

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

WORDS FOR THE FAINT OF HEART


*"A bruised reed he will not break, and a
dimly burning wick he will not quench."
Isaiah 42:3*

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For a long time in the Christian church the view prevailed that the gospel was for losers. To be washed and filled one had to be unclean and empty. Only "penitents" need apply. Those who possessed a confidence in their own ability and a positive self-image could not be serviced by the gospel until circumstance or grace brought them low!

Salvation was for such as could speak of themselves as "chief of sinners," or "less than the least of all saints." It was for the kind of person who could pray -- and mean it: "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us." 1 It was for those who could heartily sing:

"Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind;
Sight, riches, healing of the mind;
Yea, all I need in Thee to find,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come! 2

Then came Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Harvey Cox, William Hamilton and many, many others to challenge the view that God has dealings only with losers. God wants winners too. The gospel is capable of engaging men and women in the fullness of their powers. A man's spirit does not have to be broken before he can believe. In fact, God wants us to walk through life heads up, asserting ourselves, exorcising evil, enthroning the human, without the crutch of a dependent faith. We please God most when we lean upon Him least!!

* * *

This is where some of us are. We elevated

Bonhoeffer's corrective into a norm. Christians aren't supposed to ask God for what they might better do for themselves. Secularity is God's gift to us. There's a world to build out there, a humanity to affirm -- let's get on with it!

But the picture isn't quite holding up, is it? Surely not for all of us all of the time, and not for many of us most of the time. Behind our bold attempts at bravado there frequently exists anxiety, and a needy, hungering, wavering self.

Some of our youthful secularists mistook biological energies for spiritual toughness. As they age they may feel differently. Here in this city of everlasting hustle, there are millions and millions of beaten people. Seventy-five years ago a man returned to this country from Europe and said that the reason American cities are prosperous is that there is no place to sit down! We're always moving. Always pushing. Always trying to implement the vision that propels us.

But the truth is that while we are ashamed to cry in public we go home to weep alone. We're really not bringing it off, are we? I think often of that cartoon in the "New Yorker" years ago where one camel turns to the other and says, "I don't care what people say, I'm thirsty." If my ear is at all in tune with where laymen are today around this country, they are saying, "I don't care what the theologians say, I'm beat."

* * *

For all who are faint of heart, or all who will admit that they are, I have good news today all the way from the prophecy of Isaiah. "A bruised reed He will not break, and a dimly burning wick He will not quench." Or, if you prefer the New English Bible, "He will not break a bruised reed or snuff out a smoldering wick."

Who is this "He" referred to in the passage? In

Second Isaiah we have several songs and poems that have to do with the Servant of the Lord. There is much speculation as to who the servant of the Lord really is. Some say it was the nation Israel. Others, someone living but not spoken of in Scripture. Others, someone coming. Still others, the kingdom of God itself. For Christians there has always been a sense of connection between the Servant spoken of in Isaiah and Jesus himself.

It is more relevant to ask, "Who is the God of whom the Servant is an agent?" -- whether the Servant be a nation or a person. The God whom the Servant represents is a God who is marked by tenderness and who is moving society in the direction of a benevolent and compassionate order.

"A bruised reed He will not break." A reed isn't much in itself. Reeds are as common as the wayside grasses. Yet, according to this word, even people who appear to be expendable and worthless are to be restored and cared for. The smoking wick has reference to an oil lamp that is sputtering. Meant to give off light it offers only a flickering flame and much smoke. According to the promise, lamps like that which are not fully functional, not able to do what they were meant to do, will be carefully trimmed and resupplied rather than snuffed out.

We believe that God is revealed in all of this, for God is patient and gentle in His ways. His aims towards us are not to destroy but to fulfill. "A bruised reed He will not break, a dimly burning wick He will not quench."

* * *

Come closer for a nearer look at these powerful words. Consider the bruised reed. I imagine whole acres of them growing up on either side of a river. I can see animals as they scurry for prey thrashing through the reeds, trampling many of them down. Broken reeds suggest casualties that owe their difficulties

to some blow from without. Many suffer in life through no fault of their own. We all know people who are victims of birth defects, victims of some accident on land or sea or in the air, victims of some disastrous downturn in financial fortune, victims of a drastic loss of health, victims of inflation. All such received some blow or blows that caused them to tumble from the orders of life -- whether of marriage, of employment, of health, of family, of faith. These are the bruised reeds. They were just standing there when something hit them, and down they went.

A society is to be judged by its attitude towards such. However much we may talk about democracy in this country we are in large measure a meritocracy. There is still a pervasive feeling in the land that only those who can contribute are worthy of support, concern and interest. Those who become unemployed know only too well how quickly even friends can change.

Plato believed that infanticide was alright in the case of feeble babies. After all, what could they produce? Nietzsche believed that strength was the only virtue and weakness the only fault. He was an advocate of selective breeding, looking forward to a race of supermen. In Nietzsche's mind pity was a paralyzing mental luxury and a wasted feeling. Not so with God! No matter how plentiful reeds may be, no matter how seemingly replaceable, they matter to God, and in His sight none is expendable. That is what the prophet is trying to get us to feel and understand.

Two summers ago, John Kenneth Galbraith and William F. Buckley, Jr. were having at it on "The Firing Line" program. The question being pressed by the host was this: "By what right does society, through taxation, take from those who have in order to give to those who have not?" I'm frank to say that I was disappointed in Dr. Galbraith's inability to give a reason. He said something like, "Ah come on, Bill, I wouldn't want to live in a society that didn't take care of its poor." But Mr. Buckley replied, "I'm not really asking you what you'd prefer or what you'd like,

I'm asking you what the justification is for taking from the rich to help the poor." In our terms, what obligation do healthy needs have towards broken needs?

