

Broken Pottery and Raising Figs

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Scriptures:

Psalm 31:9-16 (NIV), Luke 13:6-9 (CEV)

Psalm 31:9-16 New International Version (NIV)

9 Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am in distress;

my eyes grow weak with sorrow,

my soul and body with grief.

10 My life is consumed by anguish

and my years by groaning;

my strength fails because of my affliction,[a]

and my bones grow weak.

11 Because of all my enemies,

I am the utter contempt of my neighbors

and an object of dread to my closest friends—

those who see me on the street flee from me.

12 I am forgotten as though I were dead;

I have become like broken pottery.

13 For I hear many whispering,

“Terror on every side!”

They conspire against me

and plot to take my life.

14 But I trust in you, LORD;

I say, “You are my God.”

15 My times are in your hands;

deliver me from the hands of my enemies,

from those who pursue me.

16 Let your face shine on your servant;

save me in your unfailing love.

Sermon:

I cherish the powerful words from Psalm 31. I have become like broken pottery. But I still trust in the Lord to deliver me and wrap me in his unfailing love.

I grew up on a little farm in Washington State. In that place and in those times, we fixed things. If a wheel came off the feed cart, we made do and then we fixed it. We learned how to do that. But then there was that old cliché: “if it ain’t broke don’t fix it.”

Lots of Brokenness

As if to say there is a lot of stuff out there that I should just leave well enough alone. And that could be. But as I experience life now and look around, damn near everything is broken. Broken dreams, broken promises, broken homes, broken hearts, broken spirits, broken bones, broken families, broken down cars, broken systems of justice, welfare and health care.

We live in a time and culture in which the gap between hope and reality is as broad as the grand canyon and threatening as a Kansas tornado. Life could come apart at the seams any moment. The ramifications of all this

brokenness – well it is hard to fathom. It so seriously begs the question, what is the purpose of all this brokenness.

But it would be a more difficult question if we asked, what would be the point of living if all was smooth without fault or hardship or challenge? The other side of the coin isn't clear either. No, it is an absolute requirement that brokenness is part of the work of creation and purpose. Our task here is not to lament the failure of perfection. Our task is to respond to suffering. There is suffering in our communities, there is suffering of individuals, there is suffering of the planet, there is suffering among all living creatures and matter.

Suffering

Suffering is the gap between the creation and the potential; between the point of origin and fulfillment. The creation is only the beginning, the embryo, the seed. The potential is the possibility of wholeness when we work together to address the suffering, the gap. The greatest philosophers of time have written reams on the subject. And I have tried and failed to find any simple equation. All creation is a complex balance of building and brokenness. And it is the resolution of the tension between the two that creates all meaning. If you wish to change your present circumstances, get more deeply involved in the process of mending and healing, addressing the suffering. That is the only viable effort giving us purpose and new life.

You have heard about the guy whose roof leaked. Every time it rained, the house required a major mop up. And after every rain the guy's wife said, why don't you get that leaked fixed. And the answer was always the same: when it's raining, I can't fix it. And when it's not raining, don't need to fix it. So the poor soul went year after year never working at the real suffering. And he developed no purpose beyond living from one rain to the next.

How many of us stay stuck in the same patterns of helplessness and hopelessness? We go on month after month, year after year going round and round in the revolving door of our self-pity and depression and failed vision. Proverbs 29:18. Where there is no vision, the people perish. If I am not engaged in acts of addressing suffering, I am perishing.

Faith

For me, faith is the step beyond belief. I might believe I can fix the roof. I might believe I can make a difference. I go out on the end of a high diving board and believe I can dive and swim. But I will never know until I take the leap. Faith is the leap from the board, soaring and confident that the dive down and the momentum upward will provide the power for a strikingly long swim. So. it is with engagement in suffering. I don't know if the outcome of my effort will make any real difference. But when I take the leap and participate, then I am engaged in hope.

There are unending numbers of venues for suffering engagement. My work in the justice system has taken me to some unpopular conclusions. The major being that in the course of delivering crime and punishment justice, the perpetrator is as broken as the victim. Perhaps more so. How do we address that kind of suffering? My brokenness does not harm me, it reveals me. When I am in touch with my brokenness I am in touch with my deeper self. The obstacles to healing become intensely revealed. Not so much to others, but to me. What breaks you, cracks you open.

It was writer Debbie McDaniel who put it this way:

It crashed to the floor, breaking into an explosion of pieces. Beyond repair. My favorite mug, now being swept into the trash. "Should have been more careful," I mumbled to myself. In the midst of the hurried cleaning frenzy, I'd lost my grip. So telling of real life. "Just glue it back Mom," my kids said. But it would never be the same. The damage was done.

Broken things. Very familiar to a family of 5, with 4 pets. Lots of things moving around and active in our house. And if certain broken pieces are able to be fixed, they normally find a temporary home on the shelf, awaiting the super glue repairs. Or maybe just tossed away if unable to be neatly pieced back together and strategically repaired without hint of a patchwork of super glue lines. Often, it takes too much work to fix what is broken. It's easier to just buy a new one.

Ever feel that way? Broken. Shattered. Set on a shelf. Tossed aside. Or thrown away. It takes too much work to try to restore. "Just get a new one," the mindset of our culture whispers. "Don't let anyone see the broken flaws." That's the world we live in.

Kintsugi

In Japan, they have made restoration an art. There is an ancient practice called *Kintsugi*, meaning "golden joinery" or "to patch with gold," is an age-old custom of repairing cracked pottery with real gold, not only fixing the break, but greatly increasing the value of the piece.

