

God Cares for the Vulnerable

Isaiah 42:1-9

Lessons from Isaiah: Images of God's Messianic Kingdom on Earth

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In 1972 when my wife and I were married, a friend was at the event and handed us a wedding present that he said was important for me to return to in every year of my ministry future. Actually, I've come to believe it is a daily reminder of the call of a servant leader.

He was reflecting upon Isaiah 42, the passage we just read. He was reflecting on his own experience of pastoral leadership and of how many of the pastors that he had seen and known had not been healing presences for people, but had been hurtful. So he wrote a poem in wonderful graphic lettering and put it in a frame. I have it on the wall of my office at home.

It goes like this,

Do not weep for those who are grieving. Do not weep for those who are dying or ill. Do not weep for those who are in despair. Do not weep for the orphan, the widow or poor. Weep for those who break the bruised reed. Weep for those who quench the smoking flax. Weep for those who do harm in the name of the Lord. Weep for those trample over the sick and dying. Weep for those who do not see the hungry and thirsty. Weep for those who do not feel the despair of the lost or have compassion for the oppressed. Weep for those who bring destruction in the name of the Lord.

Isaiah is making a stark contrast in this section of the wonderful prophetic poetry. It is the contrast between the typical pattern of world leaders and the servant of God who will come as Messiah and the kind of leader he will be. The world leaders on the one hand are people who will do injustice, who will call too much attention to themselves and complain because of their own victimization. They will not be focused on the care of the poor and the orphan. Whereas the servant of God – the Messiah God sends – God upholds this person and God's spirit dwells within this person, as represented in the baptism of Jesus which we celebrate in the church here today. Isaiah anticipated the words that would resonate from God the Father: "This is my Son, the one I love, with whom I am well pleased." The servant of the Lord is one who stands with those who are vulnerable – those who are weak. And the Spirit of God comes into him and empowers him to bring good news to people who are generally without good news in the world. Baptism was His beginning place in affirmation of His own being, of the love of the Father. He was able to walk through the world without being played by the world and its pattern of typical leadership: being indifferent to those who don't count. And so, Isaiah not only gives us a very clear statement about the Servant of God, but gives us a clear statement about how we too can become servants of God in following Jesus. Jesus invites us to move from being seekers who are trying to discover, to becoming servants who have experience like Him: the presence of the power of the Holy Spirit who can create in us the freedom to serve God and not be manipulative or hurtful.

Servant leadership is the ultimate fulfillment in, Jesus Christ, of our baptism. It is an experience that, like Jesus, if we follow, we too can care for the poor and speak good news to those who are struggling in life. If you are a disciple of Jesus, your call is to consider in maturity to becoming an apostle, a servant leader. Disciples who make disciples, disciples who care for people who are disempowered and hurting, disciples who are concerned – who are not visible, but invisible, to the public.

Jesus accomplishes this according to Isaiah with three specific movements of ministry. The first is, that he refuses to cry out in the streets for his own justice. He does not call attention to himself. He does not say "Poor me, I am being abused by this world." He refuses to take the view of the victim. He is silent, in fact, in the gospel when people abuse him or distrust him or misunderstand him.

The second action of Jesus according to Isaiah will be that he will refuse to do any injury to those who are already injured. We don't shoot our wounded. Jesus engages those who become invisible to the culture: those who are suffering and hurting, those who are poor, those who have been disempowered or lost. Jesus cares for the least and the invisible.

The third act of Jesus is that he will bring justice, because he brings healing to people. He helps people to take responsibility for their lives and he, in healing, gives them, by the Holy Spirit, to be peacemakers among others.

Those are the three behaviors that Isaiah says very clearly will be illustrative of the servant of God. The implication is that they are illustrative of those of us who seek to be servant leaders in following Jesus Christ.

Jesus does not cry out that he is the victim. He does not demand his rights, does not become whiney, does not shrink in becoming a victim. He does not tell people, "poor me." Jesus also refuses to take up vengeance or enmity towards those who are already in pain. He's especially looking out for those who are lying beside the pool, who cannot get into the water and he heals that person when nobody else pays attention. Jesus brings justice because he is able to give people within them a sense that he has – that God loves them, that they are beloved in God's presence as children of God, sons and daughters; that they too can live into doing God's pleasure.

One of the things that this text says to us is to beware of those people who demand too much attention for themselves and they cry injustice because they're in trouble. God is looking to care for people who are in pain and not people who need to call attention to themselves. I got a recent e-mail from a person who was complaining because of the tendency in America for us to become professional victims: people who make a living at making sure that other people feel guilty if they are in pain... working their history of abuse so that there's great sympathy for them in the moment... applying their grief and amplifying it and playing the "poor me

game.” In that recent e-mail, she argued for those of us that have such persons in our lives, to ‘get rid of the squids.’

