

The Gentle Touch of *Messiah*

Matthew 12:20

People are taken back by celebrity. Back in the 1980's, David Letterman did a recurring feature called "Brushes with Greatness." In the meantime, a number of websites have popped up where people can boast about their close encounters with celebrities. Of course, the degree of celebrity status as well as the significance of the encounters might be in the eye of the beholder.

- "I was in a car next to Sting one time ... he was only like 4 feet away."
- "I saw judge Lance Ito at a Ralph's supermarket in Whittier ..."
- "Saw Vanna White one day rush into Ralph's Market in Sherman Oaks. She was pregnant and looked awful! Not a day for turning letters ..."
- "Saw that guy who played Elaine's boss on *Seinfeld* one day in the Ralph's parking lot ..."
- "My high-school girlfriend babysat Mike Lookinland (*aka* Bobby Brady)."

My favorite ...

- "I met Wilt Chamberlain while he was signing autographs ... I had a friend who's son would be thrilled to have the autograph. When it was my turn, I awkwardly said, 'I'm not really a fan ...'
"Wilt (not so friendly) said something like 'Why are you bothering me then?'
I tried to explain myself. Poorly. He died shortly after. I know it wasn't my fault but I still felt bad."

The limelight loves celebrity. It loves the famous as well as the infamous. It loves those who work hard to secure their celebrity as well as those born into it. The limelight even celebrates those who inexplicably stumble into celebrity. For the rest who live under the radar, some are fascinated by celebrity, some covet it and some resent it. Others just scratch their heads.

Virtue cannot guarantee celebrity status. If a virtuous man is well-known, it is probably because he is also brave, talented, charismatic, influential or successful in his chosen field. On the other hand, no matter how virtuous a man or a woman may be, little attention on the world's stage is reserved for the quiet, meek, gentle 9-to-5er, the housewife or the volunteer down at the battered women's shelter. In fact, were it not for the fact that millions through the ages have called Him Master and Savior, it is doubtful that the world would have ever heard of Jesus of Nazareth.

In an age when the alleged value of a man is determined by his power, accomplishments or influence, Jesus makes Himself known to the little guy, the people that this world treats as negligible. He comes to give strength to people who, in and of themselves, don't feel very strong. He gives worth to people who, in and of themselves, don't feel very valuable. And to those who, in and of themselves, don't feel desirable, Jesus comes to assure them, "You're beautiful to Me."

Matthew 12 begins with Jesus answering a charge by the Pharisees that He is a Sabbath-violator. They watched Him closely as He contemplated healing a man with a shriveled hand. Incredibly, these self-anointed spiritual guides of Israel put Jesus in a position where He had to remind them that a man is more valuable than the sheep that they would not even hesitate to rescue from a pit, Sabbath or no Sabbath. Of course, Jesus healed the man in spite of them. Sandwiched between that healing and the healing of a pitiful demon-possessed, blind mute, are words from the prophet Isaiah provided to describe to Matthew's readers why Jesus ministered to the hurts of people as He did. Steve read the full quotation earlier. This morning's message comes from a single verse in that prophecy:

A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out ... - Matthew 12:20

Any Jew could recognize that this prophecy described the long-awaited *Messiah*, for the quote commences with the words, "Here is my servant whom I have chosen," and, of course, *Messiah* means "chosen or anointed one." This expectation of a tender *Messiah* was usually displaced in the national psyche by the expectation that God's Chosen One would come as a fierce warrior to drive Rome from the land. But, "fierceness" would not define Jesus of Nazareth. He would indeed conquer as the mighty Lion of Judah, but only by conducting Himself as God's gentle Lamb.

I. A Metaphor of Human Debilitation

Most sermons lead up to an invitation. This text is its own invitation. It invites us to discover in Jesus Someone Who is profoundly tender in His response to our frailties. I cannot say that Jesus had any distinction in mind between "a bruised reed" and "a smoldering wick". I can only share what comes to my mind when I think about each.

A. God's Grace Reaches Down to Broken Sinners

"A bruised reed" was a reed that had a weak spot where it had been bent or crushed. This reminds me of a man whose life has been wounded. Perhaps, he has lived with only the values of the world to guide him. That is where he has put his hope. He trusted that worldly pursuits would fill his life with joy and meaning, but all he found was heartache and emptiness.

"A bruised reed" epitomizes weakness. A reed is little more than a large blade of grass. Even in its natural habitat, it is relatively delicate. The wind can displace it. The weight of a bird might crush it. A man fleeing through the marsh would be easily tracked by one glance at these damaged stems; "Looks like he came this way." Jesus healed many bruised reeds in His ministry.

