

The Spirit of Gentleness: The orientating virtue of Christian Ministry

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A Senior Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Divinity

Harvard Divinity School

Cambridge, Massachusetts

April 2021

Introduction/Definition of gentleness

“My friends,[a] if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted.”

-Galatians 6:1 (NRSV)

Our society is going through convulsive times. We are being pressed into different sides of a conflict that has begun before many of us were even born. The reactions and emotions that are born from such a conflict are understandably at a boiling point. We do not have to look far to identify this effervescence: we have recently lived through the infamous day of January 6th, 2021. An angry mob of people alongside more organized groups of white supremacist ideology, stormed Capitol Hill in Washington DC, one of the great symbols of American Democracy. This violent mob, which abounded with Christian imagery, was a perfect representation of the storm that was predicted after years of divisive and incendiary rhetoric in US politics, the corrosion of trust in powerful institutions and world leaders, and ultimately the cultural divided which pits one ideology against another, one worldview over another. This erosion brought about not only political unrest, but a societal illness that has seeped into the very soul of the American citizenry. Nevertheless, this illness affects all of humanity, and has frozen the hearts of people in response to other humans that stand at the other side of the conflict. We are witnessing the crumbling of the virtues that bridges the understanding of difference. We lack the gentle footprint around the soils of people's lives and their sufferings. Our communal bonds have become rough and cutting edges. With full knowledge of Christian complicity in such a state of affairs, what is our responsibility towards our neighbors in this dangerous time? As Christians, how are we to respond? What characterizes the response of a community of people conformed to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ? I propose we begin with gentleness. Across the New Testament,

we hear in St. Paul's as well as other NT authors, a plea to all Christ-followers to treat others in a spirit of *πραΰτης*: gentleness, mildness, humility or meekness. All of these words which refer to the virtue of gentleness, or meekness, have been codified in different contexts within a Christian cultural framework. Today, it is mired in a web of conventionality and triviality, taken for granted and even undesired. How do we conceive of gentleness today, and act in the spirit of gentleness as Paul prompted us to do?

Let us first search for a working definition of gentleness that unsettles the convention. Starting at the root of faith, how does the New Testament interpret gentleness? As referenced above, *πραΰτης* is the NT Greek word mostly used to designate this virtue. Etymologically, the word expresses “gentle strength”, or power with reserve or gentleness, while also springing from a divine origin by its association with the Spirit in the Pauline text. In this Early Christian context, gentleness is initiated and culminated in an act by the will of God, operating from the believer's faith. Therefore, gentleness is a divinely inspired virtue that has to do with restraint of one's own power or strength over others. It is the basis of self-control over the passions. In this aspect we can see how in Paul, it is reflected as a spiritual element in which transgressions, sins, and conflict are overcome by God's willing of His people to be gentle with one another in the trials of life. This accords with the anthropology of the New Testament. Gentleness is also often expressed through humility. To be gentle, one expresses the fundamental humility that fosters the equanimity of relationships, a person is not above or below the person he or she is in relation with. Furthermore, gentleness is intimately connected to love. It is the gateway for love to manifest itself fully without overcoming the recipient with just our own complicated and loud selves, but letting Christ shine through the gentle giver. Gentleness is summoned often in the context of communal relationships, it is expected within the bounds of loving community,

spiritual siblinghood, and proper testimony before God. It presupposes a consistent understanding of the other as worthy of our complete attention and kind care, because God desires so. As it is written in Philippians 4:5: “Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near”.

We are bounded to act in a “spirit of gentleness” with our neighbors, in which we first recognize a shared existential situation in relation to sin, stating that we have all fallen short of the Glory of God, and therefore in community we sustain ourselves by God’s Grace in mutual restraint of our violent capacities, not overpowering others by our own will, but rather act gently by decreasing, letting the other fellow sufferer that reflects the face of Christ to increase in abundance of goodness. By decreasing to self-glorification, power, and hatred, we empty ourselves for the filling of God’s mercy, which increases among us the presence of the spirit of gentleness, as Paul suggested to the Galatians. Therefore, we must know ourselves to be sinners, to be human creatures in similar need, to recognize our own selves in the other, that the other and myself are not separated by our needs and weaknesses, but rather connected and strengthened by mutual recognition. In gentleness, we are able to nurse each other into wholeness because gentleness is an ontologically healing act, it restores and cares for the essential nature of human beings under God’s sovereignty. Thus, gentleness is the disposition of being that affects and colors our striving towards virtues. It gives them depth and direction into the presence of God by being a reminder of God’s treatment for our humanity. Rooted in this New Testament basis, I propose the following claim about gentleness: gentleness is the primal virtue that is cultivated in response to God’s Mercy expressed in Jesus Christ. Now, an important consideration must be made regarding our own context viewed in light of this argument about gentleness. The spirit of gentleness, brought about by God in us, is not a virtue that arises from the application of law.

There is no direct formula we can concoct to reproduce gentleness uniformly and out of our own political will. Gentleness proceeds from God's grace, it is a result from the testimony of God's working in us. We honor our Christian vocation by exercising, however limited, the spirit of gentleness with our neighbors under the context of grace. This means that even our service is received "unmerited" by the recipient, its freely given. Political repercussions from this ministerial pursuit could be both radical or not radical at all, it depends on the conditions of where one lives and works. The fruits of gentleness could be public or private, done individually or as a Church community. God, in the end, is the initiator and completer of the work.

As we explore the proposed questions, we will meditate through various exemplars of the faith and this particular virtue the effects and invaluableness of gentleness to Christian living. I argue that gentleness is the orientating virtue in Christian ministerial life. It gives form to love, and opens up the pathways for the rest of Christian virtue. I will therefore examine two theoretical columns in my work, Alasdair MacIntyre and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and what their vision for ethics is. Then I will draw from their theory and establish 4 narratives (Mister Rogers, L'Arche, Etty Hillesum, and Martin Luther) that will help me define and demonstrate what gentleness looks like in the context of a life lived. And thus life together, to borrow Bonhoeffer's title of his book on Christian communal living, is made possible in the spirit of gentleness, for only so can we enact mercy to the real people that make up the potential conflicts and their wounds upon our collective and individual lives. Can the gentle hand reconcile the sinful and saintly humanity within us, and among us in the form of our neighbors?

Theoretical Framework -Alasdair MacIntyre and Virtue Theory

To understand the importance of gentleness in a Christian ministerial context, it will be helpful to first turn to Catholic Moral Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's virtue theory, from his seminal book, *After Virtue*, which revitalized the field of virtue ethics, providing an powerful alternative to contemporary liberal moral discourse. MacIntyre's contribution is summarized in the elaboration of the contingency of the virtue based on specific traditions and narratives that make the virtues intelligible to the community of practitioners. For MacIntyre, virtues are social facts. Therefore, virtues work best not at the behest of separated individual modes of conduct, as with contemporary liberalism. Contemporary liberal thought on the virtues hinge on a compartmentalized set of ethics where human ethical life is divided to differing levels of ethical conducts. These differing levels are subject to arbitrary development depending on the individual. Traditions and communal practices are not expected to function within these sets, for the individualized system of ethics are not responsive to historical developments, but it sees itself as ahistorical facts. MacIntyre pushes back by pointing at the inefficiencies of the virtues practiced outside historical or narrative referential frameworks. These sets of virtues have no *telos*, no end to which they are aiming. Another problem would be the inherent contradictions within these sets, as they lack perspective of their own historical origin and the mythos that surround individualized sets of ethics themselves. Theologian Stanley Hauerwas posits this as the illusion of choice given by the liberal narrative that states one is free to choose. However, are we actually free to choose, when we didn't even choose this narrative of freedom of choice in liberal democratic society? Hauerwas precisely points at the fact that even in this subtle and widely spread assent in our society, we are subject by narratives outside our own choosing,; we are formed and spoken into being. Therefore, we are presented with a dilemma about the

intelligibility of the virtues in addition to a crisis of communal practice and coherency.

MacIntyre's work is a rectification of the place of the virtues in human life, and a looking forward to unifying human life in the prospect of its historical perspective, its communal dynamics, and the individual participation within the proper frames of action that give rise and meaning to virtuous action.

