

## 12 December 2021: Advent 3 – Philippians 4:4-7

One day, I was 9 years old, my older brother invited me to play a game. He held a narrow tube, about 4 inches long, of woven material like a basket. He said, “Put a finger in each end.” I did. “Now, get your fingers loose.” I tried to pull my fingers out, which only trapped me more securely. Finally, after I had panicked for what he considered a sufficient time, he revealed the secret. To be free I had to gently loosen the tension.

Paul bids: *Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.* The Greek word translated ‘gentleness’ means a readiness to yield, to forbear, to be mild, reasonable. It is not weakness or passivity, but graciousness of spirit that delights in peace. In Wisdom 12:18 the word describes God. A gentle person embodies God’s nature and witnesses to God’s nearness.

Gentleness is not valued. For instance, might any politician be described as ‘gentle’. We have ‘reality’ and talk shows based on the premise that the more fighting, abusive language, and ‘drama’, the better. Am I telling you a secret when I say that many people seem addicted to personal ‘drama?’

We can be so obsessed with our own or others’ difficulties. ‘Drama’ can be an attempt to make life more interesting. ‘Drama’ may make ourselves seem stronger, or prove we are victims. Others’ ‘drama’ may make us feel better about ourselves. Regardless of purpose, drama kills gentleness.

Anger is another reason gentleness is scarce. Anger is response to the world not being as we want it. When the world in general and friends or family specifically do not cooperate in making the world as we demand it, attempts at manipulation, whether as controlling tyrant or sullen victim, often ensue. Over time unhealed anger becomes resentment, the cancer of the soul. Anger, whether active or passive, kills gentleness.

A third roadblock is despair. Early Christian spiritual teachers considered despair the most serious spiritual ailment. Despair rejects God’s grace, assuming oneself too weak or unworthy to receive joy. As with drama and anger, despair is a symptom of self-centeredness, utterly contrary to a gentle spirit.

What is the gentleness Paul urges? Gentleness is not indifference. It is certainly true that the gentle person listens more than speaks, prays before and while doing, allows others to go before her/him, is placid in the face of turmoil, mellow when provoked, and as happy with others’ successes as with one’s own. This is what gentleness looks like, yet how does one ‘get there?’

Gentleness is intentionally, actively “making space.” We make space for God, for others and for oneself. We make space for God through prayer, worship, study and centering the mind gently on God when thoughts wander or run elsewhere. Perhaps the best methods are gratitude, and its first cousin, praise. Practice gratitude to and praise of God; the more you do so, the gentler you become.

We make space for others because everyone is a gift from God, even (perhaps especially) the unlovable. Everyone is a gift, and we are all fellow students *and* fellow teachers one with another. We have something to receive from others and something to give. If we are indeed all made in the image and likeness of God, then we all have something to share, something—perhaps unknown or undervalued—that is invaluable. We are all invited to grow up into the fullness of Christ, to grow in the practice of Christian charity through every relationship and encounter. Gentleness accepts the fact that no one is beyond redemption, and everyone is our teacher. Gentle people make room in their lives for others to be God’s miracles.

We must make space for ourselves, too. That is, we are gentle with ourselves; not complacent, but gentle. We accept ourselves as we are each day and offer ourselves as unreservedly to God, as we are able, for God to do with us and work with us as God wills, praying for the willingness, wisdom, patience, and humility to be useful to God, to others and to ourselves. Gentle Christians do not fight sin, they surrender faults and failings to God in sorrow, with the joyous hope of eternal healing. Gentle Christians do not dwell on others’ faults but see others are in as much need of God’s grace as oneself. Gentle Christians yearn to share God’s grace with others.

*Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.* Be gentle: live God’s gentle, loving nature; be an agent of God’s nearness. We are held, everyone is held, in the palm of God’s hand; gentleness shapes us to fit snugly.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, for ever and ever. Amen.