

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for the Communion Service January 9, 2011  
Lessons: Isaiah 42:1-9 and Matthew 3:13-17

## BRUISED REEDS AND DIMLY BURNING WICKS

The Servant of the LORD is a teacher, and his is the kind of teaching for which people near and far away have been waiting, even if they do not know it could ever come. That's important for us to understand as a church. People are waiting for a kind of teaching they may not even realize they need or want. Their experiences of life may not have prepared them for such teaching, such truth from God.

To understand, we might think of the child who has never known a loving family or a secure home life, who has never experienced acceptance and kindness, never had mistakes met with understanding from a patient and caring adult. That child longs for a kind of truth, a type of reality, never experienced. The child has no way of knowing such a life is even possible but longs for it nonetheless. To hear an adult voice that is not yelling, threatening, or belittling would be wonderful, if it could be true that adults might actually speak to children that way; but since the child has never experienced friendly speech from an adult, who knows if there really is such a thing in this world? So it is that school teachers sometimes hear themselves asked by a young student, "Can I come and live with you?" The child longs for something he or she now senses for the first time: conversation without rage, attention from an adult that brings no fear or shame, acknowledgment as someone whose presence is welcome and whose very existence is considered worthwhile and worthy of positive adult attention. Imagine the surprise of a child suddenly treated for the first time as something other than a nuisance.

The Servant of the LORD cares for the people, and he is sent to them for their sake. He is a teacher, and so their responses matter. He has not come to separate the strong from the weak, the worthy for the unworthy, or the promising from the difficult. An already bruised reed he will not break, and even the most dimly burning wick he will not snuff out. So, he brings hope to people who expect none, who are already damaged by life.

Jesus took the form of the Servant, and in this time when the churches are no longer riding high in American society, it is imperative that we follow Jesus in taking that form of the Servant so long denied by Christian triumphalism. No longer can we afford to go on doing our own familiar church-thing, not much caring whether people outside the church like it or not, find it helpful and healing or not, or even understand what it's all about. The truth,

however, is that the churches never really could afford self-satisfied indifference because in the best of times for Christianity's own prosperity, the approach to people that says, in effect, "Here's the truth of God all spelled out, take it or leave it," was unfaithful to Jesus Christ and served him quite poorly.

Our beliefs and doctrines matter because they help us think through our faith and understand how it is that we can profess hope for this world when there is so much cruelty and despair in it, but people long for more than beliefs and doctrines. They need the God who cares, and so they need servants of God to show them God cares.

The essence of the church's message to a world of bruised reeds and dimly burning wicks is not so much a matter of what "you must believe" (or else) as a matter of who loves you and longs to heal you and give you life that is genuinely human. The church must be a teacher in the manner of the Servant — a teacher who moves people to ask, "Can I come and live with you?" People yearn for they know not what, because they have not experienced it and may not even believe it really can exist for them.

In this recession that is persisting, people are angry, frightened, and shamed. So, they are easily misled by opportunists who offer them scapegoats to blame for their distress. In the extreme, such was the situation in Germany in the 1930's when the scapegoats became the Jew, the Gypsy, the Communist, and the homosexual. Today in America, the scapegoats include the Muslim, the Spanish-speaking immigrant, the homosexual, the poor person in general, the public employee (especially the teacher), and the college professor. From a different view, the scapegoat may be the business person or the Christian. When times are tough, there is a lot of finger pointing and stereotyping.

We live in a time when the wealthy are getting richer by leaps and bounds while many who used to feel secure or hopeful are getting misused or tossed aside. Never in this land has there been such a huge gap between the rich and the poor, and ironically the poor are the ones getting much of the blame.

I believe the churches must become teachers and not just preachers. We need to give content to the hope we profess in Christ, and that content must make sense to people. We need to offer depth of understanding in a society of slogans people are ready to fight over. But we need to offer warmth as well as depth. What many people outside the church expect from Christianity is not understanding, respect, welcome, and empathy. They long for such things, whether they know it or not, but they expect judgment and rejection or just indifference. We live in a world of bruised reeds, young and no longer young. Countless people slog along through lives that disappoint them.

Jesus seeks baptism from John. He is one of us and knows he needs God's grace. Nothing matters more in the message of Christmas than that God's beloved Son is one of us and fully intends to make himself one with us in all that it means to be human in this world. Jesus will not pull back and stand apart from us as the exception to what it's like to be human. He will not regard himself as exceptional. When Christians try to be exceptional — to be exempt from the life of the rest of humanity, to stand apart from the bruised reeds and dismiss the dimly burning wicks — they are not being faithful to Jesus and walking in his way.

Jesus' way is that of the cross, which is the way of self-giving love, represented symbolically for us here at the Lord's table. Our Savior must also be our teacher, so we will live our belief and hope in him in ways that move people to discover what they have longed for but, perhaps, did not even realize was missing. The unloved child does not really know what is missing or understand how it feels to be wanted, to be treated with kindness, and valued as a person. There is a yearning in the human spirit, however unaware people may be of it. We have a need to discover that there is more to life than success or failure. The churches are going to have to decide whether they want to be preserved institutions the world passes by or teachers who awaken that yearning of the human spirit and so share hope not recognized before but desperately needed. Amen.