The heart of it is in turning what is broken into beautiful, cherished pieces, by sealing the cracks and crevices with lines of fine gold. Instead of hiding the flaws, Kintsugi artists highlight them, creating a whole new design and bringing unique beauty to the original piece. The pottery actually becomes more beautiful and valuable in the restoration process because, though it was once broken, it not only has history, but a new story.

While most normal repairs of broken things hide themselves, like nicely sealed super glue fixes, the usual intent is simply to make something "as good as new." Yet the art of Kintsugi reinforces a profound belief that the repair can make things not only as good as they were before, but "better than new." Better than original. Better than new. Soak that in for a moment. It is possible for me to be better than my original.

Revealing the Scars

There are lies out there that swirl around and whisper to your deepest soul in weak moments, when you've lost your grip, and things come crashing down. You feel the need to hide the scars. You feel like the brokenness has rendered you useless in life. You feel beyond repair this time. You feel tossed aside. Forgotten. Shamed. Rejected. And you find a shelf, waiting for repair.

But the creative force breaks through all that mess. We are never beyond healing. We are never too broken for restoration. We are never too shattered for repair. We are not ashamed of our scars, of the deep crevices that line our soul, or the broken places of our lives. They have an amazing story to tell.

Brokenness has the power, unlike anything else, to bring forth new beauty, strength, and inspiration to others. Because it's often in those moments that we've tasted deep suffering, that we noticed we were made for more.

The scars of life, the healed wounds, the deep lines, they all have stories to tell. Yet often we try to hide them away, preferring instead to present to the world, a safe façade of who we are, a more "perfect" version. It's too difficult to risk the real vulnerability of exposing what once was. Or what still is.

Healing

We have a Healer. One who repairs. Who can fit the broken pieces that no longer seem to fit right into a perfect design. There is a process behind the scenes, mending, fitting together, creating a better work of art, more than we ever dreamed possible. That healing makes for beauty. Especially in the broken.

We often dream of just getting patched back together; hoping this time the glue will stick. But it is creation's design that our repair and healing was never intended to be invisible. No, our repair job is beautifully lined with shining grace through every scar, every broken event. Gold filled crevices of our heart, now stronger, better, more beautiful than before. And that is the work of humanity, you and me: that is why we are here and that shall be our story. We engage in bringing life to what was broken. That is the Easter story.

Wholeness and health is our potential. But it is not the absence of pain and hardship. To be healed is to be a person of faith not just belief. Belief is a choice and a mental framework for understanding. But faith is a leap. This is not for the faint of heart. This is not some goodie two shoes stage show. This is diving into real suffering, choosing life and significance. Everyone you meet has something broken. Everyone.

Shavar

The Hebrew word for broken is SHAVAR. It is a strong word. It means "wrecked, shattered, even crippled or maimed." In the book of Psalms, brokenness is often applied to the human spirit. A person with a broken spirit does not make excuses or blame others. It lives in the same room with humility. My broken spirit faces my own poverty. I am ready to change, to be helped and healed. I have tasted mercy. A simple wounded spirit makes a person difficult to live with, a broken spirit makes a person a joy to be around. There is a tenderness, gratitude, a gentleness and willing to be with others who have faults and breaks. When we understand our deeper self with the cracks and the breaks, we wonder why we resisted such joy and freedom for so long.

Shavar/Broken. The word actually holds many meanings in a holistic concept. In translating it is important to retain the ambiguity of many of the powerful Hebrew words. This is intentional to allow the spirit of the creator to speak to me. Shavar is a verb, not a noun. It is active. One rendering is a breakthrough. So, the Lord is near to one experiencing a breakthrough in spirit. When we read the Psalms of David, we get in touch with his own experience that every rose in his life that died was an opportunity to be touched by God in a way he could not experience it when all was well, when every rose was in bloom and healthy.

Shavar: To crush, to rupture, to break in pieces, to be crippled, to shatter. And yet another twist on Shavar: To cause to break out, to bring to the birth. So that Hebrew concept is that brokenness is a prerequisite for new life, for rebirth, for change. The very creator of our soul insists that we break down and break forth to move toward the potential and the wholeness possible. So it is that our brokenness is healed. The broken pottery is restored.

The Fig Tree and Us

Nearly every time when Jesus was confronted with a theological question, he offered a story. The story about a fig tree was included in the lectionary scriptures for this Lenten season. A very short intriguing story.

A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard. One day he went out to pick some figs, but he didn't find any. 7 So he said to the gardener, "For three years I have come looking for figs on this tree, and I haven't found any yet. Chop it down! Why should it take up space?"

8 The gardener answered, "Master, leave it for another year. I'll dig around it and put some manure on it to make it grow. 9 Maybe it will have figs on it next year. If it doesn't, you can have it cut down."

We are here to bear fruit. Fig trees should have figs. We are broken. We should be about the business of fixing. Our deepest purpose is to be engaged in the act of restoration and healing; to be engaged with each other in the mending of our shattered pots and lives. Perhaps the master is a bit impatient with me as I may have gone a long time with little or no fruit. I appreciate the gardener, sticking up for me.

We are each other's gardener. Here to intervene, to nurture, to water, to feed, maybe even spread a little manure. And we are blessed to be given another opportunity to bear fruit – to be engaged in random acts of restoration. It's really the only thing that makes any sense. The fig tree story is one of suspense: will the tree bear fruit and avoid the ax? Will the gardener's care and faith prevail?

Maybe just because I have not been cut down yet, I should not assume I am bearing fruit as intended. No, I am given an opportunity every day to be engaged in the mending of the broken. That fig tree, facing a possible eschatological event, was not left alone and unattended. That gardener made a commitment. We are challenged to be there for each other, bringing our brokenness to the place of understanding, mending and restoration.

That's what we gotta do to fix broken and raise figs.

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