



Broken: Good News for Tough Times Inseparable

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Romans 8:26-39
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I began writing this sermon over a week ago and finished writing it this past Tuesday, that is a miracle in itself as far as timelines for sermon writing goes. I did this because on Thursday I took one of my ordination exams so in order to prepare for that I felt I had to get my sermon done prior to Thursday and I did. The sermon I wrote was inspired by the courage of Lizzie Maguire's senior sermon she gave on youth Sunday just a couple of months ago, but I gained the courage to share it only after a lot of prayerful consideration. Then last Sunday we found out that Gillian Lundgren, a fifteen-year-old student at OPRF high school took her own life. I began reconsidering my sermon a little, should I incorporate the loss of such a young life in some way with our series on brokenness? I wrestled with what the sudden loss of a youth in our community means. But we will never have the answers to some of the questions that a loss like this summons. I did not know Gillian, or her story, and I do not assume to know or understand the battles she fought. All I can do is tell my story. Needless to say, I decided not to rewrite my sermon but to provide you with this preface. Mental illness is not talked about enough, we don't want to admit it but it affects us more than we know, many of us struggle with it or have a loved one who struggles with it, it can lead us to feeling isolated and broken. It is not something to be ashamed of. It is an opportunity to share our brokenness with one another, be a support for one another, and keep one another safe. Too many people and youth have lost their lives to mental illness. My hope is that we can support those who struggle with it every day and that we can love one another through their brokenness.

Today's scripture includes some of the most hopeful news Paul could give the Romans or any other group of people. He tells them that "Nothing can separate us from God's love." Really? Nothing? Paul does not tell the people that they are receiving this gift of love because they are wonderful, faithful, obedient, deserving people, because they aren't and neither are we. We have done nothing to deserve the gracious gift of unconditional love from our creator, but God gives it anyway. God loves us despite what we have done or failed to do, loves us in our failures, our mistakes, through our flaws and in all our brokenness. "Nothing can separate us from God's love: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing." Or any other thing...

As this sermon series is on brokenness, I hope that all of you have had the opportunity to reflect on this concept a little, if only just to ask yourself, when have I felt broken? I was actually excited to do this series and be a part of it, this is absolutely one of my favorite faith and theological topics. Brokenness, cracks, pain, scars, hurts all unavoidable parts of being human, but the idea that they can lead to being mended, being made whole in some way, and the result being beautiful, that is something I can preach about, something I believe in to the depths of my soul, because I have experienced it.

Can anything separate us from the love of God? In our brokenness it is understandable to feel distanced from God. I am a person who struggles with depression. I began struggling with this illness when I was about 15 years old. If there is anything that I have learned about depression in the nearly 13 years I have dealt with it, it would be that it doesn't necessarily make sense. It can sneak up on you, it can make you feel and behave in strange and different ways each time it presents itself, it can isolate you from everyone including God, making you seem unrecognizable even to those who know you best. But a couple of things happened the year that I was diagnosed with depression. Having grown up in a divorced house, my older sister was the constant in my life, she was my role model, confidante, and protector. That year she graduated high school and went away to college, I remember crying the whole way back from Ohio after dropping her off. I remember feeling abandoned, what would I do without her? I struggled to figure out where my place in high school would be, but found purpose and pride in swimming on varsity my freshman year. I was a butterfly, my events were the 100 fly, the 200 individual medley, and the medley relay. I started swimming competitively when I was 5 years old, but that year during one of my races my back popped and I was in a lot of pain. It was determined that I have a degenerative disc in my back and it was strongly suggested that I stop swimming butterfly. My coach tried to switch me to back stroke, it wasn't the same, and it never would be again. The depression got worse, I felt broken, physically and mentally. Could this separate me from the love of God?

Throughout the rest of my freshman year and the summer leading up to my sophomore year things got progressively worse, I was no longer a fabric with fraying bits, I was unraveling. I was put on anti-depressants, I fell in with the wrong crowd, abused alcohol, and experienced violence. So many days were a struggle to just get out of bed, my mother fought with me every day to get me up, get me dressed, and get me to school. In my brokenness, I didn't feel God anywhere. Surely I had been separated from God's love. I didn't feel close to anyone, and I often didn't feel anything at all. I had lost interest in all things that had previously brought me joy, I was apathetic, lethargic, I was depressed. It was hard to imagine that I would ever feel something again, that I would ever feel happiness, that I would ever feel whole. My depression was just one piece of my brokenness, I had also made poor decisions that left cracks in me, and in the moment it is hard to figure out where it all went wrong and nearly impossible to find a way out. In that place of brokenness I cannot say that I hoped for anything at first, but I did wish things were different, I wanted to be fixed, I hated that I couldn't understand myself, I wanted nothing more than for the emptiness to be filled and the pain to cease. Somewhere along the way I must have started to hope, to pray, pray that God had not abandoned me, hope that my pain would have purpose, that my wounds would heal and become scars. Why scars? Because scars are the end of physical pain but they never let you forget the wound that was there. A scar is proof that healing has taken place and tells a story.

Some of you may have noticed that I have a few tattoos. Each tattoo was a literal wound that need to be cleaned, covered in ointment, given time to scab, and heal and each one tells a story. Each tattoo was painful to get, some more than others, but the pain is now gone and they remain as reminders of someone or something. I have one here on my left wrist. It is a set of footprints, visible to the world and easy for me to see. I chose the footprints because of the poem read before

our scripture reading, it was a story that spoke to me in my brokenness, the idea of not being alone but rather carried during our most difficult times in life.

When I look back on those times that I suffered the most with my depression I know God was there. At the time I couldn't see it, I was too numb to feel it, but I know God was there through the support, love and persistence of my mom and family, through the friends who continued to reach out to me and care about me even when I couldn't care about myself or them. Somehow I got up and got through each of those days, and I believe it was with the presence and love of God through the Holy Spirit. That was the time in my life where there was only one set of footprints in the sand. In my brokenness I was carried and loved through it all. This piece of art up here and included in the bulletin is something that I created during that time of my life as an expression and representation of my experiences with depression and my journey to wholeness. Whenever I look at this small tattoo on my wrist I am reminded of that time in my life and how difficult it was, it really makes me appreciate where I am now because of that time, and reminds me that I am never alone.

We all have moments of brokenness, do they separate us from the love of God? Maybe like me you too struggle with depression, or have dealt with substance abuse or experienced violence, maybe you have experienced a loss, of a loved one, a job, or relationship, or you have made choices that led to feeling broken. As human beings we are guaranteed to experience some form of suffering or brokenness, that unfortunately is the bad news. But be assured there is good news too. In the places you feel broken there is hope. You can put the pieces back together in some way, you can create a new beautiful kind of wholeness, and it will be beautiful because of your cracks and your scars that will tell your story. On our broken vase that is slowly being mended, we add gold paint to the cracks where the pieces have been put back together, I see my tattoos like this gold paint. It draws attention to the most painful parts of my story, but they invite others in to be a part of my story and my brokenness and in that way I am never alone.

My depression is something that I will continue to struggle with. As a result of our human nature we will continue to experience brokenness, but in that brokenness we can take comfort in knowing that we are not alone, we are in a community called to love and support one another in and through our brokenness and God will always be with us there. So can our brokenness or any other thing separate us from God's love? I tell you, nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate you from the love of God. Amen.