the bottom. But you know what? It could grow into something beautiful if we care for it. Who knows, it might become the tastiest tomato we've ever grown. So let's be the ones who don't throw it out. Let's be the ones who take it in. Let's be the ones who care.”

He carefully cut out a square and two rectangles from some old plastic pieces he stored in the corner of the building.

He bound them together with Duck Tape.

He sprayed the edges with WD 40.

We made our way back to the garden and to the small, broken, lowly tomato.

He held the tomato in his calloused hands and ever so gently spread aloe over the blighted part.

He attached the handmade shelter around the tomato with baling wire.

“This will protect it from the heat of the sun,” he said, “And keep it off of the ground. This will give it a chance.”

That kind of gentleness can mend a blighted tomato.

That kind of gentleness can mend a broken world.
I want talk about that kind of gentleness today.

Gentleness as resistance.

These words don't often go together, gentleness and resistance, do they?

But I'm an 'upside down' thinker.

I like to try to bring things together that are usually apart.

In the gospel life, there is no eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

In the gospel life, there is no violence in response to violence.

In the gospel life, there is no harshness in response to harshness.

But there is an equal and opposite reaction.

We respond to an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth by turning the other cheek.

We respond to violence with non-violence.

We respond to harshness with gentleness.

This is what I mean by gentleness as resistance.

It is standing nose to nose with the world, fists up in the boxing stance, and fighting...but fighting like Jesus.

Remember, in our gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus describes himself as 'gentle.'

That word in the original language of the Bible is *prautes*. It means "to trust God's very self."

The opposite of *prautes* means "to trust solely in myself."

In Matthew 11:28-29, [Jesus] calls us to come to him when we are heavy laden and tells us that he himself is gentle (*praus*) and provide rest to those who answer the call. His *prautes* is not rocked by what rocks us. It is centered and comfortable with what is. He paints a beautiful picture of a walk of life in which we model ourselves on his own gentleness (*prautes*). Being comfortable, modeling our lives on Jesus' gentle confidence, is where rest from burdens lies. (Eugenia Ann Gamble, *Tending the Wild Garden*)

That is gentleness as resistance.

1) How might we be gentle to ourselves?

When we do something wrong, do we have an image of a harsh god, a violent god, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth God?

Or do we have an image of a gentle, humble God?

“I am gentle and humble,” says Jesus.

Do you see God this way?

Do you see yourself as God sees you?

This week, Pastor Jennifer reminded me that when we beat ourselves up because of things that we’ve done to hurt our neighbor, to hurt God, or to hurt ourselves, then we should ask ourselves, “Is that kind, true, or gentle?”

Resist the temptation to be harsh with yourself.

Be gentle with yourself.

Gentleness as resistance.

2) How might we be gentle with our neighbor?

STORY

On August 31, [1962,] Fannie Lou Hamer and seventeen other people boarded a beat-up bus and rode the thirty miles to the county seat of Indianola. No vehicle deserved the honor more. Owned by a black man from a neighboring county, the bus had been used in summers to haul cotton pickers and choppers to the plantations, and in winters to carry the same people to vegetable and fruit farms in Florida because there was not sufficient work in Mississippi to keep food on the table. Yet when the eighteen passengers arrived in front of the courthouse in the sobering light of a mid-morning sun, most of the enthusiasm aroused in the mass meetings and in the bus ride over had disappeared. Everyone on the bus took note of the situation, and nobody moved toward the door. Charles McLaurin, the SNCC worker who had come to Ruleville earlier in the year to coordinate voter registration activities in Sunflower County, described the moment: “[When] we got there most of the people were afraid to get off the bus. Then this one little stocky lady just stepped off the bus and went right on up to the courthouse and into the circuit clerk’s office.” The others on the bus slowly followed Mrs. Hamer to the voter registration desk in the courthouse, where they were asked by the circuit clerk to state their business. Mrs. Hamer explained that they had come to the courthouse to register. The clerk replied that all but two of the group would have to leave. Mrs. Hamer and a man named Ernest Davis remained in the office to complete the application.