I think of one paralyzed man who spent his days at the Pool of Bethesda. The locals believed that when the water moved, it was because an angel had stirred it, giving the pool some miraculous power to heal. When the water did move, sick people rushed to get in, but this man was too weak to get in, and others got in ahead of Him. Most people ignored him. Some may have scolded him about his superstitions, but such responses only break bruised reeds. Jesus restored Him.

"A bruised reed" epitomizes worthlessness. There is little value to an individual reed, for it takes many to weave a mat or a basket. A bruised reed is utterly useless. It is not rigid enough to be pushed into the pattern of the weave. If one did manage to use it, there would be an immediate weak spot in the finished product. Bent reeds were discarded. Perhaps, that is why a man might break them, just as you break sticks in your yard so they will fit in the trash receptacle. A frugal basket-weaver might break off the bruised part of the reed. Jesus would never break it at all

Think of the various characters in Jesus' ministry who were discounted by their world as useless. The pervading wisdom of the day was that the sick and lame were suffering for some sin of their own or of their parents. That man with the shriveled hand and a certain woman crippled for eighteen years that could not straighten up were of so little account to the world around them that Israel's leaders would have preferred to let them suffer rather than allow Jesus to heal them on the wrong day of the week. But, Jesus did heal them, because "a bruised reed he will not break."

Why do we know categorically that Jesus will not break a bruised reed?" It is because it is God Who bruises it. No one can live in open defiance to God forever. God has revealed right and wrong to this world in the things He has created. Sure, the arrogant deny their ultimate woundedness. They persist in snubbing their noses at heaven, but for those who come to the end of their strength and feel their estrangement from God, bruising is the first step to restoration.

B. God's Grace Reaches Down to Burned-out Saints

"A smoldering wick" may be a part of a lamp that simply needs to be trimmed or have oil added to it. I think of a believer who may come to a point of feeling that he is all used up, but the reality is that he has only come to the end of himself and of his own resources.

A believer who is "a smoldering wick" is not destined to remain chronically weak. He only feels weak. Perhaps, this weakness is a result of the fact that it has been a long time since the Holy Spirit first ignited the divine flame within his heart, and this particular believer has not availed himself to the proper maintenance that keeps one strong. His prayer life has broken down. His love of God's Word has grown cold. He may have developed an adulterous relationship with the world and the gods of money, power and advancement. Often, a man feels weak just because he has abandoned the fellowship of his fellow-saints for other companions and counselors.

A believer who is "a smoldering wick" is not destined to remain useless, even though he may feel useless. He believes, but he suspects that the fire of his witness has grown insignificant. Perhaps, he is worn down by trials and disappointments. Perhaps, he has scandalized his witness through failing to master his tongue, his temper or his lusts. Perhaps, he has squandered too many God-given opportunities to act. Perhaps, he has buried whatever talents he had, and the point in time when those talents might have made a difference to the world has passed. Oh, he believes, but he done so little for Jesus with his life. He fears that he does not generate enough light to illumine his own way, much less guide the lost.

Know this, Christian; how you may feel about yourself right now is not the final word on your worth. Jesus made His statement about your worth when He died for you. Christ will never throw you away. If you return to Him with all your heart, if you reclaim Him as your first love, He still has work for you to do. The value of a piece of art does not depend so much upon the value of the raw materials from which it is made, as on the reputation and workmanship of the artist.

I had the occasion a few weeks ago to visit a violin shop dealing in handcrafted instruments. I had never seen so many violins in one place. The proprietor took me into his workshop where he was restoring many other instruments. He handed me one old unfinished violin that looked no different to my untrained eye than any other fiddle in the house. He attributed it to some Italian guy I never heard of. Then, he added, "When that's completely restored, it will be worth \$150,000." All I could think of in response was to hand it back to him as gingerly as I could. We are worth what we are worth not because of how others judge us and certainly not because of how we judge ourselves. Christ established our worth when He restored us to Himself.

II. A Metaphor of Heavenly Reclamation

A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out ... - Matthew 12:20

A. What Glorious Understatements!

Jesus will not break a bruised reed and He does not extinguish what remains of a smoldering wick, but neither does He simply pass them by and ignore them. He works a miracle in both.

Here, the Word says that Jesus will not break a bruised reed, but we know that He will also take that broken life and make it over. He will replant that broken life in the soil of Himself. He will make it grow. He will make it strong. He will make it capable of bearing fruit for His kingdom.

