

The Servant Son

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A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the first Sunday after Epiphany, the Baptism of the Lord, January 7, 1990. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

I guess it's my age but I find myself reading obituaries. Last week I came across the obituary of a 45 year old woman. That really got my attention because I'm 45. Her name sounded vaguely familiar. I got out my Newark High School yearbook and discovered that she was in my home-room for three years. I looked to see if she'd signed my yearbook but she hadn't. I hardly knew her.

I have to confess that my first reaction to the information in the obituary was judgmentalism because she was a bar maid who apparently had a live in boy-friend. But there was something else intriguing about her obituary. She was a member of a Methodist church where she taught Sunday School. I thought, "That's really strange. Methodists, traditionally, are against drinking but she taught Sunday School, was a bartender and had a live in boy-friend." So my immediate reaction was self-righteousness. What kind of influence did she have on her Sunday School class? Did the church approve or overlook her relationship with her boy-friend?

That was my first reaction. But I'd also been thinking about my sermon for this morning. I'd been thinking about the Old Testament Scripture lesson ^{written hundreds of years before Jesus} where Isaiah speaks of the Servant of the Lord. "Here is my servant", the Lord says, "whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight... A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out." Obviously, Isaiah wasn't talking about reeds and wicks, he was talking about bruised people, people whose hope and self esteem were at the point of being extinguished.

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, Christians read this passage

with new eyes. They said, "Isaiah was talking about Jesus. That's how Jesus dealt with bruised people. That's how Jesus ministered to people whose hope was almost extinguished. He didn't crush bruised people. He healed them. He didn't snuff out people whose hope was flickering. He rekindled hope.

And then I thought of the passage from Matthew. John baptized Jesus. John's baptism was for repentance. But the universal testimony of the New Testament is that Jesus didn't need to repent, didn't need to be baptized. That's why John said to Jesus, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Nevertheless Jesus was baptized, undoubtedly, because he wanted to identify with sinners. A lot of people would've inferred that Jesus was a sinner when they saw him being baptized but the inference would be wrong.

We, as Christians, know that Jesus was sinless. And yet throughout his ministry he purposely identified with terrorists like Simon the Zealot, Zacchaeus, the tax-collector who bilked his own people, and Mary Magdalene who had a particularly sinful reputation. Sinners were attracted to him. Sinners loved Jesus because he didn't crush them, he healed them. He didn't snuff them out, he lit up their life.

I've always been fascinated by this. Often *down and out* sinners feel uncomfortable around us *up and in* religious type sinners. They don't want to hang around people who put them down. But they weren't turned off by Jesus. They were attracted to him and he publicly identified with them in baptism.

Just look at one illustration from the gospels. A woman caught in the act of adultery was brought to Jesus. The Old Testament law made it clear that adultery was punishable by death, by stoning. The guilty party would

stand before her accusers. Her accusers would throw rocks at her. Her head, arms and body would be hit repeatedly by heavy rocks. Dark bruises would appear on her face and arms. Her bones would be crushed by the heavier rocks. Finally her life would be snuffed out.

But Jesus, the sinless Son of God, refused to have anything to do with this. He refused to crush this woman bruised as she already was with sin. He refused to snuff out her life. "Let the one who is without sin, throw the first stone." He was the only one without sin. He didn't throw a stone. When her accusers left he turned to the woman and said, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

And I thought again of that obituary. I wondered what led this woman to go to church? Was it difficult for her to go? Did she overhear the whispers, "What's that kind of woman doing in church? Doesn't she live with some guy? Isn't she a bar-tender?" And I thought, "Maybe she saw in that church something of the sinless Jesus who identified with sinners in his baptism. Maybe she sensed that he could change her life. Maybe Jesus really had begun to change her life, healing her bruises, giving her hope.

Maybe Jesus, through that church, helped her to feel that she had

something to contribute to the work of Christ. *And isn't that why you are here? This morning? Maybe Jesus can begin to change my life, heal my bruises, give me hope, make me all I can be... enable me to do what needs to be done*

Leighton Ford, the evangelist, once told a story about his brother in law, Billy Graham. An elder was leading Dr. Graham on a tour of his church. In passing, the elder boasted that this was a biblical church that takes the bible seriously. He said that one of the members had become an alcoholic and been disciplined out of the church for drinking too much because, "The Bible says, 'Be not drunk with wine' and, he said, we didn't

want to give anybody the impression that we condone drunkenness."

Billy Graham responded, "Have you ever disciplined someone because they weren't filled with the Spirit?" The man said, "What?" Dr. Graham explained, "The Bible says, 'Be not drunk with wine but be ye filled with the Spirit.' If you discipline some out of the church for disobeying the first part of the verse, shouldn't you discipline others out for disobeying the second part of the verse? Is everyone in your church filled with the Spirit?" The man changed the subject.

I think if all our sins were spelled out in our obituaries we'd drop dead with shame. In the heart of the best Christian there are attitudes and actions that are displeasing to the Lord. And in the heart of the worst sinner there's "the light that lighteth every man", which can lead them home to the Father.

Don't misunderstand. Jesus didn't come to leave us in our sins or to excuse our sins but to take away our sins. But we come to the Lord's Table, not because we think we're better than others, but because we see ourselves as bruised sinners in need of the grace of Jesus.

The vile, the lost, he calls to them,
Ye trembling souls appear!
The righteous, in their own esteem,
Have no acceptance here.

Approach ye poor, nor dare refuse
The banquet spread for you;
Dear Saviour, this is welcome news,
Then I may venture too.

If guilt and sin afford a plea,
And may obtain a place;
Surely the Lord will welcome me,
And I shall see his face!

(William Cowper, Olney Hymns, "Hasting to the Table")

A famous Scottish preacher, Dr. Duncan, was officiating at a Communion service in Edinburgh, Scotland years ago. The elders were

offering the bread and wine. One woman, with tears flowing down her face, motioned with her hand and shook her head, "No!" Dr. Duncan saw her and walked from behind the Communion Table, took the bread and the wine and offered it to her saying, "Take it, lassie, it's for sinners." Jesus offers us his body and blood this morning and says to all who truly turn to him, "Take it. It's for sinners. I've come, not to crush you, but to forgive and restore you. I've come, not to snuff out your life, but to give you life abundant."

Will you trust him? Will you come to him this morning? Amen.

Let us pray:

Just as I am! Thou wilt receive,
Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;
Because thy promise I believe,
O Lamb of God, I come! Amen.