To inquire in more detail, let's move to MacIntyre's analysis into the nature of the virtues. First and foremost, virtues are a secondary phenomena. MacIntyre explains that virtues follow a "concept of the good life for man" as prior to the actual practice and expression of virtue (184). We must first answer the question of what is the good, before we proceed to act upon the good in the appropriate manner. In this account, MacIntyre uses examples from fiction, in which a particular content points to, for example, an exemplary Christian moral outcome. In the atmosphere of fiction such as Jane Austen's or CS Lewis, we can evidence exactly what they conceive as the highest good in which the moral universe is bent towards. Outside of that aim, there is no basis for any action, and thus a randomness is set in place that endangers the focus of the virtues. This concept of the good life for man is not, however, an immovable set of practices or system of ethics. MacIntyre reminds us that a history of tradition is at play when engaging within a particular ethical framework. Each stage of development within that system presupposes the previous stage. Therefore, the traditions are conscious of history and its movements. Virtues play a role within a shared framework that is constantly commented upon by each progressive stage (187).

Therefore, after having established MacIntyre's claim about the place of the virtues within a concept of the good life for human persons in a historical and alive tradition of practices and virtues, we move on to MacIntyre's definition of a practice. Practices are:

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended (187)

MacIntyre defines a practice as a type of collective medium from which human beings can arrive at particularly defined goods. How to reach these goods heavily depends on coherency, which means the reciprocity and adequacy between ends and actions. Since it is a collective action, systematic pondering upon right action is developed for the sake of communal subsistence. In the end, communal subsistence hangs in the balance between experience and application, which refers back to the importance of narrative. Past experience cemented in tradition is passed on for the sake of the present community to harken back and move forward in the present. Therefore, the importance of recognizing the sociology of the virtues in relation to their historical quality and their contingent nature in relation to human relationality, teleology and community. As MacIntyre reminds us: “Practices have a history” (190). In relation to this history, practices are therefore not free to be interpreted arbitrarily, but are subject to authority and precedent. To engage in a practice “is to subject my own attitudes, choices, preferences and tastes to the standards which currently and partially define the practice” (190). The communal experience leads to this subjection in practice. The narrative and histories of the practices we engage in have a grasp of us that we cannot escape if we want to inhabit the atmosphere of the defined goods. In form of a caveat, MacIntyre states the following: “the standards are not themselves immune from criticism, but nonetheless we

cannot be initiated into a practice without accepting the authority of the best standards realized so far.” (190). Thus, there is an openness of expression within the settled structures of ethics. Nonetheless, these structures are present to be able to move with integrity across different contexts. It is important to remark that the good that is sought and the medium of execution to reach those goods are for “the good of the whole community who participate in the practice” (190-1). The community either benefits or suffers at the integral witness of its defined practices and goods.

MacIntyre reminds us further that practices and virtues are rooted in relationships with the past and present:

To enter into a practice is to enter into a relationship not only with its contemporary practitioners, but also with those who have preceded us in the practice, particularly those whose achievements extended the reach of the practice to its present point. It is thus the achievement, and a fortiori the authority, of a tradition which I then confront and from which I have to learn (194)

To practice well, we must realize that practices are not alienated facts, which could be one problem in contemporary and popular moral thinking. As part of an anthropological argument, I do not make myself nor can I define the good by myself. We constantly turn to others in our own self-definition, and always will we be confronted by the web of relations that hold us and our ends together. Our story will always be besides the stories of others, which both in turn belong to overarching stories that help us navigate our daily lives. All and any story is not beyond criticism, as MacIntyre suggests earlier, but truly we are in continuum and flux within the dynamism of the stories that form and grew us into being. MacIntyre echoes this as he writes: “I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful

expectations and obligations. These constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point. This is in part what gives my life its own moral particularity” (220). Hence, we are always morally and ontologically imbedded, and our individuality rises from that accumulation of layers, that effervescence of social and moral variables that give our life unity and direction. In contrast to contemporary liberal individualist ethics¹, we are not unique by how we fashion ourselves, but in how we are called into being by a multitude of voices that we cannot even fathom the depth.

There is something to say about how we counter the presence of evil in communal settings and their practices, and MacIntyre affirms the existence of practices that are simply evil (200). Yet, this does not deter from the importance of recognizing the main argument MacIntyre is making about the virtues. An important question is always how this fits into the whole spectrum of human complexity and life. For example, as Christians, how do we witness to our story alongside the notion of human experience? How does our narrative project itself into human life, and how does our human condition project itself into our narrative? Once more, it is important to look deeply into the structures that holds communities and practices together that aid us in our quest to seek the defined good in any given circumstance that holds truth, wellbeing and life abundant to the whole of human phenomena and experience.

This presence of practices, communal structures, systems of ethics, histories of practice, mainly point at the importance of narrative. Narrative is the nexus that holds everything together for collective purposes. This reasoning is why, later on we will engage with different narratives of gentleness in which we see how gentleness as a virtue is incarnated and practiced as part of the

¹ MacIntyre criticizes and posits himself against “liberal individualism” as an antagonist. As a product and institution of the historical process of modern societies and economic institutions, “Individualism is thus the form that modern self- consciousness has assumed by extricating itself from the narrative order(s) that had hitherto given it a definite content. And only by this act of self-disengagement does one achieve the standpoint of individualism that modern moral philosophers take for granted as the fulcrum of all moral action”(Hinchman, 644). The “de-situated self” whose moral actions are not mediated narratively, but are rather led by preferences that are imposed on any context, suffer a communal disjointedness which prevents a deep association and relationality.

intelligible effect of the story we were handed down to as Christians. Namely, that we have been redeemed and clothed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ by the Grace of God. This narrative fact has changed all things for us, and therefore everything we do is a ripple in the story that as Hauerwas would state: “is not of our own making”. MacIntyre’s explanation of virtue theory helps us see this aspect of faith more clearly.

Theological Anthropology - Bonhoeffer

After reviewing narrational virtue ethics by MacIntyre as an important piece in positioning the virtue of gentleness as an orientating virtue, I would like to turn to the other face of our theoretical framework through Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s work on Christian Ethics. Bonhoeffer is leading us to think theologically about the human condition, leading us beyond the question of good and evil in relation to Christian’s concern with ethics. Bonhoeffer is claiming a theological anthropology which positions action within a self-consideration of the human being in relation to God. To summarize, Bonhoeffer places an anthropological dichotomy based in the Genesis account of the origin of sin: human beings in adoption of knowledge about good and evil, and the human being that does not consider knowledge of good and evil because he considers himself in relation to God’s absolute goodness. Bonhoeffer in his *Ethics* states:

For Christian ethics, the mere possibility of knowing about good and evil is already a falling away from the origin [Ursprung]. Living in the origin, human beings know nothing but God alone. They know other human beings, things, and themselves only in the unity of their knowledge of God; they know everything only in God, and God in all things. Knowledge about good and evil points to the prior disunion and estrangement [Entzweiung] from this origin. (300)

The human in possession of knowledge of good and evil position himself in the judge’s seat by virtue of grasping the distinction, while the human that position himself outside the distinction

acts in light of God's original knowledge of the distinction. This is to say, by adopting such knowledge, human beings are creating ethics as if they were God, while the other is subject to God's goodness in a relationship of dependency as creatures of the God that is all light and Goodness. Bonhoeffer writes: "Human beings as the image of God live completely out of their origin in God; having become equal with God, however, they have misappropriated the origin and made themselves their own creator and judge" (300-1) Therefore, the Christian must place him/herself in the realm of Christ's action, which is the reconciliation between the human and God. The human stands before God in Christ, which is God's action of reconciliation and restoration to God's original goodness:

Love thus denotes what God does to human beings to overcome the disunion in which they lived. This deed is called Christ, it is called reconciliation. Love is thus something that happens to human beings, something passive, something not at their disposal, because it lies utterly beyond their existence in the state of disunion. Love means to undergo [Erleiden] the transformation of one's entire existence by God (336)

Thus, any human action, for a Christian, to be rooted in the good, to be counted as virtue, is the reflection and recognition of God becoming human in the world in Jesus Christ. God has transformed us and has moved us into the fulfillment of His Will through Christ. Our capacities are an extension of God's primordial action. In regards to love, Bonhoeffer continues: "Love has its origin not in us but in God. Love is not a human behavior but God's" (334). This is to say that we are to be single-minded in regards to our attention to where the good is from, and therefore to recognize the good as coming from God alone into us through the work of reconciliation performed by Jesus Christ.