Maybe you are a Christian, but you feel like the flame of your lamp has all but gone out. Not only will Jesus not simply put you out of your misery, He will restore your "smoldering wick" if that is your desire. Because we are prone to weakness, we are also prone to unproductive despair over our weaknesses. The grace that first saved you is the same grace that *MUST* put you back together. You cannot fix you, but that's not your job. Return to God. Trust Him with the repairs.

Stanley C. Baldwin admits to burying garbage in his backyard while a college student rather than pay for removal. He failed to realize that garbage service in that small Canadian town was free:

"Similarly, many people try, not very successfully, to dispose of the garbage in their personal lives: their sins, shortcomings and bad attitudes. The good news is that God provides 'free garbage service' to every resident of God's kingdom ... And when God gets rid of the garbage ... it will not come poking out again with the spring thaw or wash up on the shore. It is gone forever." - Stanley C. Baldwin, *Upper Room*, 06-04-02

After his heinous sin with Bathsheba, David knew that self-repair was a hopeless enterprise:

⁵Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
⁶Surely you desire truth in the inner parts;
you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.
⁷Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. - Psalm 51:5-7

B. The Weary Receive a Place with the Mighty

The experiences of life can bring anyone to a point of questioning his or her value to God. We have been disappointed by unfulfilled dreams. We have not resisted temptation. Sometimes, age is a factor. The young are prone to a waywardness that poisons the pursuit of holiness. Those who are raising families are necessarily engaged in the demands of career, for they have to make ends meet. Some older folks are disappointed that time has slowed them down. They cannot serve God with the strength they once had. And, for people of all ages, there are those remarkable peers who seem to be more successful, more fruitful and more admired.

It is useful to remember that the weak are just as precious in God's sight as the mighty. In Exodus 30, as the Israelite nation prepared for life in the Promised Land, the LORD demanded that whenever a census was taken, each person was to pay a one-half shekel redemption tax. Most of the other offerings that would be required were based on their productivity, but this tax was a reminder of the fact that God had rescued them. The fact that the tax was a flat-rate for each of them, no matter how weak or how powerful, was a not-so-subtle reminder that God doesn't have favorites. Each soul was equally precious and equally in need of a Rescuer:

... The rich are not to give more than a half shekel and the poor are not to give less when you make the offering to the LORD to atone for your lives. - Exodus 30:15

In 2002, the Republican Party mistakenly invited an Ohio inmate to a \$2,500-a-plate fundraising dinner in Washington with President Bush. The invitation and a letter from Vice President Cheney were sent to Robert Kirkpatrick at the Belmont Correctional Institution in eastern Ohio. Kirkpatrick had recently been sentenced to nearly three years for drug possession ...

“I’m going to tell him that I’d be happy to attend,” said Kirkpatrick, “but he’s going to have to pull some strings to get me there.” - John Bacon, *USA Today* (06-05-02)

Whether or not it is apparent that you belong, strings have already been pulled to secure your place at a more important banquet somewhere down the line. That invitation is not based on your record, your merit or your accomplishments. That invitation is based on the fact that Jesus’ blood was spilled for you. Redemption cost Jesus the same price for each of us. That renowned, effective celebrity saint is not one bit more redeemed than that hardly visible saint. Both are just as precious to Christ. Both were redeemed at the cost of His blood. One is just as safe as the other.

C. The Weary Can Know They Are Useful to God

If you are training a child day in and day out to acknowledge God’s rule over his or her life, you are doing just as much for the kingdom of God as if He had called you to speak to the minds and hearts of a crowd once a week. If you can minister to need anytime that the Lord places it in your path, you are just as useful to His kingdom as if you had a knack for speaking numerous languages and used them all to proclaim the Gospel to audiences around the globe. All Jesus calls any of us to do is to love the Lord with all we are and with all we’ve got, because it is He Who made us what we are and Who has given us everything that we possess.

Interestingly enough, as the celebrity believer blesses the lives of countless anonymous believers through his books, his sermons, his songs or his victories for the kingdom, it often turns out that his own salvation was nurtured by some small, seemingly anonymous influence. It is very often a faithful parent, but it might be a consistent and caring Bible School teacher. It might be a dependable albeit unspectacular minister. It might be the fellowship of his home church. It might be some combination of all of the above. What we must remember is that it is God Who calls each of us to Himself and Who gifts us with the gifts that He wants us to have. If we can only be content to be faithful as He demands, He will position us and utilize us as He sees fit.

In the meantime, know that He cares for you as tenderly as He cares for any of His children.

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