

10.20.2024 Pentecost 22

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Isaiah 53:4-12; Psalm 91:9-16; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45

“Called to be servants of all”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

It is hard for me to imagine the Christian message about Jesus without the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. The words of Isaiah 53, “*He was wounded for our transgressions,*” were understood by early Christians as having been fulfilled in Jesus. We continue to understand Jesus’ work as the Redeemer through his suffering, cross, and resurrection. Our understanding of Jesus Christ would be greatly impoverished without the Suffering Servant of Isaiah.

The writer of what is often called Second-Isaiah, chapters 40-54, wrote during Israel’s exile in Babylon while expecting the coming of the Messiah. Isaiah’s honesty about human sinfulness and God’s suffering reverberates today: “*He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.*” The clarity of Isaiah’s words enlighten our understanding of Christ. We are sinful, each turning to their own way, yet God lays our sinfulness upon the Suffering Servant, Jesus Christ.

Though we often focus on our individual sinfulness, Isaiah is also writing about the corporate nature of our human sinfulness: “*All we like sheep have gone astray,*” all communities and nations. Notice the pronouns Isaiah uses: “he” and “us” reveal the Suffering Servant as the Redeemer of all people. He alone will make many righteous: “*He shall bear their iniquities.*” The word “our,” as in “*our transgressions,*” points to the social and corporate nature of human sinfulness. When one community suffers, the whole nation suffers. When one nation suffers in war, all nations suffer the ripple effect of human brokenness and suffering.

“*All...have gone astray*” means all people and nations. As individuals and nations, we cannot escape the effects of our human sinfulness. If we are clear on this one crucial point, we can proceed: All nations, including ours, are tainted by sin and brokenness. If it were not so, we would have no need of a Redeemer. If it were not so, we would not be at one another’s throats. If it were not so, we would not continue to make saviors out of our leaders. We have all gone astray and we are all in need of forgiveness.

Isaiah’s Suffering Servant is the key that unlocks the prophetic understanding of Jesus Christ’s work in this world God so loves. Jesus heals us by his suffering so that, in imitation of him, we might become his servants suffering alongside of others. In a world in need of healing,

Jesus gathers us into a servant church. Ours is a faith active in love. This is why we feed the hungry and the homeless in the Soup Kitchen, shelter the homeless in Room In The Inn, visit the sick and visit the imprisoned with Kairos. This is why we respond to those who continue to come to the church door during the week. Recently, I sat with a man as he sobbed, telling me that he and his family were now homeless because they could not pay their rent. People come to this church seeking God's strength and hope. The church in this world is to be a sign of hope in a world of enormous suffering. Christ has fed and forgiven us that we might give others strength and hope.

Some years ago in Japan I belonged to the Japan Ecumenical Association and in preparation for the 500<sup>th</sup> year of the Reformation, I heard leaders of various churches speak about the meaning of the Reformation for them. I remember a talk given by the late Bishop Kazuhiro Mori, Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Tokyo. Bishop Mori began with a textbook perfect talk about why the Reformation was needed for the medieval Roman Catholic Church, restoring the gospel of grace and service to Jesus Christ. He then recounted being a young priest in Rome and seeing the Bishop of Rome carried into St. Peter's Basilica on a chair gilded in gold. Bishop Mori recounted how he said to himself, "I never want to be carried like that. Christians are to imitate Jesus Christ in lives of service to others. For Jesus said, '*The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.*'"

We are called to be a servant church. Yet we also need to acknowledge that the church has not always been a sign of hope in the world. Like James and John, the church has also sought greatness in its cooperation with imperial power and with today's ideologies and nationalisms. As part of the commercial expansion of the modern era, the church cooperated in the colonization of nations and the enslavement of people of color. We don't like to talk about this because it is unpleasant, and so we never fully confess our ongoing complicity with the greatness and power of the world. We don't recognize that we have all gone astray, even the church, and so we continue to find it hard to say, "not my will, Lord, but thy will be done."

Jesus has not called us to make churches appointed with gold and silk, to accumulate wealth, or to seek power and privilege; rather, Jesus has called us to be his servants in this world. He has called us not to worldly greatness but to his great work of lifting the suffering and the weak with hope. Jesus has commanded only that if you see your neighbor in need, suffering in body and soul, that you leave everything and at once help your neighbor in every way within your power.

This is what Christ has done for each of us, giving us an example to follow.

Yet like James and John, we are constantly grasping after greatness. We unashamedly ask Jesus “*to do for us whatever we ask.*” Like James and John, we continue to seek glory without the sacrifice of service. Jesus responds to us as he did to them: “*You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized?*” Like headstrong children we answer, “*We are able,*” not knowing that Jesus’ cup of suffering must always lead to self-denial, death, and the carrying of the cross.

Yet like James and John, we are often overly optimistic. We consistently underestimate our problems because we do not see the depth of our sinful self-centeredness. Human sin is deeply rooted in our corporate life; our society and our institutions are cracked and broken at their foundations. Jeremiah’s words describe us, “*My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water*” (Jer. 2:13). Instead of building upon faith in God, we blindly build upon faith in ourselves that given enough time and money we alone will solve our problems. We put our faith in human progress, that things will always improve, and yet we remain unable to free ourselves from the suffering we cause. We believe that our systems are essentially good and fair, and so we never fully see our sinful oppression and racism, and our addiction to wealth and privilege. Because we believe in our own human greatness, we continue to say, “my will be done,” rather than “thy will be done.”

The grace in today’s gospel is found in Jesus’ words, “*It is not so among you.*” The church is to be God’s alternative community standing in opposition to the leaders and tyrants of this world. We are to be a sign of strength and hope in this world by serving those in need.

Look to God’s Suffering Servant, Jesus. Jesus gave his life as a ransom for you, and he calls you to give your life for others. He calls us to be a servant church.

Jesus sends you again today into this world God so loves. Jesus sends you again today to be his hands and his voices.

Jesus gave his life for you so you might give your life for others.

Look to God’s Suffering Servant, Jesus, and others will meet him in you. Amen.