

We Need the Suffering Servant

a sermon on Isaiah 53.1-6

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"I don't like to be told what to do!" Have you ever felt that way? Of course you have. That's human nature. We have a deeply rooted urge to snub authority and assert our own will.

In a college dormitory, the furniture in the common room was rarely ever moved. Occasionally one or two students would leave a chair or something out of place. The resident director posted a polite sign: "Please do not move the furniture." From then on the room never looked the same way twice. Rearranging it into bizarre configurations became a sport, a source of endless amusement. Chairs got stacked on top of one another. Couches were turned with their backs to the television. No one had ever had a desire to do this before. No one ever thought it would be fun. Why did it suddenly become such a thrill? That little sign. It was work to shift the furniture, but it was worth it to snub authority.

A friend of my mother's once got two traffic tickets in the same afternoon. She got caught in a speed trap and got a ticket for speeding. When she had to pass back that way again, she vented her frustration by driving less than five miles per hour. The police gave her a second ticket for going too slowly.

Examples of this tendency are endless. The office manager cancels casual dress on Fridays, so the staff comes in the next Friday in tuxes and gowns. A kid sits for three hours staring at a plate of green beans because she won't eat one. I have a friend who was easy to beat in chess. Whenever a good move was available to him, I pointed it out, saying, "Here's what you ought to do. You'd be crazy not to." He would never make that move, even if it was what he wanted to do. He didn't want me to be able to say, "Well, I told you what to do," if he won. He rarely did. That stubbornness. That pride. It's inside every one of us. "Don't tell me what to do!"

We chaff under authority, even when it is good authority, even when we know it is in our best interest. When the authority is heavy-handed, ... well, we really rebel against that. That is why dictators have lots of security and big prisons.

Now think about the problem this creates for God. God is the ultimate authority. He wields the ultimate power. According to scripture, he created us in love and gave us everything necessary to our happiness, yet we still rebelled against him. He was all goodness and grace. He gave us one little law, for our own good, and naturally we

broke it. I love the way C.S. Lewis explains the command against eating the forbidden fruit. He mentions it in book two of his science-fiction trilogy, *Perelandra*. God gave us the command so that we could obey him, not out of our own self-interest, but simply out of love for God. The command made our love for God tangible. It served no other purpose than that. In any case, we broke it. And we've been doing the same ever since.

So God tried the soft-glove approach, and we rebelled. Now that we are rebels, and our hearts incline away from God, what hope does he have to win us back? If the soft approach didn't work, what's left? The hammer? God certainly has the power. He could smite us into compliance. Imagine if every broken commandment resulted in immediate and terrible retribution. We would all behave very nicely. But in our hearts, would we love God? No, we would hate him more. If God came at us with the heavy hand, overwhelming us, we would resist him – ironically to our own destruction. God would not be the loser; we would be. We would fight to the death our one chance for life, peace, and happiness. We would bend every fiber of our being to the task of our own damnation.

God does not want that to happen, so he came up with a brilliant solution. He became one of us, and a humble one at that. Not a king or a warrior. Born in a stable, he worked the trade of a carpenter until the time came for him to announce God's kingdom. He showed us the way of peace and of God, but naturally we would have none of it. Then he died for us.

If God tore open the heavens and revealed his glory, we would faint in terror. If he sent legions of angels, we would consider ourselves noble victims. If he came as a king, we would demand he do what we want, or we would rebel. But he did not come with power and glory to overwhelm us. He came as the suffering servant. And against that kind of love we have no power. Our defenses crumble. Our pride withers. We contemplate Jesus on the cross, and our minds choke on the truth: He did that for me? He loves me that much? My need is that great? How can this be? How can God love me so much, especially if I am such a rebel against him that no lesser sacrifice could atone for my sins? And thus the rebel lays down his arms and surrenders. The rebel who would have held out to the bitter end against coercion and authority falls to his or her knees before the awesome power of suffering love. ...

This sermon is the third in my Lenten series "Pictures of Jesus in the Old Testament." So far we have seen Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promises to send a prophet like Moses and a king like David. In both cases, Jesus fulfilled the promise, but he so surpassed expectations that he totally redrew the picture. He is the prophet like Moses, but he is so much more. He is the king like David, but he far surpasses the original. Jesus is so original, you cannot squeeze him into any mold or preconceived ideal. You start with a picture that looks like Moses or David, but before you are finished, it looks more like Jesus than either one.

