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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, December 6, 2023
Matthew 12:15-21
A Bruised Reed

HOLY GOSPELMatthew 12:15-21, RSV
Last week we read about Jesus healing a man with a withered hand. Because of that healing on the Sabbath, Jesus is aware that some of the Pharisees have taken counsel against him, how to destroy him.

¹⁵Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. And many followed him, and he healed them all, ¹⁶and ordered them not to make him known. ¹⁷This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah:

¹⁸“Behold, my servant whom I have chosen,
my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased.
I will put my Spirit upon him,
and he shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles.
¹⁹He will not wrangle or cry aloud,
nor will any one hear his voice in the streets;
²⁰he will not break a bruised reed
or quench a smoldering wick,
till he brings justice to victory;
²¹ and in his name will the Gentiles hope.”

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As the old saying goes, you can take the boy out of the country, but you cannot take the country out of the boy. I have been living in the city for more than thirty years now, but I grew up in the country, along the river, and I know about bruised reeds. Isaiah prophesied about Jesus that “a bruised reed he shall not break” (Isaiah 42:3, KJV). Well, you have deal pretty gently with a bruised reed to not break it. If your rowboat drifts into a bruised reed, that reed is simply going to topple over into the water. A bruised reed cannot take rough handling.

I think that the Isaiah quote about the bruised read is an excellent prophecy concerning Jesus. Notice the gentleness with which Jesus handles the news that some Pharisees have taken counsel together, how to destroy him. First off, he does not destroy *them*. Really, he could have. He could have summoned twelve legions of angels and they could have destroyed his opponents. But what does he do instead? He simply withdraws from that

place. He does not contend. He does not provoke his opponents by doing miracles right before their faces.

So, he moves on. And yet, he remains true to his character as our Great Physician of body and soul. He moves on, yet, as our text tells us, “many followed him, and he healed them all.” He does not lie low. Healing the man with the withered hand had gotten him into terrible trouble, but he continues with his healing in any case. Yet, again, notice his gentleness. He heals but he asks that the healing be kept quiet.

¹⁵Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. And many followed him, and he healed them all, ¹⁶and ordered them *not to make him known*. (Matthew 12:15, RSV)

He is trying to avoid conflict while at the same time continue as the man of compassion that he is. I do not know what more he could do.

But shall he continue this way forever? Shall he always move on and try to keep the peace? Well, judging by the Isaiah passage, he has a deeper objective than simply to avoid conflict. Notice that little word “till.” Our text goes this way:

²⁰he will not break a bruised reed
or quench a smoldering wick,
till he brings justice to victory; (Matthew 12:20, RSV)

Some people avoid conflict because that fits their personality. But Jesus avoids conflict as a step along the way to a mighty confrontation in which he brings justice and righteousness to victory. Jesus does not shy away from conflict. Indeed, he plunges into the greatest conflicts imaginable. He contends with sin, death, and the devil. He contends with fickle followers, changeable crowds, the high figures among his own people, and with the Roman authority Pontius Pilate.

So, perhaps we could look at today’s passage and say that his gentle dealing with the Pharisees who have resolved to destroy him... you could say that that gentleness is tactical. It is a matter of the right time. He keeps his eye on his great objective to bring righteousness to victory.

But I think there is a bigger and more glorious idea at play here. Jesus in fact deals with our whole human race with gentleness. This is good, because there are a lot of bruised reeds and dimly burning wicks among us. Compared to him, he could easily break us bruised reeds. I mean, he is God! He has plenty of strength at hand to deal with our whole world. But if we stand back and look at the big picture, he conquers sin, death, and devil in such a way that he leaves a gentle invitation open to you and me. We read that invitation back in Chapter 11 of St. Matthew’s Gospel:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28)

Jesus is strong, but he does not overrun us. He leaves us freedom to come to him. He awaits our choices day by day.

Let us, then, come to him. Indeed let us run to him day by day. We are never going to have a better and more gentle Savior than Jesus, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.