Bonhoeffer's insistence on this anthropological account is based on the Lutheran insistence that it is God's act that is primordial in the realm of good and evil. Acts of human beings are conducive to an illusory distinction between what is good and evil, ever subjected to

the arbitrary variables of human existence. This is to say that human ethics, conceived as only discernable from human reason and isolated from community by being extrapolated from individual concerns, are historical phenomena and do not have their origin in God's eternal action in Jesus Christ. Christ is the eternal word incarnate from which God acts in complete goodness and grace to humanity as a whole. Therefore, it is Christian's duty to live in Christ's action in the world. The Christian's ethical considerations, their lives, their communities are surrendered totally to the person of Jesus Christ as locus and embodiment of any Christian ethic. We cannot start from a position of what are the system of ethics of the historical person called Jesus, but we must pose the theological stance upon the narrative that marks the life of the Christian community in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For Bonhoeffer our human responsibilities are transformed by the person of Jesus, by God's good act in history through Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer states further:

Action in accord with Christ does not originate in some ethical principle, but in the very person of Jesus Christ. This is because everything real is summed up in Christ, who, by definition, is the origin of any and all action that is in accord with reality. Jesus Christ is the very embodiment of the person who lives responsibly. He is not the individual who seeks to attain his own ethical perfection. Instead, he lives only as the one who in himself has taken on and bears the selves of all human beings. His entire life, action, and suffering is vicarious representative action [Stellvertretung]. As the one who has become human he indeed stands in the place of all human beings. (231)

Hence, ethics are not the end, but simply a means to live within the telos that is the embodiment and reflection of the person of Jesus Christ in the world. The reality of the material world, its sufferings and cares, are reflected in Christ, and in Christ, the Church acts in complete freedom to venture into worldly responsibility for the sake of others. In Jesus, we see and experience the whole of human reality, and thus we are called to care and be wholly responsible because the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ has begun a transformation of humanity into God's original goodness,

instead of human discernment about what is right or wrong. The virtues we practice distinguish us, they are outward signs of our calling as Christians, they respond to the narrative that God has given us. Nonetheless, we must ascertain that these distinguishing virtues, that are the aroma of Christian life, do not overpower the role of faith. Faith is trusting in the direction of the narrative, and the end of the Christian narrative is Jesus Christ who ultimately reigns and saves us from the pit of despair. The world tests the limits of our capacity to perform the virtues, and by the power of God we live them out, however imperfectly, until the end which God will reify.

Taking into account Bonhoeffer's emphasis about Christian ethical action, we see firstly the specific narrative in which a virtue can become a virtue without compromising the essential relationship between God and human works. Secondly, we can picture how the virtue of gentleness is part of this larger dynamic in which it is not the perfection of virtuous action, the perfection of gentleness, but the reflection of gentleness that stems from God's action with humanity through Jesus Christ. God's transformation of humanity by God becoming human has changed the landscape of human action and disposition. How we embrace reality in turn becomes a reflection of God's action through Christ, and this makes us act in a particular way because we want to respond faithfully to the divine initiative. The narrative in which we live our ethical lives is therefore a theological reality that is shaping the form and content of our humanity, reconciling us to God and beginning to be a whole human. Bonhoeffer ends one of his chapters with a beautiful caveat in which he explains what is it exactly that God's primordial actions embraces:

To be loved by God certainly does not prohibit human beings from thinking powerful thoughts and doing joyful deeds. It is as whole human beings, as thinking and acting human beings, that we are loved by God in Christ, that we are reconciled with God. And as whole human beings, thinking and acting, we love God and our brothers and sisters (337-8)

By loving God, who loved us first, we begin to love our neighbors even more so, in their full humanity, and therefore respond in a spirit of gentleness with them, for the sake of Christ that took us up in reconciliation with God. We must not forget, however, that the Christian will be confronted with the gravity that the fallen world drops upon our shoulders; Bonhoeffer himself carried his cross when he was led to act, suffer and die. To act gently will not always spring from our being so easily, we might suffer from it, or even be led to actions transgressing the bounds of gentleness as we know it. The story of Bonhoeffer's life testifies to this difficulty when he resisted the Nazis. Gentleness does not justify us, or saves us; Jesus Christ justifies and saves. Bonhoeffer's last words reveal to us, by living in faith and trust, by knowing ourselves held in this covenant with God through Christ, "the beginning of life" is seen beyond the horizon of death. So we should act freely, in the radicalness of spirit that God acts in us, and have faith in the God that calls us to this life. Hold fast to the Word of Promise that has already been declared over us in Jesus Christ.

Narratives: Mister Rogers and L'Arche

To understand what we can call the incarnation of a virtue, how we see the virtues manifest in ordinary and extra-ordinary life, we must look to actual lives lived in the spirit of gentleness. Following through with the framework that has been established, narratives are vehicles of ethical interpretation and application. By studying the virtues beside narratives, we can actually see the polyphonic nature of a virtue, meaning how a virtue manifests in different contexts with different voices. Henceforth, we shall be exploring the virtue of gentleness as the orientating Christian virtue by analyzing narratives about Fred Rogers, L'Arche, Etty Hillesum and Martin Luther.

I. Fred Rogers and his *Neighborhood*: “I like you just the way you are”

Fred Rogers, better known as Mister Rogers, was an American children’s television personality and a Presbyterian minister. He felt called to the world of television as an object of ministry, in which he thought television would be an important medium to enact positive change in people’s lives, especially in the lives of children. The desire to start in television stemmed from the feeling that television was terribly misused. Always looking to reach the hearts of children, he thought about what adults were putting children through. He realized that adults were treating children as adults *in potentia*, looking at children from the perspective of what they will become, not for who they are in the present. Rogers even mentions the following trend in the world of television itself when they reached out to children: “they will become great consumers one day” (*Won’t you be my neighbor?* 22:47-22:54). Fred Rogers was aware of the precarious situation children were being exposed to through television, which included violence, superheroes, boys with armed rifles, inanities, etc. Therefore, he decided to become a counter-current to that trend, imbuing this newfound vocation with his own religious one.

The television program that was born from this root of concern was *Mister Rogers Neighborhood*. The Neighborhood was a holistic concept for Rogers, as he explored the different facets of being individuals that live in relationship to other people. The Neighborhood was an ethical simulacrum for children, which communicated without condescension to children an understanding of complex human matters in a way they could understand. The Neighborhood embodied Fred Rogers’ simple philosophy and even theology: you are born special; you don’t have to do anything sensational for people to love you. Rogers believed in a radical outpouring of Grace and kindness that overcame any obstacle. He would say: “Love is at the end of everything; the presence or the lack of it” (*Won’t you be my neighbor?* 4:00-4:10). These tidbits

of Rogers show only a small fraction of how he incarnated these statements. Look no further than Mister Rogers to provide an incarnational theology and philosophy that privileges the uniqueness of the singular human person. Its not just about talking, but about working on it, breathing it, living it.

Mister Rogers wrote one special song that encapsulated his belief in the uniqueness and lovable-ness of human persons, a gentle song if there has ever been one: “It is You I Like”. The song goes like this:

It's you I like
it's not the things you wear.
It's not the way you do your hair,
but it's you I like.
The way you are right now,
the way down deep inside you.
Not the things that hide you.
Not your caps and gowns,
they're just beside you.
But it's you, I like.
Every part of you.
Your skin, your eyes, your feelings.
Whether old or new,
I hope that you remember,
even when you're feeling blue,
that it's you I like,
it's you, yourself,
it's you
It's you I like.

In the 2002 Dartmouth Commencement Address, Mister Rogers explained what he meant by this song:

And what that ultimately means, of course, is that you don't ever have to do anything sensational for people to love you. When I say it's you I like, I'm talking about that part of you that knows that life is far more than anything you can ever see, or hear, or touch. That deep part of you, that allows you to stand for those things, without which humankind cannot survive. Love that conquers hate. Peace that rises triumphant over war. And justice that proves more powerful than greed.

