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Blessed are the Meek

A Tribute to B.B. King

B.B. King—the king of the blues—is dead. He made his transition from time to eternity on May 14, 2015 at age 89 leaving behind a legacy of artistic expression that helps us all to hear and feel and know the complexity of our humanity. His life was an interpretation of the wisdom Jesus the Christ taught: “blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.”

We live in a world that mistakes meekness for weakness. We think humility is humiliation, and we count gentleness equal to cowardice. This is a deception. The Greek word that is translated as meek in several versions of the Bible—*praus*— also means humility and gentleness. To be meek is a kind of power, the power to endure, the power of patient striving, the power to bear the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to and then wait for our just due. The life of B.B. King shows us a man born into a context of grinding poverty and vicious racism, but he was also born into a family of faith. His mother took him to church as a child, and it was within his faith community, and a community of family and friends where he found his sense of self-worth.

A preacher friend of his family came over to eat on Sunday afternoons and brought his guitar. The preacher taught young Riley B. King how to play. Later, as a young man, he joined a gospel singing group. During the week, he worked from can to can't (from first light in the morning until dark.) On the weekends, he went into Indianola, Mississippi to sing for passersby to put money in the hat. During the day he played gospel. At night, he played the blues. The blues people gave him the most money.

He was told that at some point he would have to make a decision, that he could not play God's music and the devil's music. Time passed and one day while working as a tractor driver, he thought he had turned the tractor off, but it kept going and was damaged. He ran away to Memphis. While there he found a group of guitar players who gave him master's classes in blues guitar. About six months later, he decided to go back to Mississippi and to work off the debt he owned to the farmer whose tractor he had damaged. He was proud that when he left Mississippi the second time to start his career in Memphis, he started correctly.

He struggled, playing talent shows for one dollar a week. He became a disc jockey on the radio and started to play on the radio. He was known as Beale Street Blues Boy King. Later he shortened the name to B.B. King. In 1951, he had his first hit record, “3 O'clock Blues.” When he started to tour, he gave up the radio job, and the rest is music history. He worked hard for his entire career playing nearly every day of the year often in different cities every night. He played the Chitlin Circuit, the venues where only African-American artists played. He became a cross-over artist in the late 1960s. American blues and the guitar playing of the three blues kings—Albert King, Freddie King, and B.B. King—were major influences on British guitarists and an up and coming generation of guitar players including Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix, and Carlos Santana. He toured with The Rolling Stones and with U2. Even later in life, he played all over the world.

When we think of meekness as patient endurance, that is the life story of B.B. King. But when we consider his humility, it takes us to a place of deep spirituality where he was able to set aside his own ego and allow God, Divine Love, to speak through him and through his guitar named Lucille after a woman over whom two men were fighting one night, started a fire, and he risked his life to go into the fire to save his guitar. In his day, church-going people often drew a bright line between God's music and the devil's music. I say they were mistaken because the devil, the adversary, the mind-set that accuses us of our inadequacies, that tells us to make decisions that only benefit our own interests, as far as we can understand those interests, comes to church every Sunday and sings the gospel songs. I say that God who is Divine Love can find us wherever we are and can speak to us through a blues guitar screaming and crying and growling and laughing in a smoky club on Saturday night.

B.B. King chose the blues, but there is a spirituality to the music that at once takes us deeper down into the core of the moment and the present situation and also takes us beyond the tears and the trouble to a transcendence, to a place that soars above time, moment, and even our own individuality. When B.B. King plays, we know that someone else has felt the pain, the longing, the loss, the joy of human beings loving each other. We know that we are not alone, and that connection is holy.

Far too many people think the blues is only about pain. The blues is about love. It is about jealous love, crazy love, vulnerable love, lost love, sensible love, righteous and redemptive love, social justice love, forgiving love, letting you go and wishing you well love, paying the cost to be the boss love, fake love, primal love, lonely love, true and happy love. The blues is about the chains that bind us, that require us to work jobs we can't stand and to live with people who are difficult. The blues also encourages us to keep our heads up and look to the sky because there must be a better world somewhere. The blues is about living the love we sing. The blues is also about letting the good times roll. It jumps and hollers: "turn out the lights and call the law." It is a feeling the is not afraid to feel.

B.B. King's fans know his guitar voice with one note. And according to Carlos Santana: "That note is not in the amplifier. It's not in his fingers. It's coming from the center of his heart. I can hear B. B. King with the sound off on the TV just by looking at his face."

To allow oneself to become an instrument of human emotions to this extent requires not only a certain artistic genius, but it requires courage. And all of his fellow artists recognize this. Santana says: "He is a grand majestic spirit that when he plays, it commands respect."

Another aspect of meekness is gentleness, and B.B. King was a gentle man according to Dionne Warwick. She called him the epitome of a gentleman who allowed no disrespect of women in his presence. He was kind and graceful. The quality of gentleness is at once a description of a careful, delicate touch and it is an indication of nobility. It is a description of one who belongs to a family of high social station. B.B. King earned his nobility through his talent and work and perseverance and resilience. He earned the highest awards that this nation has to offer. He met royalty and the Pope John Paul II. Even the state of Mississippi declared February 15, 2005 B.B. King Day.

The summer of 2014, I had an opportunity to visit the B.B. King Museum in Indianola, Mississippi. My parents were from the Mississippi Delta, and I still have cousins in both Greenville and in Indianola. I spent hours in the museum and when I go back, I will probably spend more hours there. I was impressed by how the museum told the story of the blues starting with its African roots. It taught about the cross pollination with gospel music and its influence on rock. There was a portrait gallery that

told the stories of other blues men and women, including the young generation. When I left, I could not wait to buy the music of Sharda Thomas, a young African-American woman who plays the fife. The museum reflects B.B. King's generosity of spirit. (I say that anyone who is seriously interested in music ought to make the pilgrimage to the B.B. King Museum in Indianola.) King gave credit and gratitude to people who helped him along the way. He took time to pass on his knowledge about the blues and being a musician on the road and about being a decent human beings to others.

Regarding the wisdom of Jesus, "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth", Sting asks in one of his songs: "All This Time": "What good is a used up world and why would it be worth having."

The meek help to keep the only world we have from being used up. They pour their love out like a libation onto a thirsty earth and the whole world is refreshed. B.B. King poured out his humanity, his patience and humility and gentleness and the world rewarded him with honor. He is gone now, gone to a better place to dwell with the ancestors. And we are left to celebrate his life and legacy, and to do our bit to refresh the earth that is our own inheritance.

See : "B.B. King The Life of Riley" a documentary