

# GENTLE BENJAMINITE

## Sermon, October 9, 2011

### Text: Philippians 4:1-13

When you are young, the passage of time doesn't always mean that much. When I was a younger man, years were somewhat "cheap" to me, in the sense that I don't think I really appreciated their value. When I was younger, I always thought I could use the next year (or two or three) to fix the mistakes of the last year, or I could just, you know, start over ... after all, there's plenty of time. Some of you know my first date with my wife-to-be was followed by our second date ... nearly one and a half years later! That's a long story, but let's just say that knowing what I know now, I'd give almost anything to have that squandered year and a half back. But again, when you're young, you think you have plenty of time ... time is a relatively cheap (*in the sense of being "not precious"*) commodity. I remember beginning seminary back in the late seventies and thinking if this ministry thing didn't work out for me, I could always try another profession. I remember being fascinating by reading in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* at the time about people who in their late twenties, early thirties and even older who were just entering medical school ... and how, in fact, medical schools were welcoming such students as they tended to be more worldly wise (*in a good sense*), they tended to be better "grounded" in who they were and what they wanted in life, and they tended to be better equipped to deal with real people and real situations than their "grade-grubbing" young counterparts who tended to be experienced in academia and little else. (*As a bit of an aside, my younger sister did just this ... she started medical school at age fifty; she graduated last June and is now an M.D. doing her residency at Bryn Mawr Hospital in the Philadelphia area!*) I also remember thinking at the time maybe I could just try out for the Philadelphia Eagles, which I had actually considered doing during the open tryouts of the Dick Vermeil years ... any of you who have seen the Disney movie "Invincible" will know about the unprecedented open tryouts Vermeil hosted ... a few of my college football teammates actually (*but unsuccessfully*) took part (*"Invincible" portrays the story of Vince Papale who, at age 30, made the team and became the oldest rookie in the history of the NFL to play without benefit of college football experience*).

Who knows? You think anything is possible when you're young. Again, there's plenty of time.

Nobody tells you exactly when this happens, but eventually you come to the realization you might just be too old to start over and/or to start out in a different direction. You've made too many commitments. There are bills and tuitions and mortgages and car loans to pay off. And for the most part, your big choices in life are largely behind you. Perhaps some of those choices were made for you by others, perhaps some of those choices were forced on you because events beyond your control have shaped your life more than you thought possible. But sooner or later everyone comes to grips with the reality that you are older than you realize. Once you get past, oh, forty, you always think you are ten to fifteen years younger than you actually are ... but there are plenty of people who will help remind you of reality. Like the Miriam Hospital doctor last July telling me all the test results were pretty good ... for a man my age. Like the perky young woman at the Chick-Fil-A counter on Friday who, when I ordered a small lemonade, asked if I wanted to take advantage of Chick-Fil-A's offer of free beverages to senior citizens ... which marked the first time in my life anyone had ever asked me that question.

To be honest, I was kind of grateful when I realized I had tumbled into this stage of life. It is a sort of sweet resignation that has gotten my mind off of what I would or could or should do, what I woulda or coulda or shoulda done, or where I should or could plan to do in the "future", and got me focused on what I AM doing ... more precisely, on what God is doing around me, in me, and through me ... right now. And that's a freeing realization. I'm still open to things which may still happen, and I trust I still have still many years ahead of me (Lord willing), but I have nevertheless come to grips with, and am content with, who I am, where I am, and who and what and where I'm called to be. I'll never be trying out for the Eagles.

For those who have been blessed to live for a long time (*and by historical and world standards, surviving past fifty is living for a long time... consider the average life expectancy in 1900 in the US was 48; in ancient Greece the average life expectancy at birth was 21!*), when you realize there are many more years behind you than there are years ahead of you, you've (*hopefully*) gained some wisdom about life, about how things work, and those who are younger would do well to listen to you, to spend time with you, to not be too quick to dismiss you. I love being able to spend leisure time with people like my parents, people who really have accumulated a lot of wisdom about life throughout their years. Some of their wisdom is about things they and their friends wished they knew when they were younger; things they are now happy to share with anyone who will listen. One thing many of them have discovered is that the older they grew, the more obvious their personalities became. Kind and considerate people tend to become so very gracious and gentle in old age, while cynical or rude or self-absorbed people just become more and more unbearable. And what many people learn over the years is that the countless little choices you make along the way, the so many seemingly ordinary choices you make, all are playing a role in displaying not only what kind of person you are, but what kind of person you will eventually be.