In his song, Mister Rogers is talking to the vulnerable self, the naked self without the ornaments of worldly honor or prestige. He is saying that this self, the one he likes, is the source of the good. It is where God has placed our value as His children, in the heart of our very selves. Yet, how does one speak to this vulnerable self? This self so torn by the push and pulls of the world? I argue that only the gentle word at the heart of *I like You as You are* can pierce the obfuscating layers. It is a word of trust, a word that speaks directly to the person and declares upon them the grace that God has bestowed upon us. It is a declaration of intimate relationality, where love gently weaves together the fragments of life to pursue what is highest, the virtues and practices that serve the good. The song does not betray the relationship by way of production, nothing needs to be done except an openness to the Other, a promise to walk gently in the secret place of our pure humanity. The only way to sing this song is gently, as Mister Rogers sang it, which implies careful attention and care for the one it is being sung to, a consideration of the person in front of us. Mister Rogers posed the difficult questions regarding the choices we make that make us act in constructive or destructive ways. It goes to exemplify, how the disposition of the words that come from our lives matter intensely. Rogers states:

I'm very much interested in choices, and what it is, and who it is, that enable us human beings to make the choices we make all through our lives. What choices lead to ethnic cleansing? What choices lead to healing? What choices lead to the destruction of the environment, the erosion of the Sabbath, suicide bombings, or teenagers shooting teachers. What choices encourage heroism in the midst of chaos? (*Dartmouth Address*)

What choices do we hand out to our fellow human beings, when we lack love? What barriers do we create between our selves, when we abandon the Other to the violence of the suffering world? Roger's song brings to us a tall order, an order that is echoed in the command of God to love

one's neighbor as oneself, when at the center of our identities is the God that wonderfully made us, irrespective of the garments we wear, or the way we do things. We should not deny our feelings, but neither should we let our wounds fester uncontrollably, especially if it affects the others we have not been able to enter into relationship with. We never know the full story of people, which makes gentleness the primordial step in our venturing towards social and interpersonal healing, and most importantly, into the root of love. Love and gentleness are intimately linked to each other. Gentleness is the gate for which we can witness love. We make space for love, open up time for love, invite the presence of love through gentleness. By not occupying, closing, or filling up space, time, and presence with our own selfishness or ego, in cultivating an atmosphere where the other can coexist in relationship to my life in such a way that is not forceful or coercive, I am leading the Other to exist in relationship to myself just as the Other presents him/herself. Gentleness orients and opens up space for a love that is shared equally and abundantly spacious for it to grow deeper. Therefore, to say *it is You I like* is not a flowery and vacuous statement, but rather the starting point to a deeper existential connection oriented by gentleness, because it unburdens the listener from heavy expectations about friendship, and instead of competing for one's love, the love is granted through a gentle acceptance of just being oneself; the gift of presence. As Rogers reminds us: "Our world hangs like a magnificent jewel in the vastness of space. Every one of us is a part of that jewel. A facet of that jewel. And in the perspective of infinity, our differences are infinitesimal. We are intimately related. May we never even pretend that we are not" (*Dartmouth Address*). We are connected amidst difference, and by being gentle with each other's specialness we arrive at the realization that Rogers had: "Because deep down, we know that what matters in this life is more than winning for ourselves. What really matters is helping others win, too. Even if it means slowing down and changing our course

now and then” (*Dartmouth Address*). Gentleness is slowing down for the other, not to be carried away by our own ego and power. To win for ourselves only is to isolate our self from others. Salvation comes when we all win, when the isolation is overcome with the life-giving presence of the other. We place ourselves as the flag of solidarity, to provide in any way possible the humble treatment of mutual love and compassion by way of a shared state of being human.

Thus, to pray like Mister Rogers is to slow down and name the names of each person that you’ve met and hold dear. You can say their names and thank God for them. Afterwards, one can pray for a blessing for each and every one, pray for the solutions to their wounds and problems, be a prayerful bridge to peace of mind, to love, to justice, for the benefit of the one who is my neighbor. Gentleness clears the path to this life of prayer as it helps us the human being in need, as it projects the image of God that resides in all of us.

Often there are times, when our neighbors and those close to us, the people we are in relationship with, those we pray for and look after, affect us in ways we can perceive as negative, hurtful, unfair, unmeasured or annoying. We can be prone to forget their specialness. We can even forget Jesus’ commandment to love one another as He has loved us. We get mad or angry, and therefore might act in a way that hurts or dips into the violent potential in us, the sin that is so quickly to spread beyond the boundaries we imagine for it. Mister Rogers penned the following song for this kind of feeling and he provides us with the gesture of gentleness as that which keeps at bay our violence, and opens the gate for love:

What do you do with the mad that you feel
When you feel so mad you could bite?
When the whole wide world seems oh, so wrong...
And nothing you do seems very right?

What do you do? Do you punch a bag?
Do you pound some clay or some dough?
Do you round up friends for a game of tag?

Or see how fast you go?

It's great to be able to stop
When you've planned a thing that's wrong,
And be able to do something else instead
And think this song:

I can stop when I want to
Can stop when I wish
I can stop, stop, stop any time.
And what a good feeling to feel like this
And know that the feeling is really mine.
Know that there's something deep inside
That helps us become what we can.
For a girl can be someday a woman
And a boy can be someday a man.

Rogers is exhorting through this song to recognize, reflect, and reorient. Rogers is saying that there will come a time when we are tested, and we won't be feeling charitable or gentle. He asks, "what do you do?" What can we do with this anger? Rogers claims that we can have self-control. That part of growing up and being in relationship is knowing that we can't be spilling over our unchecked violence over everyone that wrong us. We must inhabit the spirit of gentleness, knowing that we can "punch a bag", that we have strength and power, and yet to be fully realized human beings in loving relationship to others, we have the ability to say "stop" and not to lord this power over our neighbor. Instead we can assure ourselves of the goodness that comes from gentleness that leads to love, and ultimately, peace of mind and relationship. This song is an invitation to gentleness with our neighbors and ourselves. It recognizes our fragility and volatility, and yet has compassion over this reality, seeing that it can be otherwise fruitful and life-giving instead of destructive. In gentleness, we therefore realize ourselves in Christ, we enter into a spiritual atmosphere of equilibrium where we can see things rightly, in their uniqueness and under the guise of God's will for us in Christ. We are able to remember that *mandatum* of

love that Jesus speaks to us, and therefore see what we are feeling in the freedom provided by that grace and direction.

If there is anyone in the 20th century that embodied the spirit of gentleness, it is Fred Rogers. There are many testimonials of people who's lives have been improved by *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*:

Rebecca Bulotsky Shearer, an associate professor in the University of Miami's Department of Psychology who has worked with children her entire professional life, feels Mr. Rogers was 'ahead of his time.' 'He was like a friend,' said Shearer, who as a child watched the show. 'He was before his time. He instilled the idea of being mindful, being kind, being compassionate, being thoughtful, stopping and smelling the roses.' She said that all the principles he talked about gave young children a sense of security. ("The profound influence of Mr. Rogers")

And there are a plethora of stories more. Nevertheless, I will begin with my own. I never saw Mister Rogers Neighborhood as a child. In a way, I grew up with many of the shows and cultural references that Mister Rogers came to abhor from the world of television. I met him only recently through a documentary titled *Would you be my Neighbor?*, that focused on his life journey and the concept of the Neighborhood. Once I finished the documentary, not a dry eye in the cinema, I was struck with one particular sentiment: the presence of the Holy Spirit through the gentle demeanor of this man. As a Christian ministry student, I immediately adopted him as a model for ministry, even more so as a paragon of the virtue of gentleness. It all begins by a direct perception of his physical presence. The tone of his voice, the deliberate movements, the words that are coming from him, all of these are seasoned with a spirit of gentleness by the fact that no action of physicality is wasted. What is ordinary or just regular movement becomes extraordinary by the imbued sense of his faith. We know the message, and therefore his mere presence is an incarnation of that message. This is the first sign of the spirit of gentleness: the confluence and fluidity between faith and being. One aspect of Fred Rogers that is often praised

is his utter lack of duplicity in his relationship to people. As a minister to children, he adopted that childlike quality of being utterly himself in the face of layered and complex adult social affairs. In an interview with 60 Minutes Charlie Rose, Fred Rogers remarked the following: “that’s the real job that we have... down-to-earth actual goodness” (*Would you be my Neighbor?* 1:16:03-1:16:15). This genuine goodness is the foundation of this confluence between the self and manifested action. The spirit of gentleness therefore stems from a recognition of our true unique self, a unique self that does not exist apart from others, but that is born in the bosom of the Neighborhood. For Rogers, as we know, the self, nor the Neighborhood, could not be born without God’s declaration of goodness over Creation. At the end of the documentary, I felt like loving myself a little bit more, and hence knowing God’s declaration of goodness. Afterwards, I could say that gentleness is a stream of flowing waters right from the mouth of God into the life I have lived so far.

