
Sermon: ***Broken Vessels – Vulnerability and Vibrancy***

By Rev. Anne Gibbons, Associate Chaplain, Lynchburg College

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Scripture: Psalm 31:9-16, Philippians 2:5-11, Luke 19:28-40

Good Morning. It is always a joy and a privilege to share worship with this community and it's been especially wonderful the last few years to enjoy the ministry of the Common Ground. It is literally my very favorite place to be on a Friday morning and I come whenever my work schedule will allow.

I know that all of us must still be feeling some sadness and loss even though we are grateful that David and Kaye have been able to move closer to the Loretto community they love and the granddaughter they adore. Still, there is a void and I feel it myself this morning. Knowing how often David would work to bring together Eastern religion and Christianity, I thought I would begin this morning with a story that many of you may already be familiar with attributed to a Hindu writer:

A water bearer in India had two large pots, each hung on one end of the pole he carried across the back of his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, and while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the stream, the cracked pot arrived only half full. This went on every day for two years, with the bearer delivering only one and a half pots of water to his master's house.

Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishment and saw itself as perfectly suited for the purpose for which it was made. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its imperfection and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do.

After two years of what it perceived as bitter failure, it spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream. "I am ashamed of myself and I want to apologize to you."

"Why?" asked the bearer. "What are you ashamed of?"

"For the past two years, I have been able to deliver only half my load because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your master's house. Because of my flaws you have to work without getting the full value of your efforts," the pot said.

The water bearer felt sorry for the old cracked pot, and out of compassion he said, "As we return to the master's house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path." Indeed, as they went up the hill, the old cracked pot took notice of the sun warming the wildflowers on the side of the path. The pot felt cheered.

But at the end of the trail, the pot still felt bad because it had leaked out half its load, and again it apologized for its failure. The bearer said to the pot, "Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of your path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because I knew about your flaw and took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back from the stream, you've watered them for me. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my master's table. If you were not just the way you are, he would not have such beauty to grace his house.

As we gather this Palm Sunday morning, each of us could no doubt identify with the broken pot, aware of our shortcomings and imperfections, our sins, and our failures. Like the writer of today's lamentation psalm, we ourselves and others we know have had moments of misery, seasons of struggle, and times of terror. And as if all that suffering isn't enough, you and I like so many others and the broken pot and the lamenting psalmist also have to deal with the humiliation, embarrassment, and shame that comes when we are judged or mocked by others during our times of brokenness. We are rendered wounded and vulnerable.

And yet...and yet... as the broken pot was assured by the water bearer and as the psalmist was reassured by his belief in the Lord, the cracks and the wounds, the imperfections and the flaws, never have the last word and indeed provide an opening for God's healing and merciful grace. I've heard it said that strength doesn't reside in having never been broken but in having the courage to grow strong in the broken places. Or as Leonard Cohen's wrote in his song "Anthem" "there is a crack in everything; that is how the light gets in"

In the more than 25 years that I have been a friend of the Church of the Covenant, I have found you to be one of the most warm, welcoming and accepting communities of those among us who feel broken in body, mind, or spirit. I really mean that. In fact, on more than one occasion when I have counseled really hurting people who are longing for a deep connection with a spiritual community, this is the place I first recommend because I know that no matter how painful their past or their present, those who come here are welcomed with open arms and compassionate hearts. You state quite clearly

that you welcome persons regardless of race, culture, age, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and economic status. Like the psalmist, those of us who pray together in this almost living room like sanctuary feel God's face shining upon them, and feel safe in God's steadfast love.

As I try to understand what makes Church of the Covenant so able to embrace the broken ones with gentleness and kindness, perhaps more than any other church among all the other countless churches in Lynchburg I think it has to do with your commitment to the inner and outer journey. Or as you post on your website: Your faith is expressed inwardly by meditation, prayer, and study; and outwardly by service to the community.

I was reminded of this inner and outer movement as I thought about the sometimes suffering servant in Isaiah who proclaims that the "Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught...that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word." To be one who is taught, is to be a student, to be a disciple, to recognize that one doesn't have all the answers, to be humble. The psalmist then adds that "morning by morning God wakens my ear **to listen** as those who are taught." Members of the Church of the Covenant and others like them practice the spiritual disciplines of meditation, prayer, and study in order to listen to the stirrings of the Spirit, and to be taught so that they may sustain the weary with a word and be a blessing to the broken.

Even as you are all students of the spiritual disciplines and allow yourselves to be taught, you in turn are also teachers to people like me who learn from you every time I'm around you. The interchangeable roles of student and teacher can happen and need to happen outside of the church walls.

