

“The Meek Laughs Best”

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The word *meek* isn't a word that we use very often. I think we don't use it because it's not a quality that we especially admire. When I hear the word *meek*, the first thing I think about is something weak and defenseless, like a lamb. And the second thing I think of is someone who is ineffectual and unwilling to stand up for himself – someone that my father often referred to as a real milquetoast. The qualities we are more likely to admire are strength, and power and charisma and persuasiveness, and *meek* doesn't seem to fit in with any of those categories.

Today, I'm inviting you to rethink the word *meek* with me, and I'm going to do that by telling you about a man who I think lives a life of *meekness* in the very best sense of the word.

This man was born on Sept. 10, 1928 in Geneva, Switzerland, where his father was on a diplomatic mission for the Canadian government. Most of his schooling was in England, but when World War II broke out, he was sent back to Canada with his brothers and sister. Two years later he entered the

Royal Naval College in England. Too young to enlist as a soldier, he assisted his mother in her Red Cross work in Paris after the war was over, helping to relocate and reunite those released from the concentration camps in Europe. In 1945, he received his officer's commission and began his naval career. As a midshipman, he was selected to accompany the Royal Family on their tour of South Africa aboard HMS *Vanguard* in 1947. In his early years, he was used to associating with the rich, the educated, and the powerful and the potential for his career in the navy or the diplomatic corps seemed limitless.

Despite the promising career that lay in front of him, he found himself drawn into prayer and reflection on what might be God's call for him. In 1950, he resigned from the Navy to study philosophy and theology at the Institut Catholique in Paris. There he distinguished himself as an intellectual and a scholar. In 1963, he published his doctoral dissertation on Aristotle, and was much in demand as a lecturer and teacher. He finally accepted a position in the philosophy department at the University of Toronto. Again, it appeared as if the potential for a career among the learned and the sophisticated was limitless.

After a year, he was back in Paris, living with Father Thomas Philippe, a Dominican priest and professor, who had become his spiritual mentor and close friend during his pre-doctoral studies. Father Thomas had left the university to become the chaplain to a small institution for men with developmental disabilities, the Val Fluery, in Trosly-Breuil. Living with Father Thomas increased his awareness of the plight of thousands of people institutionalized with developmental disabilities. Feeling a call from God, he decided to purchase his own house in Trosly-Breuil and make it into a home for two men from the institution, Raphael Simi and Philippe Seux. Bringing the men into his home meant taking on every aspect of their care, physical, emotional, spiritual, and their needs included the most basic. It was hard, demanding, round-the-clock work. But it was a service that he took on with great enthusiasm and joy. However, he was not the only one giving. He found himself receiving gifts of incredible value and importance from Raphael and Philippe, too, gifts of acceptance, of affection, of laughter. Together, the three men named their home L'Arche, which means "the ark," a reference to Noah's ark. And people began to take notice of the special nature and the healing love that was present in their home. Other people who came to work in the community quickly asked about the very tall man

with the large contagious smile who seemed to radiate compassion.

Do any of you recognize this man's story? Do any of you know his name? I didn't think very many of you would. But that's okay – fame and name recognition doesn't mean very much to people who are meek.

His name is Jean Vanier. And today there are 130 L'Arche communities in 30 countries on all continents of the world except Antarctica. Vanier still lives in Trosly-Breuil with other developmentally disabled men. Raphael died in 2004 and Philippe has moved to a different L'Arche house in another community. Vanier, also, travels the world, much in demand as a retreat leader and a lecturer. He works tirelessly in establishing new L'Arche communities and advocating for the care and acceptance of the developmentally disabled. His message is consistently the same. *“Those we lock away and think worthless have the power to teach and even to heal us. We are all “broken” in some way. When you start living with people with disabilities you begin to discover a whole lot of things about yourself. To be human is to be bonded together, each with our own weaknesses and strengths, because we need each other.”* For his

work with the developmentally disabled, Vanier has been awarded with the French Legion of Honor and has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

In Jean Vanier, I do not see weakness, or powerlessness, or ineffectiveness. I don't see anything that suggests being a victim, of not being willing to stand up for his rights or the fulfillment of his needs. Indeed, I see someone who is strong and powerful, and persuasive and self-controlled. Maybe that's what being "meek" is really all about. The poet, Mary Karr, had it right when she described meekness as "a great stallion at full gallop who will halt immediately at the master's voice."

Do you know the two people that the Bible describes as fulfilling the quality of meekness? Well, Jesus, of course. We celebrate and admire his kindness to the downtrodden, his compassion for the poor, his gentleness with the children. But do you see anything in Jesus' life that even hints at weakness, or powerless, or ineffectiveness? The other person is Moses. In Numbers 12:13 in the King James version, the verse says that Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth. Moses certainly wasn't weak. He was known to have a temper. He had such charisma that he was able to unite a group of dispirited slaves and

form them into a nation, and then lead them for forty years through a vast and trackless wilderness. He even dared to challenge the most powerful world leader of his day in repeated confrontations. And he even dared to argue with God when it came to the well being of the people he led. There's no lack of strength, or power, or effectiveness in Moses either. I think our popular, common image of the word *meek* has it all wrong.

I think a truly meek person knows his or her strength. I think a truly meek person knows that he or she has an incredible source of power that comes from God and is wise enough to know how to use that power for its greatest good for the greatest number of people. I think a truly meek person lives with the assurance that what God has begun in them will come to completion, not because of any virtue or talent on their part but simply because God is at work in them and God's purposes never fail. I think a truly meek person sees the world through eyes of compassion and with the awareness that they can do something to end the suffering, to mend the division, and to celebrate the healing. And I think a truly meek person laughs easily, and lustily, and long – because they know that the joy of the Lord is their strength.

I think I'm beginning to rather like the word *meek*. It's a word that I'd like to use more often. It's a word that I'd like other to use about me more often. I would be honored to be called meek. Wouldn't you ... wouldn't you?

*Blessed are the meek ... for they will inherit the earth.*