II. The community of L’Arche: a sign of gentleness in relationship with the least of these

L’Arche is a very special family. L’Arche communities were founded by the French-Canadian lay leader Jean Vanier. L’Arche, however, is more than the efforts of the founder, it transcends him despite his best efforts to undermine the holy inspiration that drove him to gather people in L’Arche. This community, this family, houses both people with mental and physical handicaps and able-bodied assistants. The core of the community are those that society has either discarded or abandoned in many ways because of how they were born or because of natural circumstances of illness. Able bodied live-in assistants dedicate their time to take care of the core members and develop relationships of deep companionship with them. The birth of L’Arche is forever linked to the stirrings of a spirit of gentleness in community.

One of the great interpreters of the L'Arche Community is the theologian Stanley Hauerwas. Hauerwas considers L'Arche to be a sign of gentleness, an ethical embodiment in community. He points to several important factors for the development of relationship and community under the guide of gentleness, starting with patience. To be gentle, and therefore a faithful people to the God that gives us being, Hauerwas says: "L'Arche embodies the patience that is absolutely crucial if we are to learn to be faithful people in our world" (45). Within L'Arche, the live-in assistants and the core members engage in mutual relationships that defy many of our social conventions on time and value. In many ways, this defiance stems from the fact that L'Arche seeks gentleness as an orientating virtue. Its primary motive, that God loves everyone just as they are, especially in the midst of woundedness, creates the need for a prism of gentleness ("L'Arche Impact"). Gentleness must integrate every relation. Starkly, this was the orientating virtue that Vanier envisioned for L'Arche, and at the same time the one which he crassly failed to embody for those six women, and ultimately for the whole of the L'Arche community that must reckon with this new reality of their beloved founder. An internal investigation prompted by L'Arche into accusations against founder Jean Vanier for sexual abuse concluded in the veracity of the testimony of six able-bodied women who were abused by Vanier across a time period between 1970 to 2005 in Trosly-Breuil, France. The investigation stated that the abusive interactions were instigated by Vanier under the guise of spiritual guidance, which included manipulative and psychologically binding "mystical" practices and teachings that held these women captive to Vanier. He asked them to keep the sexual abuse secret. The report also concluded that Vanier was part of a group that was condemned by the Catholic Church, which promoted these teachings which began with Vanier's "spiritual father", Father Thomas Phillippe (Findings of L'Arche International's).

In a miraculous way, it is still gentleness the charisma that has driven L'Arche to a path of reconciliation with this heartbreaking revelation. The mission remained the same about living gently in community, holding the brokenness for the time that is necessary for healing to happen. Vanier's transgression has opened many questions and anxieties about the efficacy and extent of gentleness as an orientating virtue. Gentleness, which was Vanier's apparent charisma, helped him hide his sins; nobody saw it coming. Moreover, it would be his failure at this central charisma of L'Arche, that was what ultimately transpired; he did not put a stop to his violence, he lacked restraint. I would venture to answer that the response for ourselves in this situation is an ever deepening gentleness, not only of remaining steadfast with what honors God's call for our lives, but that Vanier's moral failure is precisely the lack in himself to be gentle in every relation, and instead abuse his power and status for the sake of his own pleasure. What he did, as Hauerwas sadly noted, was "anything but gentle" (*Friend of Jean Vanier heartbroken*). Hauerwas points further to a potential answer to the question: "Which is but a reminder that self-deception often is the result of trying to make sense of our lives and why we all need accountability, especially those held in high esteem" (*Friend of Jean Vanier heartbroken*). Communal accountability and reparation cannot be taken away from our practice of gentleness. Gentleness as defined does not exist in the vacuum of individual morality, but it is part of the communal identity of Christians. What happens after accountability is still at large. I think that Hauerwas' response is wise: after heartbreak, prayer must follow, both for the victims of Vanier and for the future of the community. Ultimately, it is essential to realize that the L'Arche community recognizes that the charisma of gentleness still lives and vivifies, but the future must be looked at daily in the hopefulness that the daily witness of the community will render fruit, and that different relationships will be formed from the basis of this experience. An openness of communication

must be established, and voices heard and integrated in a way that upholds the identity of L'Arche.

Within the spaces of L'Arche, people are fighting many battles received from life's struggles: rejection, violence, pain, suffering, illness, abuse, among others experiences. Therefore, at L'Arche, many of its stories rise from the tearing down of those walls. As Hauerwas asserts: "Walls so constructed can only be breached by Gentleness" (80). And this gentleness that is the atmosphere of L'Arche is not something that is born from thin air, but it is the journey towards the goal of care and being a faithful people to God. Gentleness is taught, as Hauerwas stipulated. Gentleness begins to grow from the dynamic of trust thrust by "slow and patient work" (89). The prayer life that rises from L'Arche is then no different from their life-work. It waits, it abides and is patient for the stirrings of the Spirit of Love. The eloquence of a live-in assistant are as valuable as the intents of articulation by a core member when asked or desiring to pray with the community. Gentleness takes it time to let the relationship grow into one of mutual and recognizable love. Everything becomes prayer-full as the dynamism of L'Arche relationships flourishes into bonds of love, for the subsistence and enjoyment of the other. It is a gift that God gives to us as we live in the vision of God's image. For Hauerwas, L'Arche becomes the sign that reveals to Christians and their churches to wonder and wander more bravely into the possibilities of our identity within the body of Christ. It is good news that a way has been opened up that does not destroy us, but enlivens us, resurrects us into the life that God wills for us, a life saturated with a love that sheds light over the darkness of the violence of the world. At L'Arche, there is an inherent dynamic of downward mobility, in which this spirit of gentleness opens for us the atmosphere of coexistence and mutual recognition of each other's uniqueness in the eyes of God. Gentleness is an act of recognition of our whole selves in

relationship to others, being brought daily to new life by the God who calls us to serve those who suffer and have been marginalized by the world.

Narratives: Etty Hillesum and Martin Luther

I. Etty Hillesum: Gentleness in the midst of Moral Horror

Etty Hillesum is one of those hidden people that bloom with beauty in harsh soil. She was born to a Jewish household, and grew up in a secular environment until her spiritual and religious shift around the time of World War II. Etty Hillesum's spiritual testimony has been widely adopted by many Christians. She is a representative of inner multiple belongings, as she prioritized not only being Jewish, but the spiritual lessons she gleaned from studying Russian Literature, especially Dostoevsky, whose influence seasoned her writings with many Christian themes, as she explored a powerful inward recognition of God in the midst of trials and suffering. In the same way that Hillesum was nurtured by the witness of Christians, I am reciprocally nurtured by her witness of Judaism. Her example is inspiring for all who serve and are held by the God of Israel.

Everything we know about Etty Hillesum originates from the discovery of her letters and journals, that were recovered after she was sent to the concentration camp at Westerbork. Before her murder at the hands of the Nazi regime, she subjected herself, almost without a shadow of hesitation, to the extreme sufferings of the Jewish people during those horrendous years in the Netherlands. She lived through the invasion, the segregation into the Jewish Ghettos, she lived through the atrocities of the camps, all the while preserving some innate sense of goodness and hope that is a miracle to find in such dark events of human history. After realizing a relationship with this depth within herself that she called God, she started seeing God everywhere, especially

in her own being. She spoke about helping God bring goodness into the world. She talked about the liminal spaces of time, those seconds of breathing that brought her into the presence of God and the Good while living in the camps. She spoke of sensing “a new gentleness” (165) rising within her that let her see things so differently from before. Hillesum’s life makes me wonder about the role of gentleness within spaces of horror. How do we become gentle, how do we enact gentleness, in a space so hostile, so cruel, so ungentle? How can we actually win this race, to use Paul’s analogy? Is gentleness, in these circumstances, unhelpful? How about the role of gentleness in a space and time of moral absence, like the Nazi occupied territories? What would gentleness entail in a situation of oppression and subjugation, where violence is certain to flourish? I believe Hillesum’s life, her story, can actually give us a glimpse into an almost inconceivable realm of ethical embodiment, one that I can only pronounce alongside Bonhoeffer, declaring no certainty on the capacity of my own judgement, but trusting the discernment and direction that is rooted in God’s Will for us, trusting the Goodness and Salvation of God that brings us to life and action.