The Suffering Servant is different. In the book of Isaiah we find four so-called Servant songs [Isa 42.1-4; 49.1-6; 50.4-9; 52.13 – 53.12]. They tell about a servant of God and how he suffers but his suffering has a purpose – it somehow atones for the sins of God’s people. The servant suffers, but God vindicates him. Once you know about the cross and resurrection, you cannot help seeing a picture of Jesus here. In fact, when Jesus’ original disciples were struggling to make sense of the cross – Jesus had been raised, so they knew he was the Messiah, and more, but they did not understand why he had to die – they found their answer here. The gospels say that Jesus taught them during the forty days between his resurrection and ascension. He opened the scriptures to them to explain all that was written about him. Jesus may have been the first one to make the connection between the Suffering Servant and himself. I believe he made the connection well before his death, and that he understood his death in these terms. Jesus was an Isaiah-guy. His self-understanding was shaped by this prophetic book. He saw it. His disciples saw it. No Christian has ever been able to read our text and say, “That may not be Jesus.” It’s just way too obvious.

But that’s looking back. From the other side, before the cross, there was no expectation about a coming Suffering Servant. The faithful were looking for a prophet. They were sure looking for a Messiah. They had their heart set on that. But so far as we know, no one ever said, “When will God send the Suffering Servant.” Why not?

As they read the servant songs, the servant was the nation of Israel, the whole people. The prophet described an individual, but they considered that a literary device. They thought the suffering and vindication of the servant described the experiences of Israel. And they were right, to a point. Jews still read the servant songs this way, and I can see why. If I did not believe in Jesus, I would read them that way too. But here’s the thing to keep in mind: When Jesus died on the cross, he represented Israel. He was the Messiah, and the Messiah not only rules God’s people, he stands for them; he represents them. Jesus died in place of Israel – and also, of course, the whole world.

It would be wrong, therefore, to say that just because the servant songs point to Israel that this exhausts their meaning. Not so! They may tell the story of Israel, but the story of Israel is incomplete without Jesus. These songs only find their fullest significance when we read them as a picture of him.

Christians have it on good authority that the Old Testament scriptures are about Jesus. He told us so himself. If Isaiah 53 is not a picture of Jesus, there isn’t one in the Old Testament. The correspondence startles us. It is as if God painted this picture ahead of time, so that when Jesus came, died, and rose again, we could make sense of it all. That is exactly what God did. In this case God surprises us, not because Jesus far surpassed a common expectation, but because he so perfectly fulfilled an expectation that no one had recognized before.

The picture of the suffering servant is the most beautiful in scripture. It moves us emotionally. Images have a way of doing that. When I was in high school, our church youth choir went on tour every year. It was a really big deal. We prepared all year for it, and we went on two big chartered busses. Finding cheap places to stay was important in keeping the cost down, and one night we stayed on the campus of a Catholic college in Pennsylvania. I don't remember which one. Two of the girls went exploring, and they came back shaken. They happened upon a chapel, and it was open, and they went inside, and there they found ... a statue ... of Jesus ... carrying the cross. I'm sure every Catholic chapel in the world has a crucifix, but none of us were used to this sort of thing. And this statue was exquisitely well done. In the end we all went to the chapel to see it, and few of us were not moved to tears. The sheer weight of Jesus' suffering, and the knowledge that he did this *for me*, overwhelmed us. The servant songs have that same power.

"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." When you hear those words, do you imagine the cross? I do. It rises from my imagination, summoned by these words. "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." That makes me think of myself – and others – of the depth of my need and his grace.

I don't know about you, but this breaks down all my barriers. I want to surrender to God. I want to love him in return. I want my life to bring him glory and to please him. There's no denying there's a little rebel left down deep inside. That stays with you until you die. And yet there is also no denying that God's grace is deeper and stronger.

I invite you to believe and to surrender. Belief comes first because the suffering of Jesus does not have the power to move you until you believe "he did this for me." That's the sticking point. That Jesus suffered horrifying agony is a matter of historical fact. That he did it for me ... well, that's a fact too, but it is one you have to realize in a different way. Once you stand at the foot of the cross and comprehend what it means for you, you will have no choice but to love God. You will see your need and God's love so graphically and concretely that you will never be the same again. That's the power of the suffering servant. He both forgives our sin and gives us new hearts. When we see him, we realize for the first time what true love is. And we want it. We can't love like that. Not yet anyway. Before he is finished with us we will. But when his love rolls over you like wave in the ocean, you will feel such peace that you will never want anything else.

Love is the strongest force in the universe. Maybe that's why God reached out to us in love when he wanted to reconcile us to him and bring us home. Surely it was the only way. Certainly it was a costly way. And yet his love is that great. Believe. Surrender.

One way you can do this is through the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. He loves you through this meal. In it he tells you, "I did it all for you." In the sacrament he gives himself to you, and you give yourself to him. The sacrament is a special kind of picture, one you "see" with your hands and mouth and heart. Yet it is much more than a picture, for a picture merely communicates. This meal does more than remind us of a truth. It makes that truth real. That is, it reminds us of God's love the way a hug reminds a child of a parent's love.

So come to the table and once again be overwhelmed by God's love. Once again surrender to the One who gave himself for you. Amen.

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