

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Philippians 4:1-9  
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In II Corinthians 10:1 Paul writes: "I Paul, make a personal request to you with the gentleness and kindness of Christ." With the gentleness and kindness of Christ. In the gospel passage for today Jesus is frustrated. He's frustrated because he has tried over and over and over again to offer good news, to offer an invitation to intimacy, forgiveness, and reconciliation with God. So the tone of the gospel lesson doesn't equate with Jesus not being gentle. We all have our moments, don't we? Our Lord is begging people to accept grace. Why will you not accept the invitation to draw near to God, to know his love and forgiveness?

So the tone of one passage doesn't equate to Jesus not being gentle. And we see a reference to this again in Paul's letter to the Philippians. In Philippians 4:5 Paul writes: "Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near." So Paul wrote the words in II Corinthians, and he has written these words to the church at Philippi: "Let your gentleness be known." Gentleness and kindness like that of Christ. "The Lord is near." We Christians talk so much about the love of Christ, Paul is saying. We're called to represent it in a way that would please him, and bring honor to his name. As if he were listening to us. As if he were right here. Because ultimately we know that he is right here through the power of the Spirit.

"Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near." Again from II Corinthians: "I Paul, make a personal request to you with the gentleness and kindness of Christ." Beautiful, moving, inspiring, instructive language. The word for gentleness both in II Corinthians and in Philippians is *epieikos*. It means gentle, or forbearing, or considerate. "Be

gentle, like Christ." "Be forbearing like Christ." "Be considerate like Christ." "The Lord is near." Watching, listening.

It's as if Paul is saying in Philippians: "Be gentle like Christ," which is another way of saying: "Be Christ-like." None of us will ever live up to that ideal perfectly. We really do all have our moments, don't we? Moments when frustration, fatigue get the best of us.

The parable is a picture. It's not a literal event, of course. It's a picture of God's graciousness. And Jesus invites, and invites, and invites. The gracious invitation: "Come to the banquet." Come back to love, forgiveness, healing, and a new start.

Today's verse from Philippians can be translated: "Let everybody know how gentle and gracious you are." *Epieikos*, in addition to gentleness, carries with it the connotation of graciousness. It can be translated: "Let your reasonableness be known to everyone." "Let your reasonableness be known to everyone." And the Common English Bible translates it: "Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people." I've heard it said over the years, "You can tell a person's character by how they treat the people they don't have to be nice to." "Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people." Philippians 4:5.

A man named Matthew Arnold was a very widely known poet in the nineteenth century in Britain. He was a poet and a literary critic, and ultimately a critic of culture as well. Arnold was born in 1822 and died in 1888. In the midst of the Industrial Revolution, Matthew Arnold was observing how England was changing. He was greatly troubled by what he perceived as a growing boorishness. The pace of life was quickening. Life was becoming less personal as industrialization began to take the place of agriculture. The pace, the rhythm of agricultural life was being supplanted by the busyness of city life. So Matthew Arnold saw that British culture was what we might call devolving. Things were getting worse. People weren't treating each other the way they deserved to be treated. Matthew Arnold

was greatly troubled by this. And in the midst of all this Matthew Arnold made this observation: Religion is primarily concerned with people's conduct, not with speculation of the workings of the world. It's a huge distinction, and has enormous implications when you think about it. Religion, observed Arnold, is primarily about human conduct, not primarily about speculative theology. Yes, that has its place. Yes, it is important. But we might say in our terminology, "The bottom line is how do we live?" How do we treat people? Do we show through our actions what we say we believe with our intellects? Religion, says Matthew Arnold, "is more about conduct than about speculative theology. And Arnold drew this insight from Jesus. Matthew Arnold saw in Jesus not so much a speculative philosopher but someone who went person to person, often to people on the margins of society. He went from person to person offering love. Offering hope. Offering forgiveness, a new beginning. Constantly in the gospels Jesus goes from person to person, from town to town proclaiming good news. And so Arnold makes a strong point. Religion is primarily about conduct, not about a speculative theology. "Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near." "Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people.

I want to close not with the words of Paul, but the words of our Lord. This is from Matthew 11:28-30. Jesus said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, 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.*