

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
February 1, 2015

First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

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Acts 19:1-7

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

“My grace is sufficient for you, for (my) power is made perfect in weakness.”
 (2 Corinthians 12:9 N.R.S.V.)

Golden Repairs

I am a child of God. I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. And I believe he has the power to change my life and your life.

We live in a throw away society. If your radio breaks, it is cheaper to throw it away than it is to get it fixed. The same is true for so many things in our lives from shoes to computers to kitchen gadgets. With more expensive things like cars, we might do some fixing. At some point, however, we are going to say, “It is too broken to fix, or too old to fix, or too expensive to fix. I’m just going to throw it away and get a new one.”

Sadly we sometimes allow that attitude to influence how we feel about ourselves. Life is anything but smooth. Things happen that wound our spirits, tear out our hearts, and drive us to our knees. That can make us feel not only broken, but abandoned, worthless, and kicked to the curb.

If you are feeling that way this morning, I have good news for you. God sends his Holy Spirit to mend our brokenness. In our scripture from Acts, the Apostle Paul encounters some seekers who have been baptized into John’s baptism, but not into the baptism of Christ. John’s baptism was one of repentance. They have accepted that they are broken and flawed. Now what?

Paul tells them of Christ and baptizes them into Christ, so that they receive the Holy Spirit and are healed and empowered by that same Spirit. That healing is a special kind of healing. It does not make our flaws and weaknesses disappear without a trace. In some ways it takes our weaknesses, our flaws and makes them beautiful and useful.

In our Corinthian passage, Paul has some problem that he refers to as “a thorn in the flesh.” We don’t know what that was. It could have been poor eyesight or an old injury from when he was stoned by a mob. It could have been a continuing temptation or even some person in his life. Maybe you know someone who is a thorn in your flesh?

Whatever it was, Paul prayed three times to have this “thorn in the flesh” removed. God did not

remove it. What God said was, “My grace is sufficient, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

There are some parallels here to a repair technique that is used in Japanese culture with valuable, ancient pottery. When an ancient pottery vessel breaks, they do not discard it or try to repair it with invisible glue as we might do. Instead they mix powdered gold into a resin and use that to restore the ancient pottery. The cracks and flaws are filled in and highlighted by the gold. This technique is called Kintsukuroi. As you can see from this picture, the end product is an even more beautiful vessel. The cracks and flaws are considered to be part of the reality of the life of the vessel. Therefore they are not disguised, they are instead, filled and illuminated.

Kintsukuroi

Christianity

Life breaks us, but then God makes us stronger and more beautiful in the broken places.

Photo courtesy **Lakeside Pottery Restoration Studio**
543 Newfield Avenue
Stamford, CT 06905
www.lakesidepottery.com
<http://lakesidepottery.com/Pages/kintsugi-repairing-ceramic-with-gold-and-lacquer-better-than-new.htm>

Now listen, sometime we preachers in a misguided attempt to help hurting people, make it sound like real Christians shouldn't have to struggle. Nothing could be further from the truth. Life sometimes wounds us, sometimes breaks us, sometimes exhausts us. These things are real. These things are difficult. These things are not, “all good.”

Tracy Hahn-Burkett has this to say. *Recently, it has come to my attention that some parents awaken each morning to the joy of perfect, sunny children who always do what they're told or, if they do misbehave, respond quickly to loving, gentle correction. These parents never raise their voices . . . never leave the house with a toddler attached to one shin and mascara smudged under one eye . . . In short, they are the people who say about parenting, “It's all good.”*

I think these parents are lying, very possibly to themselves . . .

Parenting is not “all good.” Yes, it’s wondrous, enlightening, life-giving and loving beyond anything I could have imagined before I became a parent. In parenting, all the things you have heard are true. You will find energy and strength you didn’t know you had. You will hold something tiny and feel more love for it than all of the love one universe can contain. . .

But all of the other things you have heard about parenting are also true. You will be more tired than you have ever imagined possible. You will be enraged to the point where your senses threaten to leave you because the kid is pushing your buttons and WILL NOT LISTEN TO REASON . . . and you will run the treadmill of trying to keep up with all you need to know so you can teach it to your kid.

