



Broken: Good News for Tough Times The Spirit of Brokenness

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2 Corinthians 4:7-9; Romans 8:1-11
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You might have noticed the broken pottery on our communion table this morning, which I'm here to tell you is supposed to be there. Someone actually came running up to me before worship to tell me that the vase I had put on the table had been broken and asked if they should clean it up. I kind of chuckled and told them that while it looks like something we might want to throw away, that the broken vase would actually serve as our visual for our sermon series entitled, "Broken: Good News for Tough Times." Over the next six weeks we will be exploring the words of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans. Paul knew the Christian life was a perilous one, and the world in which the church was growing and spreading was unpredictable and increasingly diverse. In this series, we will cover some of his letters most intriguing and inspiring passages. We will explore together how God sustains us in the midst of the reality of sin, or separation from God. If sin separation from God, then brokenness is the pain inflicted because of that reality. Brokenness in our spirits, in our relationships, in our communities, and in our world. We will listen for the ways that God sustains us from both within and without, helping us find wholeness and unity, no matter what crisis we are facing.

So let us begin with this reading from Romans 8:1-11:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit^[a] of life in Christ Jesus has set you^[b] free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin,^[c] he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.^[d] For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit^[e] set their minds on the things of the Spirit.^[f] To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit^[g] is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law —indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit,^[h] since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit^[i] is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ^[j] from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through^[k] his Spirit that dwells in you."

So if you have your phones with you this morning. I'd like for you to take them out and look at the last text message or email that you sent someone. And if you don't have a phone or use the internet, think about the last letter you wrote. Okay, got it? Now imagine that thousands of years from now, what you wrote to that person in a text or email or letter, would be read aloud from this exact same pulpit as divinely inspired scripture. Eeeek. I know for me my last text message was just a bunch of hearts and smiley face emojis to my family this morning. My last email

was to Carole Ferguson and Janet Haisman about logistics for the memorial service held here yesterday. And the last letter I wrote was to the city of Chicago trying to contest a parking ticket I got. I don't think that is worthy of being scripture, but in thousands of years, who knows.

While Paul's words in his letter to the Romans aren't quite like emails and yes they probably would be more exciting if they were written with emoji's, Paul never in a million years thought WE would be reading them together as scripture today. In fact, Paul had a very specific community in mind that he was addressing: A faith community in Rome that was trying to figure out how to open community to both Jews and Gentiles, helping them figure out how to do that without excluding each other, but also keeping what was important to culture and community life. While these words were not written for us specifically, over time these words of Paul have become part of the authoritative scriptures of our faith, and because of this we have a very complicated relationship with many of the things Paul has to say. Like that women are to be submissive to their husbands and silent in church, that love between people of the same sex is unnatural, that interracial marriage and divorce of any kind is against the law of God, and like we read in the scripture this morning that things of the flesh lead to sin and death.

If we read this scripture from Romans in a literal interpretation, this scripture is about bodies. Bodies that have been differentiated from the Spirit and that difference has been caused by sin. Sin that separates us from God, and makes some bodies worth more than others. This kind of literal reading of scripture has created such damage to not only the body of Christ as the church, but actual living and breathing bodies. Bodies that we attach guilt and condemnation to, bodies we try to police and control, bodies that scripture has been used to enforce. Bodies of women, bodies of people of color, bodies of abuse victims, bodies of LGBTQ people, and bodies that struggle with addiction, over or under consumption, and self-acceptance.

If sin is separation from God, then brokenness is the deep gaping wound that is formed when we separate ourselves from our fellow humanity, when we place ourselves higher than the rest of creation, and when we live defined by our flesh rather than the Spirit of God that dwells within us. Brokenness is what happens when we make some bodies holier than others fragmenting the Imago Dei, or the image of God in each other.

But when we spend more time with Paul, we see that Paul isn't talking so much about bodies, flesh and bone and we are being called to more than a skin-deep reading. When Paul talks about the flesh in Romans 8, it is not like our understanding of skin or anatomy like he uses for body which is soma. The Greek word he uses for flesh is sarx which is more of a concept than a noun. In the Common English Bible flesh is translated to mean, "self-centeredness," which does something completely different to our understanding of sin and brokenness in the flesh. Just listen to the difference in verse 6 from both translations, starting with the NRSV: "To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace." And from the CEB: "The attitude that comes from selfishness leads to death, but the attitude that comes from the Spirit leads to life and peace." Self-centeredness often leads us to self-preservation and to a quest for power, resources, and gratification at the expense of others. It divides, hurts, and oppresses. It leads us to eye our neighbors with suspicion, to hoard resources when others are in need, and to

exchange fairness and justice for the illusion of security and peace. While Romans 8 is vague and we are never told explicitly what characterizes fleshly or spirit-centered behaviors. Elsewhere in Paul's writings, spirit and flesh point to the contrasts of relationship and alienation, integrity and dishonesty, self-giving love and selfishness. Paul uses the words "flesh" and "spirit" not to set up a dualistic human nature for us to divide each other in, but rather to represent two ways of living. Two ways of living that he has known in his own life, because he knows better than most what it means to both cause deep brokenness and to crave healing from his own experience.

