

*No One Like Jesus: The Silent Servant and the Bruised Reeds*

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*Isaiah 42:1-9; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 12:14-21*

Friends, our final Scripture reading today comes from Matthew 12:14-21. May God add His blessing to the reading of His Holy Word. “But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus. Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place. Many followed him, and he healed all their sick, warning them not to tell who he was. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: “Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope.””

“Oh, no.” That was the first thought on many minds this week as details about the Orlando shooting came to light. “Oh, no” was the response of the gay and lesbian community when one of their worst fears was realized – that a place many of them considered safe became a nightmare. It was the response of many Christians and Muslims who knew our faiths would be dragged through the mud because of a violent extremist, one who did not know or follow Christ’s command to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Those who support gun rights, those worried about terrorism, those who just wish for peace – all of us said, “Oh, no.” We heard the other news this last week out of Orlando – a singer shot to death, a child killed by an alligator – and it screams at us that the world is deeply broken. We think “oh, no” about a lot of things, but this brought it to a head. No matter at what point you relate to the story, we know things just aren’t right. And no matter what we do, whether we pray or support some cause or back some legislation or whatever, we aren’t going to fix it. We aren’t going to fix the impact of sin on this world.

Our passage this week starts with an “oh, no” moment in Jesus’ life. All of us here know about Jesus’ resurrection; we know He was raised from the dead. But imagine hearing this story for the first time. Jesus’ life is suddenly in danger like never before. He was opposed, but now He is threatened. It’s significant enough that Jesus moves on from where He was doing ministry. It’s not like He can’t be found, though. The crowd follows Him everywhere. But beyond our “oh, no” about Jesus’ would-be killers is God’s Word saying “yes” to us – prophecy in the Old Testament, God speaking to us. God’s words through the prophet Isaiah gives us truths about Jesus, truths about ourselves, and what those truths mean for our daily lives.

We aren’t sure how Jesus knows about the Pharisees’ plans. By this time, Jesus was well known, and He had silent sympathizers in the Pharisees and the ruling party called the Sanhedrin. Word travels fast. It’s possible that He relied on His divine nature for this information, but it’s also easy to imagine word getting back to Him from some friend in a position to hear.

So Jesus moves on. We might think, “Why doesn’t He stay and confront the schemers? Is He nervous?” There are answers in the passage we’ll get to in a minute. But the chief issue is that it is not yet His time to give His life to atone for the sins of all who would come to Him. Jesus has more to do. He will give Himself over to His enemies at the right time and place. At the same time, He doesn’t want to give Himself over to those who consider Him a friend, either. He is not interested in being crowned an earthly king, for people to go into battle for Him against Rome. There are many reasons for Him keeping a low profile. And one of them is prophecy.

So He heads out, but the crowd isn’t deterred. They are fascinated by this miracle worker who keeps sharing about what life in the Kingdom of God is really supposed to be like. They continue to surround Him. So He heals them, all the sick. He warns them not to tell who He was. This too is prophetic.

What does all this tell us about Jesus? *He is the silent servant the Father dearly loves.* When we look at Jesus, we are not just looking at the perfect man, the consummate teacher, or the healer extraordinary, though He is all those things. He is the Father’s Son. The prophecy from Isaiah tells us the deep relationship between them.

Jesus is chosen. You know, we have kids, we love our kids, you all love yours, but there are times when we wouldn’t choose our kids and you wouldn’t choose yours. Kids talk back; they get into messes; they cost us money; they don’t appreciate their parents. Go back a generation and you know our parents would say the same things about us!

Jesus is chosen. The Father chooses the Son – to work through Him, to create the universe through Him, to save His people through Him. When we align ourselves with Jesus, when we entrust our lives to Him, we give them to the One person the Father has uniquely chosen. And rightfully so, for Jesus is a part of Him, part of the one triune God. We don’t need to worry that we’ve chosen badly if we’ve chosen Jesus, because the Father chose Him.

Jesus is the servant of the Father. This seems a little weird to us because, again, we wind up serving our kids a lot more than they wind up serving us. But Jesus is in a perfect relationship with His Father. He serves the Father’s purposes because He knows that what His Father chooses is right. We are servants because He is the Father’s servant. And yet, not only does Jesus serve the Father, He serves us. His entire earthly existence was for our benefit. When we worship Him today, it’s in no small part because He made Himself so small for us. We who are owed nothing receive the service of the one true King.