The first aspect of Hillesum’s extra-ordinary presence was her prayer life. In prayer, she cultivated the sensibility that led her down a path of solidarity and gentleness in the most dangerous places. In prayer, even the landscape that she saw changed its countenance from an indifferent one, to one that is full of mercy:

You have made me so rich, oh God, please let me share out Your beauty with open hands. My life has become an uninterrupted dialogue with You, oh God, one great dialogue. Some- times when I stand in some corner of the camp, my feet planted on Your earth, my eyes raised toward Your heaven, tears some- times run down my face, tears of deep emotion and gratitude. At night, too, when I lie in my bed and rest in You, oh God, tears of gratitude run down my face, and that is my prayer. I have been terribly tired for several days, but that too will pass. Things come and go in a deeper rhythm, and people must be taught to listen; it is the most important thing we have to learn in this life. I am not challenging You, oh God, my life is one great dialogue with You. I may never become the great artist I would really like to

be, but I am already secure in You, God. Sometimes I try my hand at turning out small profundities and uncertain short stories, but I always end up with just one single word: God. And that says everything, and there is no need for anything more. And all my creative powers are translated into inner dialogues with You. The beat of my heart has grown deeper, more active, and yet more peaceful, and it is as if I were all the time storing up inner riches (332).

Prayer, became also a well of goodness, a yearning that reaches deep within herself extracting the waters of God's goodness within her. In every harsh circumstance, it seemed that prayer was the necessary disposition, the attitude even, to change the atmosphere she inhabited. Little by little, she was juxtaposing the passing of natural discomfort in a desolate place, and the spiritual balm of communion with God. God became for her the reminder of the transcendent Love that affirms life in all places, the Love that showed her possibilities of goodness in the darkest hour. Her gentle spirit, her treatment of others, sprung from the fact that she prayed to God to lead her to goodness. She started seeing God in everything, and therefore everything and everyone became a source of reverence, for which she desired to only bring up the good. Hillesum wrote: "I love people so terribly, because in every human being I love something of You. And I seek You everywhere in them and often do find something of You." (198). Therefore, because of God, because she could see God in herself, she was able to appreciate and work towards patience with the people around her because God was present in them too. An identity rooted in God, leads to all-encompassing love, and therefore to act with gentleness. Prayer opens the opportunity of awareness, Hillesum recommends:

Life may be brimming over with experiences, but somewhere, deep inside, all of us carry a vast and fruitful loneliness wherever we go. And sometimes the most important thing in a whole day is the rest we take between two deep breaths, or the turning inward in prayer for five short minutes (93).

This became her practice even in the camps, as she worked for her neighbors through the Jewish Council that was formed to attend to the affairs of the community. She expressed her desire through prayer in the following excerpt:

I would like to fold my hands and say, " Friends, I am happy and grateful, and I find life very beautiful and meaningful. Yes, even as I stand here by the body of my dead companion, one who died much too soon, and just when I may be deported to some unknown destination. And yet, God, I am grateful for everything. I shall live on with that part of the dead that lives forever, and I shall rekindle into life that of the living that is now dead, until there is nothing but life, one great life, oh God."

Through prayer, she could see possibilities in things she would otherwise not be able to see. She could take up the life of another, and therefore become the connector of peaceability, to give to other of what they lacked spiritually.

It takes a spirit of gentleness, or to attune to gentleness, to restrain ourselves and others to fall into the violence that pessimism can bring about. In the Nazi camps, pessimism and despair were daily bread. How could one not despair? Yet, Etty demonstrates an almost supernatural disposition:

The misery here is quite terrible; and yet, late at night when the day has slunk away into the depths behind me, I often walk with a spring in my step along the barbed wire. And then time and again, it soars straight from my heart- I can't help it, that's just the way it is, like some elementary force- the feeling that life is glorious and magnificent, and that one day we shall be building a whole new world. Against every new outrage and every fresh horror, we shall put up one more piece of love and goodness, drawing strength from within ourselves. We may suffer, but we must not succumb. And if we should survive unhurt in body and soul, but above all in soul, without bitterness and without hatred, then we shall have a right to a say after the war (294).

Here she is speaking about the fruits of the spiritual, for which we can take are the fruits of gentleness, that it preserves us from falling into a state of inward destruction, so that we can overcome the outer circumstance with remaining goodness in our hearts to create a new world.

The new world cannot be ushered by the sword, but by prayer and love, simplicity and embrace, peace and inward silence. By enacting such a calling towards goodness and God-loving, she is capable of bringing fruit from harsh soil. Hillesum was able to affirm and praise life, to find God everywhere and in everyone, to root herself in peace in the face of a culture of annihilation and destruction. Nazi ideology could not rob God from her, it could not rob love, nor peace, nor mercy, nor gentleness, and most importantly, it could not rob her story. Hillesum is showing us that gentleness is an activity that draws something from others, it draws the goodness inside of them. So the spirit of gentleness is not only self-restraint, but also generative goodness. She kept at bay those forces that wanted to annihilate her, and instead found the gentle stirring that led her more and more into a way of life that resisted and affirmed an alternative that could be lived daily in the midst of a death-dealing culture. It is like the parable of the soil, in which the fertile soft ground is able to produce the good fruit. A gentle ground lends itself to be broken and grown.

II. Martin Luther: *The gentle soil under the heavy stone*

I don't think the reformer Martin Luther comes to mind when we think about gentleness. Luther is precisely the opposite of what we consider gentle characters to be. He was a hot-headed, impulsive, loud-mouthed, arrogant, derisive and stubborn German theology professor, pastor, and former monk from the 16th century, early Reformation era. Among Luther's callous and non-gentle qualities that must be mentioned for the sake of accountability and truth is his anti-Semitism, which unfortunately plagued much of his rhetoric and resulted in his 1543 treatise "On the Jews and their Lies". This text was used during the Nazi German period as part of their anti-Semitic propaganda. However Luther's writings and life were heavily mangled and

weaponized by the Nazis, lack of gentleness in speech, letter and act carry serious repercussions, and in Luther's legacy we can observe this clearly by the sharpening of his words by others, no matter how far this was from his context and person. Nevertheless, this is not the whole of the story of his life and time. Luther, when the times beckoned it, was also exceedingly pastoral, sympathetic, empathic, active, aware, brave, and, yes, gentle. Gentleness as an orientating virtue must grow out of the cookie-cutter versions we often portray this virtue to uphold. Human beings are messy creatures, and therefore what God has placed in us in abundance through Jesus Christ sees itself manifested in the diversity of personalities and contexts that humanity represents. Luther comes from hard stock, and he was demonstrably so. Yet, his faith led him to other spheres of action he himself thought he could not accomplish. Furthermore, he thought he was unable to fulfill precisely the virtues we uphold to be Christian. He thought himself condemned to Hell. Nevertheless, it is the sphere of action that lies beyond this state of mind that we seek in Christian ethics, it is action that stems from the salvific work of God in Jesus Christ. In this spirit, by looking into Christ, we are transfigured by Christ's example into an activity that can be considered gentleness as virtue.

How do we witness this exemplified in Martin Luther? Between the bombastic language, there is this ultimate concern in Luther's writings and actions, especially in the early Luther. An ultimate concern that is pastoral in expression, and expresses itself in a gentle treatment or empathy towards human beings unlike what we would expect from the German reformer that upheld the doctrine on the depravity of human nature. The Lutheran theological focus has predominantly and obsessively stemmed from the workings of God's Grace. It is in this Grace, Luther's relationship with this divine activity, where we can start observing the flowering of Gentleness as the orientating virtue, and thus leading to the other spheres of Christian action. I

will use the following examples from Luther's life and writings, which include *Freedom of a Christian* and pastoral letters like *Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague (1527)*, *A Simple Way to Pray: To Peter Master Barber (1535)*, and also the background to his early turn to a doctrine on Grace and his reasons to post the 95 theses against indulgences.

