

“Beatitudes: The Meek and Those Who Hunger and Thirst”

Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

I was thinking about these two kind of strange words, “meek” and “righteous,” and I thought the only real way to define them, in a lasting way, is to give you an illustration that you can take with you.

I thought about somebody who I learned a lot about when I was in elementary school: George Washington Carver. Now when I was in fourth and fifth grade I was part of bussing. They bussed a bunch of kids into our neighborhood. It was the first time we had African American students and white students in the same classroom and, in fourth and fifth grade, both of my teachers were African American. That was a real change at that time. So we learned, in a beautiful way, as much about African American history as much as we did white people in history, and George Washington Carver was somebody we learned a lot about. But, all of these years later, when somebody mentioned George Washington Carver to me (I had forgotten quite a bit about him), I remembered the peanuts and I remembered something about sorghum, but that was about all I could remember.

So when somebody mentioned it, I started reading about him. There is a book (all you have to remember is George Washington Carver), but the author that I’m reading - and he is very good - is Sam Wellman; so if you want to read this biography, it is fantastic.

Anyway, George Washington Carver - just to give you some fill-in for this explanation about meekness and righteousness - was born into slavery near the end of the Civil War. As an infant, his mother and sister were kidnapped by bushwhackers, who took them away and sold them off to someone else, and he never saw them again - didn’t know whether they lived or died. But George had other family. He had an uncle and aunt and other siblings who lived on this particular farm and were owned by the farmer. Luckily though, the farmer and his wife were lovely people, and cared for their slaves well in this part of Missouri. And so he learned quickly, early on in life, in his early childhood – 4, 5, 6 years old – that he was an exceptional young man, [a] great student – learned – even though there were no schools for black kids in that day.

The author [throughout this book] uses the term for African Americans by calling them “colored.” That is what they were called then. Part of the reason the author continued to use the name “colored” was to separate and understand about the difference between white people and African American people in that day and age. So I’m going to honor the author by continuing to use that phrase “colored,” because it was historical to that time.

As a young boy George longed to go to school, but there were very few schools – especially in rural Missouri – for colored children. So one day he decided he was going to learn everything he could while living on the farm. He asked his uncle - who was the slave owner - and his wife, all about what they did on the farm? So he [George] learned how to plant seeds, and learned about the different plants and the names of the trees. He was just a little pain in the neck because of all of the questions he had. If you have been a parent, you know it can be a bit frustrating, when your little ones keep bothering you, day and night, with questions. He wasn’t even their [George’s aunt & uncle] child, but he followed them

around. He wanted to know everything. When George was in the house, he wanted to know how to cook and clean, and do all of those things. He even wanted to learn how to crochet like his aunt did - just so he could know. He was insatiable in learning everything he could.

He had a brother named Jim. George told Jim that he wanted to go to school. His older brother Jim said, "Why would you want to do that? Everything is great here. I have been to town, and it is a scary place. The white people don't like us and you had better be careful how you act around them." So, he [George] thought, "I will just learn everything I can on the farm."

Well, one day his uncle, the slave owner, said, "We are going to let you go to town. I need for you to pick something up for me and you are old enough now." Now, like many slaves, George didn't know how old he was so, to this day, they guessed he was about 10 years old.

George got to walk all the way to town by himself. The town was Noelle. He was so amazed because it was so busy. I mean it had like five stores in it, and there were horse drawn carriages, and everything was hustle and bustle in this huge town, and he was shocked. He bought the items that his uncle wanted him to get.

As he was getting ready to walk home, he saw the most startling thing. He saw colored children and a colored teacher going into a classroom, and he knew he could never stay at the farm after seeing that. He ran home all that way and told the slave owner, who had let him go free. He [George] said, "I need to go to school." It was after the Civil War, so he would be paid the ransom to get George back from the bushwhackers, and now he let him go free.

But letting George go free meant he could leave the farm, but there was no money. He had one sandwich in his pocket, and he prayed to God that God would help him. He learned about God on the farm, because one little boy came over to visit, and told him about prayer. So George went into the barn and he prayed to God with all of his heart, alone. And he said, "It was like I was a bird and I had soared, and I felt that close to God." And, for the rest of his life he did nothing without praying about it first. He didn't know what church was. That little farm never had a place for him to go. He had heard about church but, in that time, colored people didn't go to church with white people. In that part of Missouri there wasn't a balcony, so that they could be in their own part of the church, so he just had nowhere to go.

