



First United Church of Oak Park

Coming Undone

1 Kings 19:1-4, 8-15a; II Corinthians 12:6-10

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Several weeks ago, I visited a quirky little museum in Zagreb, Croatia, named the Museum of Broken Relationships.¹ This is a small museum of odd little artifacts, bits of material culture that were contributed to the collection by people from all over the world. Each artifact symbolizes something about a relationship that has been broken, and each is accompanied by a short, written explanation of the relationship that the artifact represents.

- A little rubber pig, about the size of a marble, recalls a failed relationship between a Christian and a Jew who had different eating traditions.
- A light bulb memorializes a relationship that ended with a conversation that ensued while a guy was up on a ladder changing a light bulb for the person he thought was his partner. The conversation went so badly that he climbed down the ladder before finishing the job, left, and never returned. The light bulb was all he had left.
- Two bras, contributions from a woman who had a mastectomy; the bras represent her broken relationship with her body.

Some artifacts recall deceased parents and lovers. Others represent memories of relationships that came apart from acrimony or ones that just drifted apart.

One of the artifacts is a big, gray sweater that seems to have no rhyme or reason. It has layers of different necklines. One of the sleeves is considerably longer than the other. Various knitting patterns compete against each other. You know the saying that a camel is a horse designed by a committee? This sweater looks like it was knitted by a committee. It wasn't. It was knitted by a single knitter who was mad at the guy who had walked out on her. She should have known this would happen, she wrote, because every time she tried to knit a sweater for him and she thought she knew what he wanted, he changed his mind. No, not a V-neck after all, he wanted a crew neck. No, not a crew neck, a turtle neck. Or, whatever. He kept changing his mind, and she kept unraveling the sweater and starting over.

I begin here today because our scripture lessons from II Corinthians and I Kings are all about life coming unraveled. That's what "weakness" means in our Corinthians text: it means that the connective fabric of life – whatever that might be – has come loose, and a person's world is falling apart. That can happen to any of us. Jobs, family, friends, economic stability, health, communities of care: There is no dimension of our lives that cannot come unraveled.

Terrific things can unravel us, too. When we adopted our first child, we were completely overwhelmed by the enormity of the change. It was wonderful, but, oh boy, what a shock to our system. All kinds of things unraveled.

¹The museum's website tells you all about it. See www.brokenships.com.

Life has a way of doing that: unraveling. We don't know the specifics of how Paul's life came to be unraveled. His conversion was certainly disruptive, but he's talking about something different in this text, and we do not know what it is. The thorn in his side, "the messenger of Satan" to which he refers is never explained by him or by his interpreters. People speculate, but we don't know what it is.

What we do know is that he writes this while he's in the midst of a bragging contest in Corinth. Some people are claiming to be super-apostles, and they are competing for the people's support. It sounds to me, in reading it, a little like the Democratic debates. Person after person claiming greatness, candidating for the privilege of leadership. Paul sells himself in the end of chapter 11. He lists all his apostleship credentials: how many times he's been in jail, how many times he's been flogged or shipwrecked on behalf of Christ. He has plenty about which to boast, he claims. But none of that matters, he says. What's most important is that he is weak. His life has unraveled. It was in the unraveling, he says, that he began to understand God's gracious presence.

My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.

In 1974 I interned as a college chaplain in Indiana, PA. My supervisor was a guy named Bill Richard, and together we were the mainline Protestant college ministry. On a campus of 10,000 students, the conservative evangelical ministry was overflowing with students; we were getting three or four students to come to our programs. Bill was working on a different kind of ministry that wasn't measured by numbers. Together with a psychology professor at the university, Bill got funding and approval to begin a community mental health center. It was a significant accomplishment and an important year for me. I probably learned more than I realized.

Much of what I learned, I learned from Bill. He was a remarkable man. He had lost his sight when he was three years old, but being blind did not prevent him from doing anything. One day he told me that this text from II Corinthians was his favorite text in the Bible. "My power is made perfect in weakness."