Jesus serves because the Father loves Him. Not only does He love Jesus, He delights in Jesus. Jesus is the Father’s pride and joy. When I think about the relationship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I see how our relationships should be. I see how love can look. It isn’t duty or obligation. It isn’t begrudging or forced. Love is passionate – not in a romantic way, which is kind of the only passion we often understand today, but in a way where the three persons of the Trinity rejoice in one another. They relish one another. There is endless happiness within that three-in-one union that overflows in grace, love, and joy to us. It looks like a perfection that we will one day have if we continue to come to God for forgiveness and mercy.

Now here's the surprising thing: the silent servant is not speechless – He proclaims justice to the nations. But it's the manner He goes about it that is why He's given the title silent. "He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets."

Jesus is gentle. In a world obsessed with fighting the Romans, Jesus advocates a Kingdom that is not of this world. He has every reason to proclaim Himself king – He's healing, He's doing miracles, no one has ever seen anything like Him before or since. But instead, He downplays what He does. Don't worry about making me king; go and love your neighbor.

Sometimes we take incidents like when Jesus drove the moneychangers out of the temple and we think, "What a temper!" But even then, Jesus didn't use the incident to proclaim His Lordship. He does it out of righteousness, of fulfilling the true law of God that the Pharisees ignored. We don't see Him screaming or carrying on; instead, He quotes Scripture, lamenting that they have turned God's house of prayer into a den of thieves.

Think about how many times the various religious groups of the day try to trap Jesus. Jesus responds not with anger or straw men but with the truth of God. He is not silent about injustices to others, but when it comes to injustices against Himself, He refuses to speak out in His own defense, even to His trial in front of the Sanhedrin and Herod and Pilate.

His example makes me wonder about our causes and what we fight for. Should we fight against genuine injustice and lift up our voices for the plight of others who suffer – the poor, the bullied, the mistreated? Absolutely. But there is something amiss when we demand our own rights as Christians. We are servants under our servant Lord, Jesus. Our blessings are stored up in heaven far more than they are lavished upon us on earth.

We are in a weird time in society where everyone is demanding their rights, and that gets nasty when those rights conflict with one another. Maybe we should be a little less demanding of what we think we deserve. We deserve judgment and condemnation, but Jesus didn't give us those. Jesus did not stand up for His right to a fair trial, though He could have. (Paul appealed to be sent to Rome since he was a Roman citizen, but that actually extended his time in prison – there was really no case against him. He was led to do it so he could share the faith with more people!) When Jesus was mistreated, He prayed, "Father, forgive them." In times like these, perhaps we should be a bit more reserved about demanding our rights and do a bit more listening. When we are heard, it should be with compassion and grace and mercy in our voices.

And that's because of the second point in today's passage: *God chooses to spare the bruised, broken, and unworthy*. "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory." Pretty weird, right? I knew this passage, but I didn't give much thought to it. Isaiah said it, Matthew said Jesus fulfilled it, good enough for me. Because I don't know much about reeds and wicks. But it's not about the Messiah just being peaceful. It's about you and me.

It turns out reeds were pretty handy. Some of us have played reed instruments. Tracy plays one most weeks with us; the bagpipes I played a long time ago were a reed instrument. They need a piece of reed to play. Reeds were also writing tools; you dipped them in ink to write a note or a letter. They were easy to come by in the marshes; a dozen sold for less than a penny. And if you know anything about reed instruments, you know that the reed can be sensitive. Just a little tear in the reed and it won't work anymore. And while you don't want to go through reeds quickly, they're much cheaper than the rest of the instrument. In ancient times, if one was bruised, you broke it and threw it aside.

Wicks were much the same way. They were necessary because if you wanted to have a light in a room in the evening, you had to light some kind of candle or lamp or something with a wick. A wick smoldered when the flax wasn't quite right. It would give off an acrid smoke. When that happened, you snuffed out the wick and found another piece of flax to light.

