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Mark 10:13-16; John 2:12-16
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MEN OF VELVET, MEN OF STEEL

During my boyhood my father was in the automobile parts business and used to bring home various trade journals which I would thumb through, because, even as boys today, I was interested in cars. For some reason or other I have never forgotten one particular advertisement that ran for a long time in several of those journals. It advertised a motor oil and always appeared with the picture of a big, tough looking man in a turtle neck sweater and cap, and this slogan, "Tough, but oh so gentle!" Because the slogan has stayed with me all these years, I suppose it is an ad man's dream; however, from that same ad man's point of view, unfortunate it is that I can't remember the name of the motor oil.

The slogan, however, after rattling around in my brain for 10 these many years, has finally become a kind of text for this sermon. From a spiritual point of view, it is an accurate and concise description of Jesus--tough, but oh so gentle.

There are many who might deny that the description fits, but they would be those who have never really understood and appreciated this marvelous and miraculous man. We are so accustomed from childhood to think of him as the "gentle Jesus, meek and mild", who wouldn't hurt a fly, who was ever so soft and sweet.

II

Let's begin by taking a look at that side of Jesus' life, what we will refer to as the velvet side. Certainly there is much to be said about it. He was indeed gentle, understanding, compassionate, forgiving, and all the other synonymous adjectives one could mention. But meek and mild? That does not quite seem to fit.

One thinks of him calling the children together and rebuking the disciples for trying to send them away; "Permit the little children to come to me and forbid them not." Because I myself am a lover of children and dogs, I have a conviction that no one who loves children and dogs can be all bad. But does love for children mean that one is mild and mousy?

Perhaps some people, men especially, look upon Jesus as some kind of sissy because he epitomizes all those highest and best qualities in human life which they themselves find it so difficult to emulate. It is partly a matter of living in a culture where the opposite characteristics are so highly emphasized. Physical strength is so much more heralded by the mass media than is mental or spiritual strength. We teach our male children to grow up and be "men", by which

we mean, "Don't cry, don't complain, hide your deepest feelings, be cold and unemotional." The results can often be seen in physical, mental and marital breakdowns. Did you ever hear any minister preach a sermon on the text, "Jesus Wept"? Many don't like to think of him being that kind of person. We have often been conditioned into being cold, hard machines, instead of warm-blooded human beings.

Another difficulty is that we so often judge others by appearances. We see the outward man and are ignorant of the battles that may be going on in the inner man. The most gentle, kind and mild-mannered man it was ever my privilege to know suffered his dose of pain everyday of his life, the result of having his back broken twice as a child. A man of velvet, but inside there was the strongest kind of steel.

Because as a clergyman I have so many unique opportunities to come to know men and women well, I have learned how foolish it is to judge people by outward appearances. Your experience will certainly verify my own and testify to the fact that often the biggest, toughest looking characters are indeed the most gentle and kind. And the reverse is likewise true. Sometimes, perhaps because of some law of compensation, the small and the weak become the nastiest and the meanest of persons.

It is very easy to get a wrong perspective on values when we consider people, just as we get a wrong perspective when we consider things. We put a great value today on athletes with their bulging biceps and giant frames, and of course there is merit in being at our physical best. But if one had to make the choice, which would he choose? Put before yourself a hypothetical situation. Suppose some power confronted you this morning and said to you, "You can have physical perfection, or you can have wisdom and insight and understanding and sensitivity." Which would you choose? The choice would be revealing of your sense of values. Which would you rather be, a Charles Atlas or a St. Francis of Assisi? An O. J. Simpson or an Albert Schweitzer? A Caesar or a Christ?

In Jesus' Beatitudes which precede the Sermon on the Mount, the word "blessed" is perhaps better translated "happy", but happy in the fullest sense of the word, in the sense of fulness of joy. Jesus does not proclaim "Happy are the strong and the fit, happy are the powerful and the popular." Had he said that one doubts that his words would have come ringing down the corridors of time for 2000 years. He blessed rather the peacemakers, the meek, the poor in spirit, those men and women who had the qualities of velvet, the highest spiritual qualities.

III

But one must point out that it is not a matter of either/or. Jesus did not praise those who alone possessed the velvet qualities. Nor did he condemn those who had qualities of steel. Twice blessed are those who have both, and it is true that those who have qualities

of velvet usually are discovered to possess also the qualities of steel. His highest praise was reserved for a soldier, whose faith, he said, was greater than any he had seen in Israel.

If you think of Jesus as being one who was primarily meek and mild ask yourself if you could have lived the same life and done the same things if you had known it would all lead you to death upon the cross. Do you have that much steel in you?

In "Henry VI" Shakespeare clearly defined the distinction between the velvet and the steel in human character:

"What stronger breastplate than a heart untainted,
Thrice is he armed that hath his quarrel just:
And he but naked, though locked up in steel,
Whose conscience with injustice is corrupted."

No, if you think Jesus was the meek and mild type, consider those incidents in his career where his steel shows through. Consider him casting the moneychangers out of the temple. Today that would roughly be the equivalent of smashing the bingo equipment in some church, the name of which we shall not mention. Think of him condemning the religious authorities, the scribes and pharisees, in the harshest of terms. And think of him facing Pilate with probably the absolute certainty that he was headed straight for the cross. Is that enough steel for you? Do you have as much? Here was a man of velvet, to be sure, but here also was a man of steel.

IV

Due to an unusual and long chain of circumstances, I have been calling on a 19 year old man in the Veterans Hospital. A few weeks ago he was a strong, virile youth of above average intelligence, athletic, a student of the United States Air Force Academy. Then he went mountain climbing with some other men from the Academy. One of the party made a misstep and fell. His weight pulled the pitons out of the rock and the young 19 year old was pulled from the side of the mountain also. His companion was killed, and he himself sustained a broken back and complete paralysis below the waist.

As a student at the Air Force Academy I am sure he could be designated a man of steel in more ways than one. They only take the best. But now this young man is required to call upon the deepest resources of his being, the finest steel he has within him. As one talks with him one can see that already it is surfacing. This steel is not physical, but spiritual, and in most of us it is only a potentiality until some great need calls it forth.

To be "tough, but oh so gentle", is the mark of a really human person, but it is the consequence of a proper relationship with God. He alone can inspire and strengthen those powers within us which enable us to endure all things and to achieve the victory.