



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

SERMON
1-8-17

I find the lines from the Isaiah reading particularly lovely this morning. They are lines from an unknown prophet writing in the sixth century before the birth of Jesus. As prophecy they are a bit unclear about who is being addressed – in the use of you and I. Is the I God or the writer? Is the you the people of Israel or the prophet himself or to us today? Today we tend to listen to the lines and think they speak of Jesus as the you and God as the I, but remember this is OT writing and to name the you as Jesus is done by us reading him back into books written long before his birth. I like to listen to the Bible as speaking to me today. What is being told to me, or being asked of me? And in today's reading they you and I bounce around so at one moment you think someone unknown is being addressed and then it shifts to sound like I am personally being spoken to. So, I would like to read you the lines again, using you throughout the writing. This section is titled: The servant, a light to the nations. Please listen to this written to you – someone willing to serve.

(Read the lines 42:1-9)

See – lovely. One line in particular is a favorite of mine: “A bruised reed you will not break, and a dimly burning wick you will not quench.” One of the miracles of God given to the Hebrew people – to the Israelites is the miracle of the sacred candle – the menorah that was in the temple during a time of siege for the Israelites. It was during holy days and there was no oil available to keep the candle burning – yet miraculously it burned steadily during the eight holy days and the miracle led to the celebration of Hanukkah – the festival of the lights that was just observed by our Jewish neighbors. In that miracle we meet a God that keeps the light burning – shining on despite all odds.

This line is used again in Matthew to describe Jesus as he went about healing the people. So, to me it speaks both of Jesus' care and God's care for us and also the care we offer others as servants of this God.

The lines became especially meaningful to me several years ago when one of our children was suffering deep emotional distress that eventually was given a diagnosis of a variant of schizophrenia. But diagnosis or not, as a parent I was watching our child trying to continue to live in this world in the grips of debilitating illness. I began to see him as a bruised reed and a dimly burning candle struggling to stay alive. So this line became both a prayer to God and God's care of our son and to me in remaining steadfast in care for our child. God would nor will never break a bruised reed.

I don't know much about reeds – I don't know if we even have reeds that grow in Wyoming? So in my imagination I picture a stalk of a cattail branch or perhaps some of that stuff we call snake grass – I imagine either of those bent and bruised and unable to stand upright. I don't know how reeds heal, I don't know if they ever are able to stand upright again. But however the injury affects their future – they are not broken/pulled apart and discarded. This reading tells me that they need to keep growing in whatever fashion they can.

And a dimly burning wick – we can all imagine candles just fine. We can all imagine a dimly burning wick because we've seen them before. And from experience we know that dimly burning wicks need to be protected from drafts and if possible trimmed or the excess wax drained off and with care they can keep on burning. That's what God and you and I can do for a dimly burning wick.

Now these lines speak to me about how to treat anyone, all people who are struggling to keep living. I mentioned our child because I am 100% sure that all of you can relate to that experience. Whether it is you, a family member, a friend, or other loved one – our lives have all known the impact of mental illness or emotional and mental fragility. A study from the National Institute of Mental Health a few years back suggested that 1 in 4 adults suffer from a diagnosable form of mental illness in any given year. And whether someone's emotional struggles are formally diagnosed or not we know people who wrestle with debilitating depressions, anxiety, or other mental distress. Around us now are fragile people living as bruised reeds or dimly burning wicks.

So what's our message? Don't lose hope. Your struggles are not something to be ashamed of but rather are elements of the human condition. And you are not alone. And God and Jesus never wish to have a bruised reed harmed or a dimly burning wick quenched.

And if this is a time in your life when you are struggling – there are hands available to provide protection from the harsh winds. Please be willing to accept and receive care from others.

And please be willing to offer care to bruised reeds and flickering wicks. Do not lose heart. Healing can be slow and those offering care to someone might get tired or discouraged. I don't think a bent reed straightens up quickly. But as long as there is a flicker life remains and there are possibilities and presence that can bless the world and we can all take turns cupping our hands around the flickering wick or propping up the bent reed.

On a very practical level we have Stephen Ministers. They have volunteered to do this work. They are available to do this work. We are ready to start another class to train more Stephen Ministers if you would like to offer yourself to care for others experiencing struggles in standing upright. And we have each other right now, right here. Look around, pay attention. Your neighbors might be fragile right now, you might be fragile right now. Let's be there for each other and let's offer to be each other's servants and let's wait for God's miraculous presence and gifts to surprise us.

For I can tell you that 15 years ago I would never have imagined the healthy, love filled life our son is living right now. The wick burns brightly today. But it needed care – and that care will always come from God and God’s servants – you and I.

Thanks be to God.