

We Are Broken

Isaiah 9:1-4 Matthew 4:12-23

**Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church
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Kay and I stood facing each other at St. John UMC in Watertown, Massachusetts, and began saying our wedding vows. I can't remember who went first, but when one of us got to that line "in sickness and in health", we started to laugh. Well, we didn't really laugh out loud, but as we looked at each other, first came an unexpected grin, responded to with a raised eyebrow, and then we both knew that we were suppressing the laughter that was trying to rise to the surface and make us both look silly to the congregation of friends and family witnessing this supposedly very serious moment.

You see the months of our engagement could also be termed the season of antibiotics. It seemed that one infection followed another, and we kept saying to one another, "You know, I have always been a healthy person ... No, really!"

So when we got to that line, "in sickness and in health," we thought we knew what we were talking about. We had been there and done that!

Ah! But little did we know. In our future would come sleepless nights panicking when the baby's temperature shot up to 104. There would be broken bones and there would be worrisome symptoms with no clear diagnosis. Oh, and would that physical illness was the extent, or even the worst of what any of us need to face in the seasons of our lives.

But no, beginning married life as a mature 23 year-old, even though I acknowledged with an easy nod the wisdom of those who told us that married life would not be easy. Deep down I was sure that the tough times of childhood troubles, teenage angst, and college-student stress were now behind, and the glorious season of adulthood and married bliss awaited.

My attitude was not unlike that expressed by storyteller and songwriter Bill Harley, who imagines children thinking that adults have it easy, and proceeds to announce: "It's Better Than That!"

*"Every morning before we get out of bed,
We eat a chocolate éclair as big as your head! ...
We are not afraid because we are big and tall,
And we don't go to school because we know it all!"*

I like that song! Underneath the irony, there is a great truth there. Life is wonderful no matter what the age. But we also know the other great truth, which is that life is difficult, and that every age is also a time of brokenness.

We are broken. Let us acknowledge our brokenness, accept our brokenness, and through our brokenness find strength as the Beloved Children of God.

Allow me to backup and review the series of sermons I started at the beginning of this month. We have been talking about what Henri Nouwen calls "The Life of the Beloved." As the Beloved Children of God, our lives are wrapped up in the life of Jesus. The outline of our lives and Jesus' life is reenacted in the actions of Holy Communion.

We are the loaf that the celebrant lifts at the communion table. Like the bread, we are taken, we are blessed, we are broken, and we are given.

To say we are taken is the same as saying we are chosen. On the first Sunday of January we said that being chosen means that from the beginning God has named us as beloved children of God. We claim our chosenness by unmasking the world's deceptive efforts to convince us that we are insignificant. We claim our chosenness by connecting with the truth that will not be drowned out by the world's noise.

On the second Sunday of January we said that we are blessed. Our blessing is the continual reminder and experience of being the objects of God's love.

We experience blessing through prayer, taking time to listen to God's word of affirmation.

We experience blessing through presence and attentiveness to nature and people surrounding us, hearing the blessings that are always there but which we easily ignore.

After taking time last Sunday to celebrate the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who certainly shows us a life of one chosen, blessed, broken and given, we return now to the third act of our lives. We are broken.

When we first ponder this progression: chosen, blessed, broken and given, the broken part scares us. It sounds like something that is done to us, something we have to go through in order to complete the task. But this brokenness is not something done to us, nor is it something that we have to seek out. It is simply descriptive of who we are.

Nouwen writes: "The leaders and prophets of Israel, who were clearly chosen and blessed, all lived very broken lives. And we, the Beloved Sons and Daughters of God, cannot escape our brokenness either." (p. 86)

But we try to avoid it. We tend not to speak of it in polite company. "Hey, Rich, how is life treating you?"

"Oh, just great! The kids are well. We are all busy doing important stuff. I saw a good movie the other night. Life is good!"

But our deepest friendships are not characterized by such casual conversation. The ones to whom we are closest are those with whom we have shared difficult stories. And each of us has a difficult story to share.

"Our society is so fragmented," writes Nouwen, "our family lives so sundered by physical and emotional distance, our friendships so sporadic, our intimacies so 'in-between' things and often so utilitarian, that there are few places where we can feel truly safe. I notice in myself how often my body is tense, how I usually keep my guard up, and how seldom I have a complete feeling of being at home." (p. 90)

Who of us does Nouwen speak for?

I thought that perhaps Nouwen was going to say that being broken was something we had to accept the way Jesus accepted the cross. But that's not it. Rather, Jesus on the cross has come to be with us in the brokenness we already experience.

To say that the Life of the Beloved includes being broken is not to say that we have to allow ourselves to be broken in order to be given. Rather, it is to acknowledge that brokenness is something we all experience, and that it in no way changes the truth that we are chosen and blessed, that we are still and always the Beloved Children of God.

So what shall we do about our brokenness? Nouwen has what sounds like a strange answer to that question, but if we ponder it, we realize it is the only answer that makes sense.

As the Beloved of God, we are called to befriend our brokenness. God's acceptance of us leads to us being able to accept ourselves. It does us no good to love our perfect selves, because that is not who we are.

I am not saying befriend our sin; rather, befriend this broken vessel which is our life, our broken self that is in pain, our broken self that is beset by sin.

Embrace brokenness. Step toward it. We cannot avoid our unique brokenness. Just as we claim our chosenness and our blessedness, so too we must claim our brokenness.

Healing goes through the brokenness rather than around it or away from it.

"My own experience with anguish" says Nouwen, "has been that facing it and living it through is the way to healing. But I cannot do that on my own. I need someone to keep me standing in it, to assure me that there is peace beyond the anguish, life beyond death, and love beyond fear. ... Attempting to avoid ... or escape the pain is like cutting off a limb that could be healed with proper attention. (p. 96)

This is what God does in Jesus. He goes through it with us, assuring us that there is peace beyond the anguish, life beyond death, and love beyond fear. When Jesus began his ministry in Galilee it was said, "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light."

The second thing we do about our brokenness is to put it under the blessing. The blessing is that continual reminder and experience that we are indeed the Beloved Children of God. We need to shine that light on our brokenness.

The opposite of a blessing is a curse. Under the curse, our brokenness is confirmation that we are unworthy. "It is like saying, 'I always suspected that I was useless or worthless, and now I am sure of it because of what is happening to me.' (p. 96)

But when our brokenness is in the light of the blessing, the light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it. The blessing tells us that we shall not be defeated by this brokenness. The blessing tells us that the kingdom of heaven has come near and wholeness awaits us. The blessing tells us that God's love for us is unconditional - that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. The blessing tells us God embraces our brokenness and transforms our experiences of struggle into new sources of strength as we go forward toward the light.

So it is that God uses even our brokenness as a gift to the world. Through our brokenness we connect with one another. Through our brokenness we grow stronger and learn endurance. Through our brokenness the fullness of God's love is revealed.

From the beginning God has chosen us, taken in hand all of our being. God's blessing is there for us every day and every moment. This is all the amazing to us as we acknowledge that we are broken. And so chosen, blessed and broken, let us make ourselves available and see how we shall be given for the sake of the world.