When the apostle Paul writes his letter to the Philippians, he is very near the end of his life. He has made many choices, he has accumulated many experiences, so many credentials, over his life span, some of which we read about last week: a Hebrew of Hebrews, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee of Pharisees and so on. He has also accumulated and distilled a lot of wisdom about what's really important. So his readers would do well to sit up and pay attention when this old apostle writes, "*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! **Let your gentleness be evident to all.** The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.*"

"*Let your gentleness be evident to all.*" Among other things, this wise old apostle is telling us to let gentleness be our life's legacy. This probably isn't the legacy one would have expected the apostle Paul to be advocating. After all, in his lifetime he was a high achieving, Type A, goal-oriented missionary who planted churches all over the Roman Empire. This was a man not afraid of conflict, and more than once he left town with a shower of rocks behind him. He didn't mind telling people where they were wrong. You may remember he split up his first missionary team after a disagreement with Barnabas over John Mark, Barnabas' cousin. Paul had a strong and intense personality, and was never shy about what he saw was right. You may not think of him as a "Gentle Ben-jaminite." But upon reflection over all his choices, all his accomplishments, all his adventures, all his credentials gained over the years, throughout his lifetime of achieving, and striving, and fighting and encouraging, Paul deigns to say that the legacy he believes most important to leave behind is the legacy of gentleness. "*Let your gentleness be evident to all.*"

Wouldn't it be wonderful if Christians were known for their gentleness? Needless to say, that is not always the case. But it can be, if we follow Paul's wise counsel: First, he tells us, "*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*" In prayer we consciously lay our anxieties before the Lord, and as we do that, Paul promises us that "*the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*" What this means is that if we consistently and gratefully give our concerns to God through Jesus Christ, God then places His sentry, His guard, at the door of our hearts and our minds. This Sentry's name is Peace, and he is appointed by God to guard your heart and your mind. This is the key to gentleness. To be clear, for Paul, gentleness is not weakness. In fact, I think he would claim only the strong can genuinely be gentle. Only the strong and the confident can really choose to be gentle. With this God-given sentry on duty, the gentle can be calm enough to be kind, compassionate, and generous precisely because they are so confident in their strength they do not have to waste time and energy proving it.

Paul went on to write "*... whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable -- if anything is excellent or praiseworthy -- think about such things.*" Note that Paul did NOT write: "*Whatever is false, whatever is dishonorable, whatever is wrong, whatever is impure, whatever is ugly, whatever is disreputable, if anything is immoral or contemptible, try to avoid thinking about such things.*" No, Paul's thrust is positive. Do you want to be gentle? Do you want that Sentry of Peace guarding your heart? Then think about what is good, focus on what is pure, give your attention to what is lovely, excellent, praiseworthy. Whatever we give our attention to, even in a negative sense, that is what we are feeding and nurturing in our own lives! Thought of in this light, cynicism nurtures complaint. Complaint and judgmentalism and gossip about the dishonorable and impure and disreputable nurtures anything *but* gentleness. Paul's thrust is positive, proactive: whatever is "excellent or praiseworthy" ... think about such things! Choose to focus your energies on what is good and right and lovely, encourage it, talk about it, promote it, and do good as much and as often as you have opportunity and you will grow in gentleness and leave a legacy of gentleness! And just stay away from the things that make it difficult to think about what is noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable ... which is about 85% of television programming these days, but that's another sermon.

I've mentioned this before, but I've been told the core philosophy of the lawn care professionals is that the secret to a lush lawn is to *focus on growing the grass*. Sure, go after the weeds, but weed control should not be the primary focus. It is much more important and productive to seed, nurture, nourish, promote, feed the *grass*, which will eventually grow to choke out the weeds. Cultivating lawns is like cultivating our lives. Focus on what is good. Encourage what is good. Work hard to produce, feed, encourage and grow what is good. Praise and encourage what is good in others. And all this has a way of flowering into the fruit of gentleness.

And that, by the way, is in large part what the ministry of the church is to be about. The church is to be that place where gentleness is fostered, that safe place where God can be encountered, that place where parents can receive help to raise children to know what is good, faithful, excellent and praiseworthy. The church is to be the place where good is defined, fed, taught, practiced *and* encouraged. Next to helping others place their hands in the saving grip of Jesus' hands, perhaps the most vital duty of the church is to encourage and promote and teach AND DO what is good, wholesome, upright and pleasing to God, and thus nurture the attractive and gracious virtue of gentleness.