

This morning we heard words about great restraint from the second prophet Isaiah: "A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench." These are words of great gentleness. These are words of someone holding his power in check in order to protect the weak.

This part of the 42nd chapter of Isaiah has a technical name. It's labeled, "The First Servant Song." It was written by the second of the three prophets Isaiah.

Second Isaiah has several passages that we label the "Servant Songs." In the Servant Songs, God's chosen is not described as a military hero or conquering king. Instead, in Second Isaiah, God's chosen is prophesied to be a suffering servant.

Of course, as Christians, we see the words of Second Isaiah fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. He will eventually conquer through his own death. He will paradoxically make his power known through his acceptance of suffering.

Christians see God speaking through Isaiah and describing the attributes of his Son, Jesus. God says,

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations... a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench."

Yet, in spite of being gentle, the servant is certainly not weak. Second Isaiah continues: "He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching."

The description in Isaiah 42 is of great power being held in check, of great might being restrained so as to not do damage to something weak and fragile. God's servant has power to rule the earth and establish his kingdom. And yet, that power is exercised so sensitively that he will not overpower something as weak as a bruised reed or a dimly burning wick. They will be safe in the presence of God's mighty servant.

This time of year we celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord. We also celebrate our sharing of Jesus Christ's saving work through the sacrament of baptism.

We have many metaphors to describe what happens in baptism: being buried with Christ, being born to new life, being adopted as God's daughters and sons, becoming members of Christ's body, or even the old southern favorite, washing our robes white in the blood of the Lamb.

Whatever the image, we have a new status and a new identity through baptism.

Yet it's often easy to forget who and whose we are. We forget that, through our baptisms, we not only share in Christ's passion and resurrection. We also are called to share in Christ's work in the world. We are called to take on Jesus' attributes, to act in the world on his behalf as he would act. We are sheep who are called to imitate our Good Shepherd.

Yet it's all too easy to forget this identity. Sometimes, we Christians act less like sheep, and more like wolves. Instead of holding ourselves back, we often try to throw our weight around, regardless of the consequences.

Why be nurturing and caring when we can engage in the games and exercises of power?

Why follow the law of love, when we can follow the law of tooth and claw?

Why follow the will of God, when we can impose our own wills?

Yet, what is the effect of our behavior?

Do dimly burning wicks feel safe in our presence, or do they quiver in their lamps at our approach? Do bruised reeds lift their faces to the light when we're around, or do they grip the earth more tightly, holding on for dear life?

We each have countless interactions with people each day as we move through this life. What kind of effect do we have on those around us?

Most of us don't have the power to change the world. But we can have an influence on our little corner of the world.

And the way we influence our little corner of the world is the acid test for our day to day lives as Christians. When people encounter us, do they experience through our actions a glimpse of the love of God?

What are our interactions like with the people we work with? The people we go to school with? The people standing in line in front of us or behind us in the store? The people serving us in a restaurant or behind the counter? What are our interactions like? Do we shine with the radiance of Christ's light? Do they glimpse Jesus' love through our actions.

One pastor told me this story. He had gone out to eat lunch with his family on a Sunday afternoon after church. At the restaurant, a few tables away, a waitress accidentally dropped a salad into the lap of one of the customers, getting salad dressing all over the man's suit. She was very apologetic. But the guy was livid. He screamed at her about how stupid she was, how incompetent she was. And did she know how much his suit cost? Probably worth more than she made in a month. Red faced, hurling insults, really letting her have it.

And the pastor said he realized: "This guy is in a suit on a Sunday afternoon. Who wears a suit to lunch on Sunday? Probably someone who's just come from church." Youch.

A dimly burning wick he will not quench? A bruised reed he will not break? Well, not that day. That day that particular Christian flunked the test on sharing the light and love of Christ with those around him.

Now, none of us is perfect. We all can do dumb things.

But we are called to try to live in a different way. We are called to try to love and serve others.

That doesn't mean we just let everyone walk all over us. We're not called to be wimps. Jesus wasn't a wimp. He had enormous power.

And yet he used that power to serve and help others. As his followers, do we look like him, or do we just look and act like everyone else around us?

As Christians in 21st century America, we often have the same attitude of the rest of the members of our society. As Americans, we are very concerned with our rights. Yet we forget that, just because we have a right to do something, that doesn't necessarily make it the right thing to do.

We also have a tendency to want to get what's coming to us. We think an awful lot about ourselves, about our own needs, and our own interests. And we often cling to our own interests, even if that means that we aren't acting in the interests of others.

As a culture, we've lost much of the sense of what the ancient Romans called "civic virtue." Civic virtue for the ancient Romans was all about being willing to sacrifice yourself for society. In this country, our founding fathers sought to emulate the Roman model, and they exhibited a high degree of civic virtue. Our founding fathers believed in civic virtue so much that were willing to risk their property and risk their own lives to secure liberty for others.

One ancient Roman who was looked to as an example both in ancient Rome and in Colonial America was Cincinnatus. Cincinnatus was a Roman senator who had retired to his farm. Twice in the face of two different crises, Cincinnatus was called back to lead Rome and he was given almost total power. But as soon as each crisis was over, Cincinnatus almost immediately relinquished his power and returned to his farm.

It's no accident that George Washington was nicknamed the American Cincinnatus. After winning the Revolutionary War, Washington could have held on to power and declared himself king. But he walked away voluntarily from commanding the army and returned to his farm. Again, he was called back to serve as the first American President. But after two terms, he relinquished his power and returned to his farm.

Our founders prized such civic virtue. They sought to place the common good before their own individual good. However, that attitude has become much rarer in modern American society. And this is true even for Christians.

Yet, when Jesus went down to the Jordan to be baptized by John, he wasn't concerned with his own needs. John's baptism was for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus, being sinless, certainly didn't need to be baptized by John. Jesus was baptized in order to identify with us. Jesus was baptized not for his own sake, but for our sake.

Eventually, Jesus would suffer and die on behalf of others. Jesus was the Lamb of God who took upon himself the sins of the world in order to take away the sin of the world.

As servants of God's Suffering Servant, we are called to think of others, and not ourselves, for our Lord did no less for us. It's not always easy. But it's what he calls us to do.

During the season of Epiphany, we celebrate the ways that the light of God has been made known to the world in the person of Jesus Christ.

And an important way that Jesus' light shines forth in the world is through his followers. We are God's ambassadors, we are called to share God's light with others.

When we baptize someone, we hand them a lighted candle. And we tell them, "Receive the light of Christ. Shine as his light in the world to the glory of God the Father."

You also have received that light of Christ.

This week, how will you be a reflection of his light and love those you encounter?