The “literacy test,” as the registration application was officially called, consisted of twenty-one questions, beginning with such seemingly straight-forward queries as “What is your full

name?” and “What is the date?” The most trivial of errors-like the absence of a comma in the date or a discrepancy in punctuation-would often result in an immediate failure. The registration form also included the question, “By whom are you employed?”-a question certain to send chills down the spine of all who sought to register. “This meant that you would be fired by the time you got back home,” Mrs. Hamer explained. In any case, the local newspapers routinely published the names of the people who had completed an application. Even more intimidating to many people seeking to register was the question, “Where is your place of residence in the district?” It was feared-for good reason-that the white Citizens’ Council, or the Ku Klux Klan would have the applicant’s home address by the end of the day. But whenever the literacy test was completed, the clerk would produce a text of the state constitution and select a passage to be copied and given a “reasonable interpretation”-which was to say, interpreted to the satisfaction of the clerk. On the morning she tried to register in August of 1962, Mrs. Hamer realized for the first time in her life-at the age of forty-four-that the state of Mississippi had a constitution!

The day was long and exhausting. She was assigned a passage from the state constitution dealing with de facto laws. In addition to the stressful demands of the exam, the constant flow of white people through the registrar’s office heightened her anxiety. Mrs. Hamer described the scene: “People came in and out of the Courthouse with cowboy boots on, and with rifles and with dogs-some of them looked like Jed Clampett of the ‘Beverly Hillbillies,’ but these men weren’t kidding. She worked on the answer throughout the afternoon until the office closed at 4:30. “I knowed as much about a de facto law as a horse knows about Christmas Day,” Mrs. Hamer said. Of course, her knowledge of de facto law -or lack of it-had nothing to do with her failing the exam. Had she been white, she would have been excused from the impossible requirement of providing an exegesis of the state constitution.

On the ride back to Ruleville at the end of the day, just two miles beyond the city limits of Indianola, an approaching highway patrolman signaled the bus to stop. The driver was arrested on the charge of operating a bus that too closely resembled a school bus, and he was taken to jail, leaving the rest of the people alone to contemplate their prospects for a safe return home. Everyone became frightened. McLaurin recalls, “They didn’t know whether they were going to have to sit out there on the road or whether in a few minutes the police were going to come back and put everybody in jail.” Then Fannie Lou Hamer, standing toward the back of the bus, started to hum, then sing,

[This little light of mine,
I’m gonna let it shine.
This little light of mine,
I’m gonna let it shine.
This little light of mine,
I’m gonna let it shine,
let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.]

Soon the others followed the lead of her deep, strong voice, and the group sang through their fears...Someone shouted with delight, "That's Fannie Lou, she know how to sing."

In the end, the driver was fined \$100 for the misdemeanor of driving a bus that was "too yellow" (as the citation stated). Though only \$30 could be scraped together, the officers reluctantly agreed to a lower fine and permitted the bus to carry the tired men and women back home to Ruleville.

(God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights, Charles Marsh, Chapter One, "I'm on My Way, Praise God": Mrs. Hamer's Fight for Freedom)

When our neighbor does something wrong to us, do we have an image of a harsh god, a violent god, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth God?

Or do we have an image of a gentle, humble God?

"I am gentle and humble," says Jesus.

Do you see God this way?

Do you see your neighbor as God sees them?

When Fannie Lou Hamer needed the strength to love, the strength to be gentle, she sang.

Resist the temptation to be harsh with your neighbor.

Be gentle with your neighbor.

Gentleness as resistance.

3) How might we be gentle with God?

STORY

One thing I do every day is listen carefully for beauty in the plain, genius in the simple, wonder in the ordinary and courage in the human.

I learned to do this at the old Greenville Memorial Hospital.

I worked as a patient transporter there between college and graduate school.

During my break time, I went up the elevator to the NICU on the top floor of the building.

There, there was a rocking chair and a tiny baby named Gabby.

The kind nurses on the unit let me gown up and hold Gabby in my arms and rock her in the chair until my half hour of break time was up.

She was born deaf and blind and had been in the hospital for a long time.

She needed someone to hold her, hold her so closely she could feel the vibrations of a loving heart.

I was that guy.

I wonder where she is now.

I wonder if she knows that in her deafness and blindness she taught me to hear and see.

I wonder if she knows that the vibrations of her loving heart changed me.

I wonder.

Thank you Gabby.

I am because you are.

Do we have an image of a gentle, humble God?

“I am gentle and humble,” says Jesus.

Do you see God this way?

Do you see God?

God was right there with me in gentle, humble Gabby.

God is right here with us.

Gently and humbly.

Speaking to us in the still, small voice.

“Go into the world gently and humbly.

Gentleness as resistance.

Amen.

