

Unconditional Acceptance  
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany  
February 1, 2026  
The Rev. Scott Walters

At Morning Prayer back in seminary one day, the scheduled preacher was Dr. Richard Jones, professor of missiology. His text was the 10 Commandments, and halfway through a careful analysis of commandment number three, dread fell like a wet blanket upon that bright-eyed congregation. We realized we were less than a third of the way into a ten point sermon. I just wanted to reassure you at the outset that you're not about to endure a nine point sermon on the Beatitudes. I thought we'd just consider just one of them today. But we'll consider it as part of a larger question that, for some reason, I don't think I've ever given much thought to. What is a beatitude actually for?

My approach to this teaching—one of the most famous teachings in the whole of human history, I might add—my approach has often been to ask how the Beatitudes rearrange our definitions of blessedness. They disrupt our assumption that God sees things as we do, since we don't exactly envy the state of at least a few of Jesus's so called blessed ones. I can't remember the last time someone said, "Pastor, I'd just like you to help me be poorer in spirit, or a little more mournful." I've definitely never had anyone confess that they just don't feel reviled enough.

I still think that disruption is part of what's going on here. But there is a strain of wisdom in the Eastern Church that sees the Beatitudes as remedies, or, as Rowan Williams puts it "counter-proposals," to the passions of the soul when they go awry. And I'll go ahead and own up now to the fact that if I happen to say anything remotely interesting or insightful in the next few minutes, it was probably lifted from Williams's wise little book, *Passions of the Soul*.

You probably don't talk about the passions of your soul any more than you do about the purity of your heart. It's a term that arose among the monastic women and men who lived about 1500 years ago, many of them in the Egyptian desert. What they called the passions were human impulses that were not inherently evil. They actually involved important energies that move us through life and help us cope in a complicated world. But they are energies that

often become destructive, even compulsive. Energies like anger. It seems like the place of anger in our lives might be relevant to at least a few of us inhabitants of 21st century America. There still seems to be a bit of it floating around our world, would't you agree?

There's another thing to say about how these ancient Christians saw the spiritual life. If you read their bios, you might think they thought God wanted us to be uncomfortable if not in outright agony, and that demons swarmed in their desert like mosquitoes at a July picnic in Memphis. But the goal of the spiritual life for these people, at least when they were at their best, was clarity of vision. They wanted to see the world for what it truly was, and to see themselves and their deep desires for what they truly were, and, ultimately, to see God for who God truly is. They wanted lives that were free of illusions and full of love.

So. Take anger. What is anger for? Or what life-energy is it a form of, for better and for worse? Rowan Williams says these writers had a soft spot for anger, because it's a passion we know can be directed toward certain things in helpful ways. They believed there were healthy ways of directing anger both toward destructive habits and untruthfulness in ourselves, and toward injustice and destructiveness out in the world. The old cliché that warns against getting between a mama bear and her cubs is a way of saying that love presents itself as anger at times, isn't it? It's trickier to imagine how that energy could be a corrective within ourselves, but the tradition said there's a form of it that can.

But anger is a grave danger to the soul as well. And I think it's fair to say that much of the anger in the world, at any given time in history, is not making the world better or helping us see the world more clearly, even if just about every person who's ever been angry thought their anger was the good kind, the kind that sets things right. In fact, one reason anger is so dangerous is because anger blinds us.

A desert father named John Cassian said anger is like a leaf. Whether a leaf is made of gold or made of lead, if it's placed over your eyes, you can't see. So, whether your anger is a gold leaf of loving, transforming anger, or a lead leaf of the sullen, resentful, self-serving kind, anger always keeps you from seeing, according to Cassian. It's not for nothing that we still talk about someone being "blind with rage." James Baldwin sounded a little like a desert father when he said, "I imagine that one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is

because they sense, once hate is gone, that they will be forced to deal with pain." Sometimes we get angry because we want to be blind to something within us that we'd rather not see.

So, what do we do about this? How do we learn to live in right relationship with the passion that can present as anger? Especially if anger always blinds us, even when it is energy that might help set things right. Well, there's a beatitude for that, the ancients might say: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

I know. I didn't want it to be this one either. And, honestly, I'm still a little offended at hearing meekness is what we need to keep our anger directed rightly. But meekness in Matthew is not about shrinking back or being blandly unoffensive. In the King James translation, "meek" is a term Jesus uses for himself. "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest," he says in Matthew 11. "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

"Meek" is what Jesus calls himself. And you might remember that Jesus wasn't exactly a spineless pushover. Meekness, for Jesus, was about being a person with whom people's souls find rest. It's about being someone in whose presence our burdens feel lighter and the loads we pull at least feel more comfortable on our shoulders.

Have you ever been in the presence of someone like that? Someone who is at home in their own life in a way that, when you're with them, you don't feel the need to pretend to be confident or happy or smart or strong or anything at all, if that's not how you're feeling. The meekness Jesus speaks of in Matthew may simply be a way of being that makes room for other people. When someone has nothing to prove to us and doesn't need our approval to validate them, our souls rest a little easier, and we really can see the world a little more clearly for what it is.

Pádraig Ó Tuama says there's an Irish phrase from West Kerry that translates, "You are the place where I stand on the day when my feet are sore." Maybe that's meekness. People didn't find their burdens lightened in the presence of Jesus because he was insecure and told everybody only what they wanted to hear. The meekness of Jesus was, and this is Rowan Williams again, "a habit of calm attentiveness, stillness, freedom from the fretting worry of

keeping control." The only way our anger can rightly correct, the only way anger can reform the world or my life into something better, is if it is held in this meekness. Held in that kind of calm, attentive stillness that's not bent on control at all costs. That's what the wisdom of the desert says. This still resonates powerfully with me all these centuries later. Does it with you?

I chose anger and meekness for this sermon for reasons that may be obvious if you read the news. Anger continues to be unleashed in terrible ways in our world. It's been turned against immigrants in this country, which is nothing new. But there have been terrifying performances of intimidation and brutality, not only in the tragic deaths in Minneapolis, but in the ways laws are being enforced by federal agents everywhere in combat gear. Some of the energy that is anger may well be required of Christians to stand firmly for what is good and for what is true. Which is also why, especially now, we need to be the kind of people who know the damage anger almost always does. People who understand the blindness our anger always creates. And ultimately, to be people committed to the way of Jesus, which these Beatitudes lie at the very heart of. We begin with the way of Jesus, who, as much as I hate to admit it sometimes, said, "Blessed are the meek." Not "Blessed are the angry."

Which means surely it could never be a Christian act to stoke the fire of anger for its own sake in ourselves or in anyone else. Our spiritual work is to become people who embody the meekness of Jesus. People who are grounded enough in God's unconditional love for all people, that others find rest for their souls when they are with us, feel their burdens lightened. We become the place where they stand on the day when their feet are sore.

You have known such a place in your life, have you not? I don't think you'll find that restful place that can hold your proper anger in the 24 hour feed of outrage we sometimes call the news. I do hope you find it here, among the other imperfect people who say their prayers at Calvary. I hope you can find a habit of calm attentiveness, stillness, freedom from the fretting need to be in control. Not so that you'll become some serene saint who floats above the cares of this broken and violent world. But because, if one day the world really does need your anger to help set it right, you're going to need a soul that's learned the kind of meekness that can hold it.