So he went into town at probably age 10 - give or take - with a sandwich in his pocket and nowhere to go. But George knew that God wanted him to go to school, so he walked around all day wondering where he was going to go. It got dark and he got scared. This was the first time in his life he and his brother did not sleep in the same bed, he felt so alone.

He decided he would sneak into this neighbor's barn, because it was across the street from that school. The next morning, right at dawn, he heard the crow and then he heard this woman's voice screaming at him, "What are you doing in that barn?" She was also colored, so he wasn't too scared. He told her why he was there and [that] he wanted to go to school. Now, this woman, who was mad at first, said, "That is ok." See, she and her husband didn't have any children, so she and her husband took him in. God always provided for George, some way, somehow, amidst the most difficult moments. She and her husband walked George to school, introduced him to the school master, and said, "This boy wants to learn.

He will work for us, and he will go to school. And he did. For the next two years he went to school. Within just a few weeks learned to read, he learned to write and he learned how to count. He was so excited. He worked at home. He worked down the street. He gathered money together. He worked until he dropped, every single day, and they let him keep his money.

At the end of two years he was getting an ache in his heart, because he knew how to read. He knew what to do, and to write and count. But, he wanted more, but they were not going to teach him anymore, because that was all that the school teacher knew in that little colored school, with the little colored teacher. The teacher was really good and taught him very important things, like when colored children are out, and when they are adults as well; when you see a white person, you don't look them in the eye, or they will get mad at you; and, even if you make a friend who is white, you can be friends, but if other white people come up to that white person when you are with them, then you back away and you don't act like you are friends, in case it will embarrass them, and you act meek, so that you won't get hit. That is what most of the education was like at the colored school, so that they would learn not to be beaten in polite society.

George couldn't handle just that little bit of education. He had a taste for it, so again he prayed to God, and he prayed over and over again that God would help him. So he decided that, when he heard about another colored family that was going from Missouri all this way to the God-forsaken place (that he knew nothing about but heard it was a long way) called Kansas, he decided he would ask if he could ride along. The family said, "Sure," because he [George] heard that in Kansas it was a "free" state and they had better schools for colored people in Kansas.

So he rode along, not knowing who he would see, or how he would make a living, or how he would eat. There were times after the family let him off, because they wanted to go somewhere else, that he ate berries; he knew that if you watched the birds eat the berries then it was ok for you to eat them - but if they didn't eat them he knew they were poisonous. He knew little grasses that you could suck and chew on that wouldn't make you too sick, and he was able to survive until he made it to this place in Kansas.

There, by the grace of God, he met yet another family - a white couple - because he went knocking on doors in these beautiful homes in this even bigger city than Noelle. He knocked on the doors and he would say (well, you didn't look up, because they were white), "Do you need help?" Many responded, "Get the blank off my steps, you blankety-blank." They chased him away. That happened at 5-6 doors: but he was hungry, and he needed to work, and he knew God wanted him to be there. So, about the 12th house, this white woman said, "What do you want?" and he told her. (He was used to not getting what he wanted.) She said, "We need help. Get in here." He said, "I will be happy to work for you." She said, "But, you have to pass my husband's inspection."

So he cooked for them that night and he was an amazing cook. The boy could do *everything*. He did cleaning and he did house work. "But," he said, "the one thing I have to do is get an education." They said they knew where there was a colored school where he could go - and it is a pretty good one. So, the couple walked him there and he went all the way through high school. In fact, he was so amazing and intelligent that he was able to get a high school diploma.

He signed up to go to college, and the college accepted him. At Highland College, in Highland, Kansas, he showed everyone and all of the money he gathered, because he had worked side jobs, as well as the room and board he got working at the house. He was so excited. He bought a suit so he would look good when he went to college, and he walked all of the way - about 100 miles - to go to college. He walked up and they said, "What do you want?" and he said, "I'm here to go to college." They asked his name [and he said], "George Carver." They said, "Well, we didn't know you were colored." He had used every penny on the suit and food to get there, and they told him to get away - literally get away.