Think of the image of the squid. Squids are people who seem to be missing a backbone, but possess a myriad of sucking tentacles of emotional need. I love the image. They operate by squeezing pity from everyone they meet. They can make you feel guilty for not paying attention to them, they can make you feel entwined to the point where you have no ability to extricate yourself from the relationship. She goes on to say that excuses don’t work with squids. Tell a squid that you are on your way to a colonoscopy and they will come along to sit beside you, hold your hand and complain the entire time while the doctor is working on you. Don’t dwell on that image too long!

But we all know about squids. Jesus refuses to be a squid. Jesus does not in any way affirm those who would be bound and determined or tempted to become squids. Because that is not the kind of justice that Jesus wants to bring – to have people so preoccupied with their own pain that they have no freedom to reach out to other people in pain. Narcissus victimus, is not what we are talking about here: the person who says, “I am wounded, I am the one who is in pain, pay attention to me.” The curse of many small groups and families is the identified patient who needs to have constant attention.

No. The servant does not cry out and demand attention. To be a servant means that you do not keep calling attention to yourself. Jesus refuses to be the victim; he refuses to abuse the weak and the vulnerable (two of the distinct patterns that he ceases in leadership) so he can change the world. The servant does not do damage to the people in pain, like other tyrants and pagan leaders do. The servant intervenes to help without calling attention to herself or himself.

Tyranny is an easy thing to do in some ways because it is usually the shortcut to making things happen at the expense of people who are hurting. When the oppression is lifted from such people, we see it in the world all around us: the wounded are often so angry that they have no place to go with their anger. The victims want revenge and blood and want to seek other victims. The pattern and cycle goes on and on, and Jesus put a stop to it. Rodney Stark in his breakthrough book on the sociology and the history of the growth of the church, called *The Rise of Christianity* said that the overwhelming definitive difference between Christians and pagans, and the reason why the church grew from 120 to over 50 million people in four centuries is simply this: the Christians cared and the pagans didn’t. The pagans abandoned, ignored, sacrificed, practiced genocide, oppressed and enslaved people. Christians came along and engaged them, cared for them, had patience with them, lived with them in their pain and their sickness, sacrificed themselves for them, loved them to the end, embraced, empowered, and protected people who were hurting and vulnerable.

Who would you rather be with? Who would you rather invest your life in, if that was a matter of faith? Today there are those who note that many people around the world think the Christians are the indifferent ones and the pagans have more compassion. No wonder the church is struggling today.

One of the attributes of fundamentalism in any religion is that leaders tend to become angry and vindictive, and try to guide others towards anger and vengeance rather than care and compassion. We see that happening among Islam, Judaism and even Christianity. Jesus, the servant, gives us the clear model. The person who engages the living God in grace and compassion is able to emote that in their lives.

We have seen too many cases recently where children are the ones vulnerable and lost in the midst of the terrorist movement – in Russia with the battle there, in Iraq, and even in places where the tsunami has hit; in Sudan where children have fought wars. Children are often victims because they are easy prey. Jesus clearly, as the servant of God, does not snuff out the little light in a child’s life.

Conrad Wiser, in his book about clergy entitled *Harmed and Harmful*, speaks of clergy who have been harmed in the past – who have been traumatized and abused, who do not receive healing but have continued to somehow act-out their abuse, and hurt their congregation. His comment is that clergy who have not experienced healing in their lives often cause more damage than good in the name of Jesus Christ. It is important that our leaders are servants: are healing, are helping, and are not recycling their pain and putting that upon another generation. We tend to abuse people because we are lost in our own rage. We tend to seduce people because we have been seduced. We tend to use charisma to manipulate because we have been manipulated. It’s time to say “NO” to being a victim and “YES” to being a servant.

We have been accused in American culture of being too narcissistic, too wrapped up in our pain, too much wrapped in our own desire to get our rights assured so that we get justice for ourselves rather than looking out for other people and their loss of justice. Max DePree says it as clearly as he can say it in his book, *Leadership is an Art*: leaders are called to bear pain, not inflict it. This is the attribute of the servant of the Most High God. This is the pattern of the servant, the Messiah that comes in the name of the Lord: One who is self-aware and self-differentiated, One who knows himself and knows that God loves him to such a depth that he has the freedom not to live in his own pain.

That is the way Jesus is inviting us today – particularly for our leaders as Elders, Trustees and Deacons. We are looking for people who are being healed by the Spirit, who know themselves well enough that they will not do damage to those of us in the congregation and those of the world that they serve.

And you need to make sure, prayerfully, that your pastors are of the same style in that way – not perfect, but being healed, and not hurtful. The Spirit empowers us to be like the servant of the Most High God. To not call attention to our own pain, to not demand that we have our rights fulfilled, but to turn to our brothers and sisters and make sure that they receive justice and there are not damaged by the process.

It is not only true for the church but it’s true for the Christian presence in the world. If we can practice the servant leadership role that we see in Isaiah, we will change the world and the culture in which we live, because we will become servant leaders of the Most High God. And Jesus Christ is here today to help us live that pattern of life and has given us the power of the Spirit, the Spirit that he

has within himself to do that.

May we receive the Spirit of Jesus Christ within us to become servants of the Most High God. In Jesus Christ, may we do good in our hearts. Amen