The only satisfying answer is a faith answer. God has joined us in a community of mutual care. Is it not so that the Red Cross, the Kidney Foundation, the United Fund and all other social causes that bid for our support presume that there is extant in our society a belief that the bruised needs should matter to us because they matter to God?

I like the way the woman put it who was working with retarded children: "We believe that people will respond to love after they have lost the capacity to respond to anything else!"

Here is a major clue as to what the church is really about. Church is a place where people are treasured and valued not because of their vocational productivity but because God has called them His own and invested them with His worth. Churches are far too routine in their reception of members by Letter of Transfer. The term itself is cold. It suggests a movement of freight rather than a movement of people. Here's what a Letter of Transfer really means: "I cared and was cared for in my church in Minnesota. I wish now to care and be cared for here!" "A bruised need He will not break."

"A dimly burning wick He will not quench." The Authorized Version has it, "A smoking flax He will not quench." If the wick is beginning to age and needs to be trimmed or repaired, or, if the oil supply is low, there will be replenishment. The prophet here suggests to our minds people who are casualties because of some inner failure. It is no one else's fault but the lamp's fault that the wick is so frayed and the oil supply low. There are many such in our society. However much they inveigh against the injustices of our society, which are many, the essential problem is inside. They suffer from depleted stores of hope, love, purpose, self-confidence and faith.

What I catch from this ancient promise is that God does not condemn our little. He does not mock us because the flame is not pure and bright and steady. He is there rather to trim and treat that wick and to resupply the oil, anxious that we be fulfilled and not destroyed. If the truth were known, He deals with us more graciously than we are prone to deal with ourselves!

For some reason I've been giving much thought in recent weeks to this matter of depletion and supply. As I age more fully into the middle years, I have come to revise my definition of the heroic. Heroes are not the gabblers from stage and screen that frequent our talk shows on late night television. Heroes are not the athletes who can dazzle the crowd with their incredible skills. Heroes are not the rock groups that jump and swoon and groan, defying the establishment while frequently living better than most within the establishment. I share with you the conviction that the real heroes of our time are those who have taken life's depletions in stride, overcome their loss, and kept on moving.

This thought was symbolized for me by an aging gentleman I noticed on my flight to Houston on Monday last. I became aware of him first in the boarding area, then in flight when he threaded his way up the narrow aisle of the coach section to visit one of the washrooms. I took him to be a man of no less than seventy-five summers. I fancied him to have been an accountant perhaps, or a lawyer, maybe a high school principal. He was neatly and conservatively dressed in a business suit. What courage he represented to me!

Why was he traveling alone? Had his mate died? How had he managed that trip to the cemetery and back? Did his children care? Were they near?

I had had a tough enough time getting out to the airport for that 8:00 a.m. departure, how had he managed it? You see, he had a cane. One of his legs couldn't do it anymore. How had he felt his first day

on that cane? Did they laugh at him at the office? Rib him about getting old? What did it do to his pride to have to limp where once he had walked with grace?

His hair was a mere fringe of silver that decorated a handsome enough face. How had he weathered that loss of hair? Did he keep his dignity as each visit to the barber shop became shorter and shorter?

I suspected that his teeth were not his own. They seemed too full and even for that. What is it like to have all your natural teeth pulled and then get fitted for new ones. How do you explain those sunken cheeks in the interval? What's it like to go out to dinner for the first time after the plates are in?

My hero also wore glasses. Like many of us he knew what it was like not to be able to read or see without prescription lenses. A common aggravation, but a deprivation nonetheless.

Nestled behind his left ear was a hearing aid. Somewhere along the way he had had to ask friends to repeat themselves and talk up. He had had to get his good ear in the right position in order to hold a decent conversation. How many times had his wife told him after an evening out that he was talking too loud in public? How had he felt when he first got his hearing aid? Did the piece fit comfortably? Was it a problem adjusting it? How long would the batteries hold up? Did his friends comment on it or look away when they first noticed? How long does it take to get it in place when the phone rings unexpectedly at night?

He was obviously retired. How had he handled that, I wondered? What did he say when they gave him the farewell luncheon and the gold watch? What had he retired to? He must be into something, else he would have taken a flight that left at a more reasonable hour.

The world was so different now from what he knew as a boy. And he was so different too! But there he was -- my hero -- toughing it out, battling through,

staying with it, drawing strength from somewhere.

Somewhere? I dare say that he had learned the secret of replenishment. The same secret that Paul spoke of when he said, "Though our outer nature is wasting away our inner nature is being renewed every day." (II Cor. 4:16) As the promise from the Old Testament has it, "To them that have no might, He increaseth strength." (Isa. 40:29)

"Softly He touches
for the reed is tender,
wisely enkindles for
the flame is low."

* * *

The gospel is demand, sure enough. But the gospel is also promise. The strong may come, but the weak are always welcome. "A bruised reed He will not break, and a dimly burning wick He will not quench."

CLOSING PRAYER

*We thank Thee God for help
needed and received;
For compensations of the spirit
realized in the world within;
For Thy tenderness and mercy
that we scarce can understand.
Grant that all who have known
Thee as commanding Lord,
May know Thee as well as
providing Saviour.
To Thy name's eternal praise. Amen.*

FOOTNOTES:

1. Standard Book of Common Prayer, p. 23, Harper and Row, New York, 1944
2. Elliott, Charlotte, "Just As I Am, Without One Plea" Pilgrim Hymnal, p. 319, The Pilgrim Press, Boston, 1958

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