To understand Luther, we must mention *freedom*, especially freedom from sin. As mentioned before, Luther was beset by the awareness of sin and the oncoming judgement of a righteous God. Luther came to even hate this God. Yet, while reading the Scriptures, a light shone for him in the text, a revelation for him that brought him to levity: the promise of Grace and that the righteous shall live by faith. This revelation began to simmer in him until the development of his fuller theology and the reformation movement began taking force. For Luther, God's Grace given to us through the cross of Christ was the ultimate liberation, an existential burden-lifter, actual new life. Its important to notice, for the purposes of this project, that there is an important step to consider in Luther's transition from his self-torturing harshness under the consciousness of sin, and the reception of levity by God's Grace. Luther's theology dances around the grimace of sinful human existence, it purports that through Faith in Jesus Christ we are at the other end of a "happy exchange". Christ has taken our sin up to himself, so that we might receive freedom from sin, and therefore true life. The spirit of gentleness thus takes root in us in this same freedom. We acknowledge that we are captive to sin, but have been freed from sin by Christ to exert in faith the fruits of Christ's work in us in total trust and liberty of consciousness. Therefore, gentleness begins with this freedom that Christ wrought for us, it begins subsequently by a free act from one to the other, reminding each other about the promises of Jesus Christ. Gentleness belongs in the realm of freedom, for one cannot act gently on a

counterfeit, but truly commit to the action for the sake of the other. Luther says in his treatise of a Freedom of a Christian:

Hence, as our heavenly Father has in Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor through our body and its works, and each one should become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christians. (22)

Our bodies are therefore laid bare as an alter-Christus for the sake of the neighbor's suffering. How important it is to remind ourselves that gentleness is evoked in the freedom that is brought by laying our life for others in the ground of Love. Because we are free to focus on our neighbor, we are capable to recognize who set us free and therefore gift others from what God has given us. We are able to share ourselves in a spirit of gentleness, instead of being restricted by our own self-obsession. As Luther observes in his Large Catechism, we are no longer curved towards our own insides, but we cling to that of God that uplifts us to the reality of our being in Jesus Christ, we cling to Christ and thus we become gentle and sensitive to the reality of others. We start to inhabit a centrifugal force that begins in God's action within us through Christ.

Luther had the opportunity in his life to demonstrate the courage that it takes to enact gentleness. Beginning with his fight against indulgences, his 95 theses was a response against an unjust ecclesiastical system that laid heavy upon the shoulders of his parishioners. The reformation movement began from pastoral concerns firstly. By listening and observing the lives of others and their sufferings, Luther was able to tune in to deeper concerns about the fate of individuals before God and their responsibilities to others as part of God's command to love one's neighbor.

In addition to the 95 theses, another courageous moment for the great reformer was proved through a deadly plague, as we are living today with the COVID-19 pandemic and the

many protocols, responsibilities, decisions, travels, and anxieties that have affected all levels of society, association and family because of it. Writing to a fellow pastor, Johann Hess, was asking for his counsel regarding what to do in this precarious situation, when one is responsible for family and preserving one's own life. Luther responds with gentle judgement, mediating two different realities and concerns. On the one hand, he had the reality of this pastor who was afraid, the possibility to flee to save one's own life. On the other, he modeled with his own life the freedom to choose to be present in the midst of danger, to be light on one's own being by leaving his fate in the hands of God while he tended to the sick and dying that were his pastoral responsibilities. To be a minister of Christ entailed the utmost of commitment to the least of these. Luther, for himself, manifested the calm presence under fire of a chaplain, he placed upon his beloved city the *cappella* that protects from the freezing chill of death, by bringing in the warmth of the gentle Christ, the one that has freed him from sin to be present to his neighbors in compassionate and courageous care: "For when people are dying, they most need a spiritual ministry which strengthens and comforts their consciences by word and sacrament and in faith overcomes death." (*Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague* (1527), 393). Furthermore, It was Luther's belief that it was the duty of the strong to stand with the weak. It is appropriate to mention, however, how Luther also failed in this regard. During the German Peasant's War of 1524-1525, Luther sided with the German nobility against the peasants, even though it was his initial pastoral response to help these same oppressed people he then condemned during the revolt. Gentleness entails the recognition and empathy with those who suffer the most, one realizes that antagonization of the oppressed does not honor God's calling for Christians. As pertaining to the definition of gentleness in the New Testament, to enact gentleness is to share one's power or strength with restraint, a knowledge about our own nature as human beings and

our capacities in benefit to those who are lacking in the moment. For Luther, this dynamic was demonstrated best when battling the complicated task of pandemic care. He advocates for such an approach as based in faith, a calling from Christ to not abandon those who are weakened by the struggles in the world. The responsibility to the least of these was extended to all who held faith and power to stand. Luther writes:

Since it is generally true of Christians that few are strong and many are weak, one simply cannot place the same burden upon everyone.⁷ A person who has a strong faith can drink poison and suffer no harm, Mark 16[:18], while one who has a weak faith would thereby suffer death. Peter could walk upon the water because he was strong in faith. When he began to doubt and his faith weakened, he sank and almost drowned. When those who are strong travel with those who are weak, the strong must try not to walk at a pace based on their strength lest they walk their weak companions nearly to death.ⁿ Christ does not want his weak ones to be abandoned, as St. Paul teaches in Rom. 15[:1] and 1 Cor. 12[:22ff.]. (392)

Luther is clear in this passage, those who are strong should not walk according to their own strength, lest they kill the weak with their self-centeredness. The strong must accompany the weak in gentle restraint, in the consciousness of the Other's condition for the sake of the life of all who are our family in Christ. It is essential to notice how this accompaniment is based in the reality of material and spiritual conditions, it is a dynamic of vulnerability and sincerity about our distinct human conditions. If one neighbor is better off than the other, Christ beckons us to solidarity with the one who lacks. This is the movement of gentleness through faith, as Luther writes "Godliness is nothing else but service to God. Service to God is indeed service to our neighbor" (400). By faith, our Godly service and trust in God's Word is manifested in love for our neighbors in all their conditions. Luther hammers it down like this: "When anyone is overcome by horror and repugnance in the presence of a sick person we should take courage and strength in the firm assurance that it is the devil who stirs up such abhorrence, fear, and loathing in our hearts" (399). Following Luther's point, we shame the devil with our gentleness. The

demonic is represented by the fear caused by the sufferings of the other, but the external should not prevent the piercing of love for neighbor in the steadfastness of faith. Illness, disfigurement, repulsiveness are rendered inoperative by a the courageous faith that prompts us to be gentle and present to our fellow human beings in a state of suffering. Gentleness establishes a base of solidarity with the suffering, because by recognizing the fundamental humility of a Christian, one does not set oneself above another to perform acts of service, but rather is led to be more present with the necessary equanimity.

Finally, all of this would be impossible without prayer. For Luther, prayer was a response from oneself to the command of God to pray, to be in relationship with Him that holds us in His hands. Luther's prayer life was one of intense attention to the gentle care of the Father, to be grateful for everything that comes from Him. Petitionary prayer was of utmost importance for him, as he believed in a God that is our loving parent, that would not withhold from us His gentleness: "And all this is done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all! For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him" (Small Catechism, 223). In a letter to Peter, Luther's barber, Luther opens the door of the insides of his prayer life. Luther prompts Peter to not falter in the spirit of prayer, and to not be stiffened by forms of prayer, but to rather present himself as he is before God. Luther states further that we are not alone when we pray, but that all Christians share in the petitioning towards God's mercy:

Finally, mark this, that you must always speak the "Amen" firmly. Never doubt that God in his mercy will surely hear you and say "yes" to your prayers. Never think that you are kneeling or standing alone, rather think that the whole of Christendom, all devout Christians, are standing there beside you and you are standing among them in a common, united petition which God cannot disdain (263)

Gentleness in prayer entails the presence of the prayers of others. We are ourselves sustained by the Holy Spirit when we pray. It is God's mercy, according to Luther, that permits us to pray. In the Small Catechism, Luther writes concerning the third article of the Apostle's Creed:

I believe that by my own reason or powers I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him. But instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith. (225)

Therefore, for Luther, it is by the mercy of God the Holy Spirit, that inspires in us the strength to pray. By our own capacity, individually, we are not able. It is only in a togetherness that prayer becomes operative. It is in the relation between our weakness and the power of God that prayer manifests itself, and unlocks the spirit of gentleness in us, to hold each other in prayer, rather than afflict each other with our impulses. In prayer together, we can actually hold fast against the temptations of sin.

Application

What then?

I have presented these narratives of gentleness, this mosaic, to allow us to contemplate the place of gentleness in our realm of action. Gentleness is not a weakness, it is not mere leniency, but it is a disposition that allows us to see ourselves in relation to God, and therefore to our neighbors. What then, are we to do with these stories, with these examples, with this call to gentleness? What are the times telling us? I can speak to my own context.