As Lydia reminded us this morning, Paul was once Saul, not only known by a different name but by his former life of persecuting and condemning Christians. Now while the story's climax is clearly on the road with the flashing lights and a booming voice from heaven, when we read Romans 8 with his conversion story in mind, I actually think that Paul's greatest transformation happened in a different place. Paul is blinded and traumatized from the road, yet God does not leave him alone. He sends him Ananias to be with him in his pain, to literally heal Paul's body and soul, to touch his wounds and feed him back to health, and to partner with him in beginning a new life in the Spirit. It was when Paul is enveloped into community that brokenness is transformed into new life and that he answers the call of the Spirit, the call of compassion and grace and the restoring of relationship. Not only transformed with a new name, but he is given a new life in community. Because he experienced this for himself, he believed this was possible for entire communities. This is the kind of life in the Spirit that Paul invites the church in Rome to experience and the kind of life the church of our time is called to live into as well.

If you take a look at the photo on the front of your bulletin cover this morning, you'll see inside of Holy Covenant United Methodist Church, a small church on the northside of Chicago. I served on the pastoral staff in 2012 the same year that the United Methodist General Conference met to vote on the doctrine of the denomination, like they do every four years. While Holy Covenant was explicit in its welcome of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer persons into the life of the church, the larger United Methodist denomination that year refused once again to fully live into its motto of "Open Hearts, Open minds, Open doors," and instead continued to name LGBTQ people as "incompatible with Christian teaching" according to the law of the church.

The Sunday after the General Conference met, my colleague Matt went to unlock the front doors of the church for worship and found Taylor sitting on the steps weeping. Matt invited Taylor inside but Taylor kept his eyes on the ground and his head hanging low. He said, "I can't Matt. I can't be a part of a church that believes I am incompatible and doesn't see it's own brokenness. I can't walk through these doors anymore, when the doors are not opened wide enough for me to come through fully." Matt was stunned, angry for Taylor and for others in the congregation who would come through doors of the church that Sunday and feel this kind of pain. Not knowing what else to say he told Taylor to wait there for a second. He then came back with two electric and two crowbars, and through their tears, through their weeping for their broken church that they both loved, the brokenness they felt within themselves, they tore off the doors together from the building. And over the next couple of weeks they took those symbols of the sin and self-centeredness of the church and instead created something new together. They made those doors into the communion table that is in the middle of that picture on your bulletin cover. Still a symbol

of brokenness of this world, of the brokenness of the church, but now also a sign of the Spirit at work to bring healing and new life. That table became a holy place where others could gather with broken hearts and spirits, and where the story of God entering into a broken world through the body of Jesus could meet their own. That table became an invitation to follow the Spirit through the space where those doors once stood and breathe the breath of God onto the gaping woundedness of the world. That table became a place where brokenness was enveloped in community, and transformed into a tangible experience with God's grace.

Martin Luther King Jr. called this "the inescapable network of mutuality. That while our brokenness is connected to that of other, our healing is tied to the healing of others as well. We belong to each other, even in our brokenness, maybe even because of our brokenness. It is this life in the Spirit, that we are enveloped in by way of our brokenness, and we are liberated and free to love. Focusing our minds on things of the Spirit- compassion, kindness, fairness, unity- we can heal our broken spirits and be empowered to heal our broken world. While we all have that instinctual drive toward self-preservation, God invites us to realize that our needs are best filled in community.

Friends, this is the life we are called to as the body of Christ, this is the mighty work of living Life in the Spirit. When our world perpetuates the self-centeredness of the flesh, God calls us to take a different path and follow the call of the Spirit. When the pain we feel inside wants to inflict itself on others, we are called to create new ways of living with each other. When the brokenness of this world reveals itself within us, we are called not to gather into our selves but to gather into each other. And it is there in community, in relationship with each other, that we will find transformation, healing, and hope for wholeness. Thanks be to God.

Amen.