I was bewildered when he said that, because this text made no sense to me at all. I think it's a text you have to live into, and maybe we understand it better in hindsight than we do in the moment. Even then we may only have glimpses of its truth.

I shared my confusion with Bill and asked him to explain. He couldn't really put words to it, beyond what Paul had already written. But his life demonstrated it. He was challenged not only by his blindness, but also by bouts of deep depression. It was in that context, and in the context of a work life less successful than the competition's, that he had a deep and unwavering knowledge of God's grace and goodness. Like Paul, Bill was able to say, "Whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

Whenever I am weak, unraveling, without whatever it is that knits me together, then I discover the connective tissue of God's grace.

Do you suppose that's what Elijah discovers at the cave?

When we meet Elijah at the cave he is, perhaps, at the lowest point of his life. He is coming off a big bragging contest, described in the previous chapter, in which he bested the prophets of Baal and then slaughtered them all. And Jezebel, the queen, wants revenge. She puts a contract out on Elijah's life. It's all coming apart for Elijah. He's all by himself. He's really scared. He has no idea what to do next, except maybe die. And he makes his way to Mt. Horeb.

*And there was a mighty wind
Not in the wind was Yahweh
And after the wind, earthquake
Not in the earthquake was Yahweh
And after the earthquake, fire
Not in the fire was Yahweh
And after the fire
A sound of gentle silence*

Only then does God speak: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah moans and groans, and comes clean about why he is so scared, and God sends him back into the fray, reminding Elijah that he is not alone. Elijah has a community to work with, and Elijah has God.

And according to the story, Elijah does what he's told. He goes back. The situation is still perilous. Elijah is still in danger, yet he returns, with new resilience and maybe some fresh hope. Did he, too, discover grace?

Recently, one of our members shared thoughts about grace, which she'd found in a book by Philip Yancey.² He recalls a British conference on comparative religion, in which someone asked what Christianity's contribution is among world religions. C.S. Lewis responded,

"Oh, that's very easy. It's grace."

After some discussion the conferees had to agree. The notion of God's love coming to us free of charge, no strings attached, seems to go against every instinct of humanity. . . .

Aware of our inbuilt resistance to grace, Jesus talked about it often. He described a world suffused with God's grace: where the sun shines on people good and bad; where birds gather seeds gratis, neither plowing nor harvesting to earn them; where untended wildflowers burst into bloom on the rocky hillsides. Like a visitor from a foreign country who notices what the natives overlook, Jesus saw grace everywhere. Yet he never analyzed or defined grace, and almost never used the word. Instead, he communicated grace through stories we know as parables.

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Paul could never quite say what he meant by this, just as Jesus never defined grace in a tidy little soundbite. But grace is real.

I know Bill Richard discovered grace abundant in his life. I think that maybe Elijah did, too.

The person who knit that sweater in Zagreb found some sort of grace. She knit into that sweater all her anger, all the mixed signals her boyfriend had ever given her, and all the yarn she'd bought on his behalf. And then she gave it to the museum, which is itself a testimony to the many ways through which the mystery of grace can be discovered when life unravels.

I do not want to be too glib about grace, because lots of people's lives come unraveled, and they discover no comfort, no grace, no assurance of God's presence. The Psalms bear biblical witness to the despair and loneliness that Elijah felt on the way to the cave and that many people carry with them every single day. That is very real, too, and maybe some of you here today understand this in a way that is all too personal. I know that.

²Phillip Yancey. *What's So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 45.

At the same time, I believe the grace of God is as real and palpable as it is mysterious and elusive. As the sweater testifies, grace comes to us in contradictions. It comes to us in anger and in humor. It comes to us in memory and in hope. It comes to us in stories. It comes to us in community.

Maybe it will never overwhelm us like wind or earthquake or fire. And maybe we will need to strain to hear its whisper amid the silence. Despite all the “maybes” and the “not yet,” I believe grace is real. And I trust that Paul’s witness is true:

“The Lord said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’”

In life, in death, in life beyond death,

God is with us.

We are not alone.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.³

³From the United Church of Canada. <https://www.united-church.ca/community-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/new-creed>