You will always be afraid you are doing it wrong.

Parenting is illuminating and humorous, maddening and sometimes breathtaking. But one thing it is not, is “all good.” (As quoted by Homiletics, January 2015, pg. 23)

Bad things that happen to us in life, the things that break our hearts, and steal our joy - they are real and they hurt. So many times we are tempted to cover up our hurts and our brokenness, especially around other Christians. Yet it is these very cracks in our lives that lets the light of Christ shine into our souls. And perhaps it is through the cracks in our lives that the light of Christ can shine out to others.

One couple tells about how they thought they had the perfect life. Their family was strong and healthy. They had good jobs and a nice home. Their children got good grades in school and came willingly to church with them. Then disaster struck. Their perfect teenage son was arrested and charged with selling drugs. Through the stress of the trial and the subsequent jail time and community service, it was all they could do to keep coming to church. Their church family was supportive and caring. They were thankful for that.

The interesting thing was what happened later. These parents found that more and more other parents were coming to them for help and advice. When they thought they had everything going for them and that they were living the perfect Christian life, no one sought them out. No one asked them how to live perfectly. After they were broken, and after Christ poured himself anew into their lives, then they became approachable.

Being a Christian does not mean that we seek out suffering. There will be enough suffering in our lives without seeking it out. Being a Christian means that we allow God to enter our places of weakness. It means allowing Christ to control our drinking one day at a time. It means that we face the hardship of losing our job without giving up. It means that we move through the calamity of a failed marriage believing that God can mend us in such a way that even this can be used to his glory.

The great preacher, William Sloan Coffin delivered this heartfelt message to his congregation just ten days after the devastating death of his son. Coffin said, *As almost all of you know, a week ago last Monday night, driving in a terrible storm . . . my 24-year-old son Alexander, who enjoyed beating his old man at every game and in every race, beat his father to the grave.*

Among the healing flood of letters that followed his death was one carrying this wonderful quote from the end of Hemingway's "A Farewell to Arms." "The world breaks everyone, then some become strong at the broken places."

My own broken heart is mending, said Coffin, and largely thanks to so many of you, my dear parishioners; for if I the last week I have relearned one lesson, it is that love not only begets love, it transmits strength. (As quoted by Homiletics, January 2015, pg. 19)

In a society that seems to worship success and perfection, we are tempted to think that God can use us best where we are personally the most gifted and in control. Yet, as the Apostle Paul discovered, it is in weakest places that God can use us the most powerfully. Paul writes in verse 9 of our text from 2Corinthians, "I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

To lead an AA group, you must be a recovering alcoholic. To lead a support group for women who are healing from the trauma of abortion, you must have had an abortion.

One word of caution that I would give you on this. Allow the love of God to fill your weakness and bring you healing before you attempt to help others in similar circumstances. As Henri Nowen points out in his little book, "The Wounded Healer," it is hard to help someone else who is injured when you are bleeding all over them. "Open wounds stink," he says, allow Christ's healing to come to you first. Then allow that healing to flow through you to others.

Look back with me again at the image of the ancient Japanese pot. The Japanese believe that the cracks are not to be hidden but rather highlighted. The cracks are part of the life of the pot. They prove its fragile nature and great age. When repaired correctly the cracks, far from taking away from the value of the pot, enhance and illuminate its beauty.

If today you are feeling broken and weary, there is good news for you. God is in the business of repairing and using that which is broken. It is in your very weakness that God's strength can be most clearly seen.

Let me close with this quote from Heather Kopp in her book, *Sober Mercies: How Love caught Up with a Christian Drunk*. (New York: Jericho Books, 2013) Kopp writes, "In the past, if you asked me, 'What went so terribly wrong that you ended up a miserable, Christian drunk?'" I might have come up with a long list. But today, an equally true answer would be: "Nothing. Nothing went so wrong that I escaped God's will or his love for me. Nothing went so wrong that it couldn't be a part of my spiritual journey. Nothing went so wrong that God couldn't turn it into something beautiful."

Amen.