



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, March 1, 2020
The First Sunday in Lent

Choral Evensong
at 4:00 p.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Ryan Bennett, *Assisting Priest*
on
Lenten Sermon Series: The Seven Virtues – Gentleness and Brotherly Love
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The Best We Can Be

“The Best a man can get” – remember the Gillett razor company adverts? I do. I longed for the day when I would get my first razor, lather my face with shaving cream and glide the razor over my skin, smoothly, just like the TV advert. As I waited for my debut into manhood, my grandfather, who was a road traffic victim would allow me to shave him for practice.

At first, he’s face was like a patch work quilt of tissue paper covering all the blood stains. Thankfully for him and me, the need to tissue lessened.

In the last 18 months, Gillett have adapted the original advert into a new logo which reads: “We believe: the best Men can be.” Notice the difference in emphasis with a thirty-year gap. In the original logo we note the macho tone of manliness being able to get what a man wants....to something quite different – “The best a man can be” we see a move toward encouraging men to think about aspiring for what they need rather than what they want.

It’s a subtle yet significant difference. In the wake of the #MeToo movement of recent years, there has been a call to address both bullying and catcalling behavior which has come to be termed as “Toxic Masculinity.”

What is it? Researchers define it in the following ways:

1. Suppressing emotions or masking distress
2. Maintaining an appearance of hardness
3. Violence as an indicator of power (think: “tough guy” behavior)

We have seen how “*Toxic Masculinity*” has come about when we teach boys they cannot express emotion openly; that they have to be “tough all the time”, anything other than this can make them ‘feminine’ or weak. The same can be said when we teach girls that they cannot express more naturally masculine traits. I remember my grandfather’s response to the launch of the first girls football game in our home city – “Football is a boy’s game...”

Along with this, the issue of gender identity challenges us to see each person, as they believe they are called to be.

Thankfully, so much is changing in terms of education, along with societal or cultural norms. Sadly, many people have fallen victim to this mentality as both executing its tenants and receiving it's angry raw.

Where do we find a new horizon to set sail? I believe we have already launched this boat. To have both Gentleness and as I like to define it, Love for humanity, the seeds can grow.

To achieve this, we need to place both Gentleness and Love for humanity within their proper context. Sadly, both have been misused and misconstrued. Within a dominant "boys will be boys" environment, Gentleness has often been classified as a feminine virtue, "She's gentle and kind". It's been more rarely classified as a masculine virtue, and if so, often attributed as a weakness or shortcoming.

The rumble of voices can call out "We want a strong leader" ...well sadly we miss why Gentleness is considered a virtue in the first place.

Gentleness must not be confused with weakness. Although gentleness walks softly, it can also carry a big stick. Employing non-violent civil disobedience, Gandhi led India to independence and inspired movements for non-violence, civil rights, and freedom across the world. Gentleness can speak with an intuition which sees below the surface and can sometimes be the unwelcome voice amidst the roar of a collective crowd who see at the surface.

The church, as much as the world, needs to recapture the true nature of gentleness and restore it to its rightful place.

At its core, Gentleness is a way of thinking and behaving that respects the vulnerabilities inherent in ourselves and others, as it resolves to move forward and do good. It is actively responsive and protective, rather than adversarial, defensive, invasive, or passively submissive.

When faced with hurt, gentleness seeks to respond and not to react. When I was a Parish Priest, I coined a phrase within parish ministry, which was very helpful in this respect – the R&R principle – *Response not Reaction*, it became a mantra.

In the Christian life, we called to resist this question: 'How can I hurt or destroy my enemy in the same way that my enemy hurts or destroys me?

Gentleness seeks to its strength from a steady and stable foundation. Gentleness rests in inner strength to sustain peace. It desires to speak counter to turmoil of outrage, wrath, vengeance, and violence.

If we can achieve this, we are exhibiting a true love for humanity. A true love for humanity see's the self as something much larger than oneself. We are not to view ourselves as some insignificant dot, rather the way we live and share reveals how the whole created order can live, should live. A life lived in unison.

Now is the time more than any other time in human history when living in unison is of critical importance. The life of our planet depends on it. A billboard advertisement tells the story – "There's no Planet B".

Sobering, nurturing, challenging, confronting, authentic love for humanity should be all these things.

In the words of Gandhi;

"Whenever you are confronted with an opponent. Conquer them with love."
—Mahatma Gandhi