Obedient to a False Promise

by Max Erin James

When the working and lower classes are exploited by glutinosity of their supervisors; when the oppressive policies are enforced onto the marginalized; when no voice is given to the underrepresented; and when one of our people are beaten, or worse…seldom do we react with such loud responses as a riot, or reciprocated action, which is very much justified after two millennia. When we choose to respond with action, taking down the businesses that do not value us, we are met with politicians, journalists, and the ignorance of others that claim we are savages, lacking discipline. We are encouraged to follow the same steps as the late Dr. martin Luther King Jr., to continue quietly and “peacefully” marching nearly a century later while wrongdoings continue to be experienced. It is not the critiques of these groups that reach me in a way to have any emotional response. This is expected of them. They ignore the issues, likely because they do not have to deal with them, or they are completely oblivious because they are incapable of being in such a position, likely due to the color of their skin, but at times because of the financial stability that has kept the wall up between them and how so many live. No, it is not their opinions that stop me from reflecting and evaluating my actions, to reconsider my approach, or to retreat for more months of planning, hoping this time we will reach them, whoever *they* are. It is our own, a grandmother, a neighbor, a father, who exercise meekness in a revenge-based oppressor takes all world. It is our own who proclaim salvation through gentleness and avoiding provocation by one’s opposition, for it is demanded by their Bible, through the word of their king, to remain lowly against others, and they would surely be rewarded with an undefined prize, presumably a heaven. “Blessed are the meek,” it begins, “for they will inherit the earth.” It is not only our people who repeat such a phrase. Our oppressors do so as well, arguably in much better fashion, with much more proclivity and determination, especially considering the Christian community is one of the most segregated communities I have ever experienced; not only by race, but by class, political party, and interpretations of the scripture, and what each faction believes their king will and will not accept on our real world. The world we currently live in, where actions have immediate and certain impacts on lives. This same phrase repeated over and over as if a hypnotizing beacon for so many, particularly the oppressed, to justify continued misdeeds while the victims sit and take what is given to avoid judgement from their higher power, but most importantly from other people. It is the fear that others who claim to follow such a rule will look down on them, or that their misdeeds will be publicized, printed on the cover of the next local magazine issue that so few would purchase anyway. As if their skewed perception of me matters even now. As if it ever did.

I am expected to keep my head down as people insult me, push me over, and take advantage of my willingness to give, perceiving my niceness as weakness. I watch churches line the streets where people beg for change and others drink or smoke themselves to a coma. I have seen people preach on the same corners broken alcohol bottles collect, where a closed gas station is seen across the street with someone pushing a cart with a bag full of dirty clothes and trinkets the pusher found, dressed in much dirtier clothes. It is almost impossible to go more than a couple blocks in my hometown without spotting a church. On the west side, where I grew up and took a fair number of beatings, there is a flood of churches, some standing right beside one another, one being Baptist, the other maybe Catholic, both reading from the same book. Here is where we hear the phrase most. Only as the separation between how I grew up and how I currently live do I become aware of the privilege it is to not be religious, not needing a faith to confide in when all appears lost, and I feel alone in the struggles that plague so many of my people. It is the book my father holds close to his chest that demands I turn the other cheek when keeping my head down does not work. We are promised a world, an inherited earth, however figurative it seems, and this is a promise people so confidently inform me was stated centuries ago. Before committing ourselves to such an ideal, clinging to a false promise, it would have been wise to ask how long to hold out and continue bearing the pain of our ancestors while collecting our own traumas to pass on to our children. Much of the book is not to be taken seriously, if not all of it from my eyes, so what is the meek expecting to truly gain from this promise? If my people are to inherit the earth, from whom? When do they gain ownership of this world? If it is the pleasures of another plane, when do my people experience such riches? After death? After surrendering so much of themselves to a guaranteed reality for what is not directly promised? Both my grandmothers were born into poverty, worked through childhood, and died with just a bit more than their parents. What do they have to show for their meekness, their kindness, love, and affection; the kind of love humorously saved for the grandchildren; the kind of affection that lingers in one’s heart well after they leave. The passiveness of ancestors as the lovers of God used the same book to justify their colonization, genocide, enslavement, and oppression. The book that so often expresses the need for love and to give love to others, yet the very individuals preaching this asinine rhetoric look down on those who cannot afford the same suit, who lack the same complexion, who are for children safety over gun rights. I consider myself fortunate enough to have witnessed marches and protests, riots that were televised internationally, and heated debates about the rights of my people and justice for those marginalized. At the same time, seeing oppressors quote the book to me as if it changes their own devious actions. Because of this, I am incapable of devoting my life to something that has never been guaranteed, and that gains loyalty from the very people who spit on me and find me a threat. The faith so strongly supported by the same people who refuse my partner, my niece, my sisters any autonomy over their bodies. The same faith that remains strong because of the those in power within government and the economic system that only succeeds through exploitation and keeping the majority working to their final breath.

I have yet to see anyone escape their struggle through meekness. Never have I seen children keep their head down and the bullying they experienced cease and see it only transition into their adulthood. Seldom do I recognize appraisal for humility over assertiveness, and instead have seen one's refusal to be lowly seen as demonstrations of true leadership, as an inspiration to take what is described as rightfully yours. Keeping their head down, being cautious, peaceful, nonthreatening, and compassionate have never kept the oversized pork in blue uniforms with an aged-out badge from murder. Pigs so many depend on every day instead recognize confidence and self-worth as threatening to their own ego that is protected by the tainted pride of the police uniform. This ego has gripped onto their very identity, that to be questioned is a threat to their life. On the other end, when we choose to remain silent, avoiding eye contact and accept the abuse of power, we are still met with violent repercussions simply for being ourselves. The result of losing another is prayer and discouraging comments towards retaliation because it is not what their savior would have wanted in return. To be meek means to limit my voice, to not be heard. The counter to meekness is what made sure people knew we were tired, of all the bullshit. It is what warned the wheel turners we will not be trampled on and will take them in the same fashion we are taken. It is being loud that gets the unqualified promoted, so it will be the noise we make to make sure we do not continue to suffer. If only we understood that this world only uses scripture to silence the strong, to embolden only their faith in what comes after this short and precious life, while motioning through each waking moment hoping for a change in their lifestyle, that can only be done through a miracle, because capitalism rules. Religion is embedded into this same system that keeps millions in poverty, that bounded my ancestors in chains, and keeps so many in a form of bondage. It is only hope that some other worldly being is watching, and that to not fight for the freedom of all will be compensated at the end of the tunnel. If I were to submit to such a philosophy, how does one expect me to respond when I reach my golden years and take the local transit to my factory work for a twelve-hour shift because I allowed others use me as their steppingstone to a less laboring circumstance. Silence is acceptance. Silence. Demanded by a faith whose leaders have never had any moral ground; whose leaders torment others for not knowing the word; whose leaders recited from their Bible as my ancestors were whipped; whose leaders justified their genocide and colonization as the “white man’s burden.” These leaders have not changed, and we see them every day, on podiums, on television, at work, following the ideology we have all been indoctrinated into.