But prophecy tells us that the promised Messiah doesn't do that. He sounds like the ancient equivalent of a hoarder! He keeps around this stuff that has no use. A bruised reed and a smoldering wick serve no purpose. He's kind of like the guy who still has around newspapers from 1973. Bizarre, right?

Except when we realize one thing – the ancient newspaper and the bruised reed and the smoldering wick? They're us. They describe all the people Jesus ever met, they describe us, and they describe everyone in the world today. We are bruised and broken, every last one of us.

Every church, every temple and mosque, every restaurant, every stadium of sports fans, every gay bar, every straight bar, every business, every home...they're full of nothing but reeds and wicks that don't do what they were designed to do. We were made to know God and be known by Him, to love and be loved by Him, and we messed it up royally. The Westminster Catechism says the chief end of man is "to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." Not a single human being does that right.

Jesus didn't have to heal everyone in His midst. He didn't have to downplay His authority as creator of the universe and its rightful judge. He could have come down from heaven and been justified in wiping it all away, destroying everything and everyone for our firm denial to come near to Him, to follow, or to obey Him. He didn't. That's mercy. That's love.

Jesus is in the business of taking things that seem to have no value and making them incredibly valuable. Who would repair a reed when they're a dime a dozen? Who would fix a wick when you can just pop one out of the wax and pop another one in? Jesus would. He finds His people among the least, the last, and the lost. He brings them into the workshop of His Spirit, gives them hearts that can believe and find faith in Him, and makes them into reeds that can play His beautiful melody, into wicks that burn brightly for Him.

There is an end to Jesus' mercy – it lasts until He leads justice to victory. Someday, His Kingdom will come in all its fullness. That day, we will see Jesus for who He is. His people will come round Him and rejoice in His presence. On that day, those who will be condemned are those confident in their own sufficiency and merits, assured that they are “good enough” to deserve heaven, who neither need God's mercy nor want God's grace. On that day, Jesus will judge – and He will tell each one of them, “your will be done.” They will learn just how much God was a part of their existence when He separates Himself from them. But until that day, it is not too late to become a part of Christ's reed repair and candle making enterprise.

It is because God spares the bruised, broken, and unworthy that we can celebrate our final thought this afternoon: *In Jesus' name, we put our hope.* Isaiah prophesies well over 700 years before Jesus' day. No one outside of Israel has any idea who God is; they don't worship Him. Israel was God's people, His nation; outside of being a Jew, there was no way to learn about Him or follow Him. Yet Isaiah's prophecy says, “In his name the nations will put their hope.”

The Messiah brings hope to all people, not just the Hebrews. It's in the Messiah's name that the nations will put their trust. At some point, Isaiah says, God plans to expand His salvation far beyond the borders of one nation and a certain chosen people group. He will bring mercy to the pagans. Those who once considered Israel the worst of their enemies can be eternally redeemed when God sends His messiah and offers them salvation.

That is our hope. Because of Jesus – His perfect life, His death on the cross, and His resurrection proving the truth of His Messiahship – we can be made whole through Him. We can approach the Father and have a relationship with Him. And we can have that hope despite anything we've done. Through trusting in Christ, we are accepted into His family and, over time, made whole. And the offer extends to all.

If you haven't taken God up on that offer, do it today. Pray to Him to forgive your sins and accept you into His family as His servant. He will do it; there is no doubt. That relationship will guide your heart and mind and steps from this time forward, and you can begin to live in a way that's pleasing to Him.

And if you've begun that relationship, I encourage you to extend the invitation to others. A lot of people are living in fear as Orlando became the center of the nation's attention this week. Those in public positions fear that they might be in danger as they simply perform their jobs and greet others. Parents fear for the safety of their children. Members of the LGBT community grieve, and some wonder if any Christians might grieve with them, especially when they feel targeted. The “oh, no” is ringing strongly right now.

If you know someone who falls into these categories and feels fearful right now, I encourage you to make a leap of faith and offer a cup of coffee, a hug, whatever's appropriate. We're all damaged goods. But God extends His love to us anyway. And we can extend His love to those around us because we know what it's like to be a bruised reed that God has somehow found a use for. Let's go be reed healers and wick lighters this week on behalf of our Lord who will take anyone who comes to Him and make them new...that they might hear that in Christ, they will find not another “oh, no” but His “yes” of “follow me.”