Just this week I was privileged to be in the audience for the annual Rosel Schewel lecture in education. The speaker, George Couros from Canada presented one of the most energizing, engaging, and thought provoking programs I've experienced in a long time. Among other points, Couros stressed the positive role that technology can play if we are open to its power and potential. Even during his presentation, especially when he was showing video clips he would actually encourage audience members to tweet him ideas, questions, and impressions from their cell phones, which he would then incorporate into the rest of his program. He said: "What I am most excited about now is that we no longer need to be stagnant in our roles as either "teacher" or "learner", because now, at any time, we can be either or both."

While I don't think this Canadian school principal had Isaiah on his mind when he said this, I think that both of them make a similar point. We need to be willing to open ourselves to be taught, to have our ears wakened and opened in order to then have something to offer in word or deed to those around us. And then those who may learn or benefit from us, become the teachers to those around them. When we commit ourselves to learning from the Creator, then the Creator will use us to share those lessons with others around them....it's a spiraling, cyclical dance and we're so blessed to be a part of it.

And I don't think it's just us human creatures that participate in this reality of brokenness giving way to openness giving way to learning which then becomes teaching, but rather ***all of creation*** is involved.

In Paul's letter to the Philippians we are told that every knee should bend, in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth. Other translations read: every being in heaven, on earth and under the earth.....every aspect of creation in every part of the cosmos is included in paying homage to the Lord. The same Lord who earlier in that same passage has emptied himself, taken the form of a slave, born in human likeness, and humbled even to the point of death on a cross.

This broken, wounded, suffering, and dying Jesus is the one to whom every being in creation is called to honor. You can't get much more vulnerable than Jesus and yet ALL of creation is to pay homage and to honor him.

Once again, I think Church of the Covenant gets it right. Your very presence on these grounds and the work of Camp Kum Ba Yah speak to your understanding of the sacredness of all creation. Your Crofters Mission Group which works for the cultivation of food in a healthy, sustainable manner recognizes the interconnectedness of body, mind, land, and spirit.

Recognizing the importance of all creation, how fitting it is that Jesus chose to enter into Jerusalem for the last phase of his earthly ministry on a four legged creature known not as lofty steed but rather as a simple beast of burden so lowly that it hadn't even been ridden yet, literally an unbroken vessel.

As Jesus enters Jerusalem, there must have been a certain urgency as he sensed the drama that was about to unfold, and yet the colt on which he rode was anything but dramatic.....and how does the crowd respond? Luke tells us that whole multitudes gathered praising God JOYFULLY!! We picture the scene as they lay down their cloaks, or in other gospel accounts, their palm branches, with great joy and celebration. Picture the winners of the

World Series or the Super Bowl or the March Madness Sweet Sixteen during the parades in their home towns after victories. This is Big! And so joyful. Luke actually uses the term Joy more than any other evangelist so we know it was a very happy time. And it must have been so boisterous that the Pharisees tell him to stop the disciples and he knows it's impossible. In fact he responds that if even he WAS able to silence the crowds, the very stones would shout out. Again, every aspect of creation, even the rocks under his feet are worth recognition and capable of some kind of response to the divine.

And what words did Jesus hear as he strode in on a common donkey....almost the same words he heard after he was born in a feeding trough surrounded by animals in a barn. "Peace in Heaven and Glory in the highest Heaven. "

In the eyes of the world, a baby born in a manger and an itinerant preacher riding on a colt look more vulnerable than powerful, more broken than all put together, more weak than strong.....but to those whose eyes have been open and whose ears have been in tune.....there is something vibrant and beautiful and cause for great rejoicing.

Some of us here or someone we know is feeling broken this morning....

If we or they are grieving a loss....a relationship, a death, a job...any kind of empty place or hollowness....God meets our vulnerability and offers us the vibrancy of healing.

If we or they are struggling with our sense of worth, our self-esteem, our identity.....God meets our vulnerability and offers us the vibrancy of our own dignity....

If we or they are suffering because the pain of the world, the troubles in our country, the divisions in our community or the separations within our own families.....God meets our vulnerability and offers us the vibrancy of reconciliation and wholeness.

This holy week may we understand ourselves to be very much like the broken pot, carried upon the shoulders of the Christ as he makes his way to Jerusalem. We are with him as he breaks bread with his friends, even as we follow his example each time we break bread with one another and share a meal, and share our stories. We are with him as he carries his cross, even as we are willing to hold up our own crosses and help share the burden of others crosses as well. We are with him as he hangs on the cross, even as we know the moments of crucifixion in our own lives and in the lives of those

around us. And we are with him, as he is raised from the dead. Even as we share in the resurrection each time we experience new life, new hope, and new joy, in our lives and in the lives of others. The broken pots of our lives have been carried by Jesus and are therefore beautiful because Jesus breaks through our darkness and the darkness of all creation with flowers of love and blossoms of peace if only we have eyes to see and ears to hear.