As a Puerto Rican Christian living in two different yet related realities, one in the island of Puerto Rico and another in the continental United States context, I have been confronted with the question of how will I act upon the troubles of my time. In Puerto Rico, the puddle-like quality of the social problems, the political corruption and the ever increasing-inequality, leaves the virtue of gentleness in a tough spot. Because of the social situation, one is more inclined to think in a revolutionary fervor that could devolve to vengeance and aggression about the issues one is implicated in. I know that my own reactions against this oppressive atmosphere is one of increasing frustration, anger and disillusionment. The commitment of some to dismantle Puerto Rican livelihood only stokes a revolutionary fire. Yet, because of the cross of Christ, I am led to think and act differently. Yes to remain, to fight the good fight, to not flee, but persist in goodness and steadfastness of faith, to be a beacon of God's Grace on the Earth, but to be most of all present in the fight alongside others to instill the presence of gentleness. Gentleness can throw itself into a cross.

I'm reminded by a Puerto Rican political activist that recently passed away, Don Benito Reinosá. Benito, as he is affectionately called, was known for being present in every protest and cause for social justice in the island. He participated and was known by many of the pro-worker and pro-independence movements in the island. One striking thing about Benito, was his affection, and yes, the saintly gentleness that his presence brought to those around him, reminding others of what they were fighting for in the end. He was a deeply religious man, and always brought a small wooden cross that was pinned to his famous white shirt. He was hailed by some as the saint of Puerto Rican resistance. A signature of his countenance was the humility and love that poured over in his dedication to just be present and active in the causes of the suffering. When I see Don Benito, I see the Christ-presence that my faith moves within me.

When I see Don Benito, I see the significance of Jesus' saying in John 13 that pops into real life saying: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Gentleness is motivated by love, and thus all struggle in gentleness is done because of love. Don Benito struggled, he carried his cross joyfully among the people he loved, and while he has passed to be with the Lord he served, his death has given life to others who has witnessed him, an alter-Christus among us, a little Christ holding flowers at the barricade of conflict.

In the US context, it takes another layer entirely. I must learn to listen, even when my voice is drowned out in the cacophony of the United Statesian conflict. Puerto Rican issues remain a problem within the US context, yet often forgotten in the inner life of continental USA. In the US, I must not only learn to codify myself differently, but I must listen to the stories of my compatriots in the diaspora alongside the others who have suffered greatly in this land. I am aided by the narratives of Luther, Hillesum, Rogers and L'Arche as I learn to navigate the waters of turbulence in this divided country. I have learned to not flee, to be a neighbor, to labor in compassionate gentleness within the communities I live in, to pray for old enemies and new, to draw out the water of goodness that lies in the hearts of people in the United States. I have had to learn to be gentle in new ways that I never thought I had to. At times, my pockets lied empty of the mercy I could provide to my neighbors, and God shone through. I learned to be silent at the callousness of daily ignorance of many United Statesians, and I learned how to breach the gap through gentleness, to know myself to be beholden to Christ as many others are. During my time of hospital chaplaincy in Cambridge, MA, I learned when my words would be of healing or destruction. Gentleness is an active dynamic between presence and language. What will my words, my silence, my presence bring across the sea of difference? Most times I do not know. Yet, the gentleness that grows through Faith leads me to the unknown, to the risks of

relationship. Knowing my own brokenness and weakness, I tend to the brokenness and weakness of others. Like Etty, in a realm of so much suffering, what prayer can I utter that will draw out goodness from others?

In the United States, after the 2020 election, we are left with the bitterness of an almost irreparable divide between political ideologies and concerns. The problems in our midst are of an existential nature, action or inaction can lead to more death and pain. We are dealing with the large shadow cast by misinformation and mistrust, the invisible yet very palpable threat of the COVID 19 pandemic, the old aggravation of racism and the legacy of slavery in the US, the incoming pains of Climate Change which effects will be catastrophic at a worldwide scale. What is gentleness to do with all this? For a Christian, at the least, it means everything. It is the vantage point from which we can approach humbly and act accordingly to the wound that is festering. It is the Christ-response, it is the seeds sown by those that heed the prophetic message, it is the awaited spring that will return to bloom the landscape laid bare by winter. A gentle response is the one that patiently waits to harpoon into the depths of human community so that we may come out together into the promises of abundant life. Sin is coarse, but the spirit of gentleness smooths the rough edges. It is, as Hauerwas reminded us, “slow work”. It is slow because it is compassionate and genuine, it cannot be contrived, it must be lived sincerely in utter faith. It is slow because it will not abandon the least of these, those who fall behind. It is slow because it “It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Corinthians 13:7). Gentleness positions the self in these modalities of love; by being gentle we can expect our love to bear all things and not to despair, to believe and not disbelieve, to hope and endure, not to fall apart in a violent spiral within the self. It hopes that the race will be won by all in the name of Love and Grace.

The political violence of January 6th, 2021 in Washington DC can serve as a mirror for us. The seed of the hateful word is destruction, death, violence and decay. We become a decadent society by the over-stimulus and addiction provided by lording power over others with impunity and ignorance. As Christians, at our own peril do we ignore the call of Jesus towards gentleness and mercy. At our own peril do we let fester the wounds of our social fabric and history. At our own peril, do we ignore the strings that hold us together as human beings in an inseparable relationship on this earth. Gentleness becomes a response of bravery, for it pushes us over the uncomfortable lines we draw to push away the others around us. Beyond the idolatrous paraphernalia of Trumpism and political affiliations, where do we stand in the face of people's suffering? How will we act as Christians in the face of overgrown hatred and the tragic persistence of it in the heart of our communities? How will we use our freedom: to condemn or to heal? To coarsen or to soften? These are the questions gentleness will continue to rise within us in our ministry. As Mister Rogers affirmed, the essential center of choices and life-paths stems from our response to the suffering of human beings in the world. God in Jesus Christ prompts from us a faithful response. I do not know where God will lead us, but wherever these little contexts might be, I pray we might be a faithful people that responds gently, but with moral conviction in the substance and direction of our story with Jesus Christ. May our gentle response form hearts full of repentance and mercy to understand where we have failed, and where we could go from the perspective of individual relationships and communal ones.

Gentleness is not an answer, it is an awareness. It is what makes malleable the human heart towards goodness. An act carried with gentleness provides the opportunity to enact the answers provided by human knowledge. By seeing ourselves clothed in Christ, we are free to act boldly with a compassion and perseverance that goes beyond our limitedness, but is subsisted in

the corporal entity that is the Body of Christ in the world, the unity of the many members led by Christ the Head.

Conclusion

As the lives of these sinner/saints unfolded according to the spirit of gentleness, we can see the alternative futures that lay before us, the advent of God's vision for humanity. In conflict, gentleness is proven as a theological virtue, it is witnessed as it grows more fully into the transformation that God brings about in the human heart. By treading the ground gently, we are making a statement about who we are as a people. We are advocates of life in its terribleness and beauty, in its gravity and grace according to the will of God. The lives we have witnessed in this project enlighten us about the myriad ways gentleness orients us into the virtues that God molds in us as we believe in His Living Word, Jesus Christ. The gentle witness of Mister Rogers, that opened up ways for children and adults to learn the essential quality in each of us, that we are lovable, and capable of loving in return. He also taught us the value of self-control, towards which we can grow as full human beings by God's grace and will. The gentle witness of L'Arche, that manifests how gentleness looks like in community. It has let itself be written to account for an alternative time, an alternative coexistence based on gentle relationships of trust and utter openness of self to others. This gentle community honors their Christian calling in their service that incarnates Jesus' mandate to love one another deeply as God loves us, no matter who we are in our particular circumstances. The gentle witness of Etty Hillesum, that in an inhospitable place, God granted her to be a channel of life and peace against the degradation of those intent on destroying her Jewish existence. She shows us the power of prayer to open up these channels of gentleness within us, how we can adhere to this atmosphere to help and serve

others in need, no matter how small the calling. And finally, the gentle witness of Martin Luther in his clarity regarding the unburdening of the conscience through the Gospel of Christ, making us free to act in ways unexpected and bold for the sake of neighbor. He reminds us to hold with a gentle hand the hands of the weak, so to better give them life in shared faith and community. Christ paved the path for us in these people and in so many more that are hidden and present to us across all landscapes so that we might be free to live abundantly despite our limitations. A gentle spirit leads us evermore into the embrace of Divine Love, may we be able to learn and enact what God has made possible in our midst. More narratives can be added that lets us know that we participate in this great cloud of witnesses. God has declared over us a ministry to heal, preach, and serve with gentleness, may we honor this calling in full confidence of God's promises.

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