He had nowhere to go. He was in that town. He started working and cleaning and doing everything to make some money. He knew he would never be able to go to college, but he heard about land grants and they were giving them even to colored people. So, he went and got land in Kansas, in this God-forsaken part of Kansas, where nothing would work; but it was free and he was going to get it, and he did.

He met friends and they all gathered together, but his part of land didn't have a drop of water. Three years he worked that land. He dug a hole in the ground for a well - 20 feet. They go into great lengths about how scared he was, and others were for him, that he could barely see light digging that deep - all of the possibility of it [the well] collapsing. But he prayed to God and he knew God would protect him, but God didn't provide water. So again he lost everything. He was able, though, to sell it off to someone else and made a few bucks on it, and decided to walk north, because he knew [in the] south they were worse to colored people - because along the way white people attacked him, threatened him and tried to kill him, so he thought north was safer.

So he went to Iowa and landed in Winterset. Again, God blessed him with a nice, white couple - again [by] knocking on doors - who were willing to take him in. The husband was a doctor, and the wife needed help at the house - and he [George] was a great cook, cleaner, and did everything that was needed.

He asked a million questions of this family, as well, so this couple in Winterset, Iowa, said, "You need to go to college." He [George] finally told them the humiliating story of what happened in Highland College, and the man said, "We have connections with another school." They were Methodist and it was a Methodist college in Indianola, Iowa, called Simpson College.

They walked him to Simpson, made sure he got in and he stayed the year. He had learned to be a painter on the farm when he was a little boy, by taking berries and rubbing plants to get colors, scraping the plants onto the paper and onto the pavement, or whatever he had in front of him - he could paint. They didn't think, because he was a male, he should be allowed to paint at Simpson College - especially because he was colored, he shouldn't paint - but he was so good and proved to them that he was so good at it, they let him paint.

Then he asked about agriculture and they didn't have anything - it was a liberal arts school - so after a year they said, "We need to help you get to Iowa State." He graduated from Iowa State, and went on and taught at Iowa State. He did many other wonderful things. He had hundreds of patents.

When he was at the end of his time at Simpson he was thinking about staying, because he was comfortable there, and he could have become a very good artist. People were enamored by this colored boy who could paint. They really thought he might be something. It [his work] was almost unique, so he thought he could make a living at it. But he said, "God has told me that I need to care for my race. Painting would be good for me, but I don't see how painting would be good for my race. If I could do something in agriculture, I could help the poor, colored people who are almost all on the farms, and maybe I could figure out something that would be better than cotton that would make more money, than just their picking cotton, and I could make a difference in the lives of my race."

That was the motivating factor for him to go to Iowa State. Now, with all of the patents that he had the potential that he could have filed for, he could have been a multi-millionaire. He never filed for a patent, because his goal was not to make money, but to get the information out to as many of his race as he could so their lives would be better. If he patented, it then they would have to give him money, there were legal situations and it wouldn't get out fast enough, so he chose not to make much money, but to make everyone's life better.

I encourage you to go read the rest of the story. The reason that I picked out these parts were because he was meek, but his meekness was not weak. I don't think he was meek when he wouldn't look at white people who he thought would beat him. What was meek about him was his willingness to share what could have been patented, and make a lot of money, but to be meek enough to say, "I'm here for a greater mission than myself." That is what made him meek. He thought of things bigger than himself and gave of everything he had to others - that is what made him meek.

Now, the righteous part was his prayer life with God. But it didn't remain there. It wasn't just a personal relationship with God - that's only half of what righteousness means. The other half of righteousness was doing something in God's name to make the world a better place. Everything he did - the decisions he made - were always prayed over first and then the decision would be made. That is the definition of righteousness.

So as we leave here today, go out and read his biography. But even if you don't, ask yourself, how was George Washington Carver from - what Scott described this morning - meek in a way that wasn't weak? How was he righteous in a way that wasn't self-righteous, and how can I, in my own little world, do the same thing? Thinking about what God wants from my life more than what I want, and how can I make other people's lives better - and make that the first priority than what simply makes my life better?

If we can answer those questions, we will know what it means to be meek and righteous and therefore blessed. Amen