

Blessed Are the Meek



A Small Spring on Sulphur Island

8/22/99

The barred owl, I assume, would not normally be counted among the meek. A pair of them are calling to each other as I write this piece at five am. For a few days lately I have been having a biblical problem. The blessing reserved for the meek, it appears, is the only one which doesn't seem to involve a reward in the kingdom of the afterlife: "for they shall inherit the earth" *Math. 5:5*. To the casual reader or listener the poor in spirit and the persecuted inherit the kingdom and the pure of heart get to see God, but the meek will be left with the barred owl's inheritance of oaks, hickory, and cypress hung with green curtains and boas of Spanish moss. Of course, this is what we all inherit whether we like it or not, believe it or not.

It's as though the will has been read among the saints and somehow the meek go back to the first day of creation. They start the six days or fifteen billion years over or worse yet get stuck with the problem of digging out of the apocalyptic rubble created by our species with six billion individuals, many not meek. Perhaps this is how to define magnanimous, those who have endured holocaust or apocalypse and are thereby ready to do life right. The strong meek.

As far as I can see, Christianity has not lost any sleep over this little textual problem and that may be a tribute to its lack of interest in meekness. I for one take more seriously the endowment

of the earth than the promise of heaven, or better yet, imagine no God aside from the earth or outside my inheritance of it. Of course, if you look into the great variety of biblical traditions, you will find the explanation that “earth” in this phrase is just a metaphor for “the promised land” and that will untrouble the waters I am stirring here. Nonetheless, the question of meekness and its rewards is fascinating to contemplate in the context of protecting the river.

For the last year I have been focussed on my blessings and find myself referring back to my mother as the human and divine source of them. Faced with the task of counting my blessings, I start with her and fall asleep before I recall all of what I have from or owe to her goodness. She taught me love and she taught me God, by word and example and being. My father did too, but not quite so much.

She it was who, when I was an early teen bursting out of my shoes and slacks, took me to the back baywaters and the sloughs of the Halifax and Tomoka Rivers and showed me with binoculars the great blue heron's world, the brown and white pelicans, the gregarious gulls and terns along the sandy isles, the mud-stalking egrets and oystercatchers, what Bartram would call the stilted tribes. We learned them altogether with our Peterson's guide. From her came my ability to steal up on this pure white, wily one along the shore and watch every little craning in slow motion toward the prey in the brine. She thrilled me to a whole lifetime of wonder. This was my sermon on the river (Marie: chapter five, verse five).

The earth in those days of the early 'fifties had half as many people. I won't say it was a better or a worse earth, but I wonder whether the number of meek to inherit it has also doubled. What is it that the meek get in this life after the unmeek have grabbed for all they can get?

I am satisfied that the difference between the kingdom of heaven and the inheritance of earth must be trivial in these beatitudes and that this reward is, perhaps, for what they didn't have: earth as fruit, earth as treasure, earth as luxury. The pure of heart get to see God, the mourners to feel comfort, and those who hunger and thirst for justice are filled with solace, i.e. a finally fair judgment. So the meek get their habitat back, the bison their plains, the salmon their passages upriver to be born again, and the unborn their first breath.

When I moved to Florida from the Bronx at age eleven, I thought I had inherited heaven. Especially, the beach at Ormond by the old Coquina Hotel seemed to me the most beautiful place on earth. Or else I could walk a half block down Fifteenth Street in Holly Hill, barefoot, to the river's edge and watch the small boats go by, sometimes identifying dolphins and sharks and manatees breaking the glassy silk surface. Along the edge, all the water waders, feathers spying fins, stood ready to strike.

I rode my bicycle three miles to school, stopped wherever I pleased along Ridgewood Avenue to study my new habitat, found snakes and lizards in the boot-hatches of palm trees. It frightens me now when I think of the hundred ways children are made to fear their inheritance. The potential sting of the bee, broadcast on every TV channel as deadly, has the force almost of a world war to

deter a child from the woods and waters. The mosquito as carrier of the West Nile virus makes some parents and their kids afraid to sit on the porch. In this respect, the meekest of all are often the girls whose safety, cleanliness, and precious clothing will surely keep them from a full earthly inheritance in this life.

I remember my mother as afraid, like the rest of us, at spiders and roaches. We were used to rats occasionally scratching in our walls in New York City, but it was a revelation to be eschewed when we saw a huge Florida spider in our little pink bathroom carrying a small bar of soap up the wall. She seemed almost as big as my hand and much more hairy. The first time we saw a Florida grasshopper eating our hibiscus, it was another revelation. Called a lubber, this colorful creature with red on yellow patches looked almost the size of a small bird, but we learned to dispatch the voracious vegans soon enough, to save the inheritance of our flowers.

Besides my father, no one in our family was very keen on fishing, but I remember the excitement of my childhood at the catch of crabs in early fall when we took a big pot to the beach and filled it with dozens for dinner. Running along the evening wavelets and grabbing the mid-sized from behind, there was a thrill of escaping the pincers and the opportunity to menace your brother bending over his next catch. I remember avoiding the bigger ones because of a fear they might be able to wriggle out of my grip and come after me. In this context, perhaps the meek and the weak get a little mixed up.

When I look out these days at the beauty of the Wekiva, spread out across the blue summer skies in white puffs and whisps of water vapors, I count the airborne river as blessing, catch it like a three-hundred-million-year-old, September crab and taste the cake of my inheritance.

Never before today have I thought of heaven as a place of active generation, where new species and individuals are created, new mates and new children. Isn't maternal labor over over there? Folks have always wondered, I know, what happens to the person who has had more than one spouse to reunite with in the afterplace. I have read extensively in the Christian tradition and never saw any speculations about meeting a new partner in the New Jerusalem. The presumption has been from the beginning among the fathers of the early church that heaven dwarfs sexuality (as indeed life eventually does), but many of us take as consolation the recovery of our loved ones when our day is done.

Inheritance, of course, has not only to do with family genetics, but with all the rest of human creation as well. The smallest or the meanest of objects such as the spoon or thimble that Neruda's poetry would celebrate, can be the most prized legacy or remembrance. The earth itself, whatever our physical or religious endowments from our parents, belongs to each of us by divine right in the sense of this beatitude or more secularly of the Declaration of Independence.

To fail to be meek about it might reasonably be cause for forfeiture. When I think of the tactics of those who would like to build another development around the Seminole Springs or bring another Rosemont right up to Blackwater's banks, destroying the rural character of the protection

area, I fear for the children of central Florida and especially Lake County who with walls and gates, pesticides and alarm systems, outerbelts and malls, wall-to-wall chain stores and fast-food franchises could soon lose much of what this boy from the Bronx inherited in mid-youth, half a century ago.