

“Faithfulness in Fragile Times: The Blessings of Brokenness”

Psalm 32:1-7; John 12:20-32 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – March 17, 2024

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the bearing of these words, that we have the courage to be
broken open for the sake of love. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

And suddenly, it's the penultimate Sunday of Lent, the week before Palm Sunday, and I only have a little time left to talk with you about Faithfulness in Fragile Times. Our theme this year invites us to remember the teachings of our faith that help us through difficulty. I cannot think of a more important thing for us to focus on at this point in time. And today's lesson may very well be the most important. It's certainly part of the core of Christianity.

What I want to talk about today is brokenness. But not just brokenness. Our lesson today is a reminder that the primary thing Jesus wants us to know is that, through the power of God's compassion, the world is made whole through brokenness. And our scriptures today show us just how hard that teaching is for us to accept and how hard we will resist believing it.

One of the things that catches our attention early on in this reading from John is how many people are involved. There are Greeks and Philip and Andrew and a crowd, which presumably includes those Greeks and Philip and Andrew. And this seems like an odd way to warm up to a central gospel teaching, but I think it's not a distraction. Telling us about all the folks who were there to hear Jesus say all these

confounding things, including foreigners from outside the Jewish faith, is a way of making clear that he's talking to us too. This isn't a private teaching, a secret message for those on the inside. This is the main thing, so we'd better pay attention.

And then, once he's got our attention, Jesus is back to his farming metaphors. For someone who grew up presumably apprenticed into carpentry, Jesus sure talks about plants a lot! "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Is this what those Greeks were expecting? "We wish to see Jesus," they had told Philip. Were they intending to find someone who would immediately begin talking about the inevitability, indeed the imperative of dying? Were they considering becoming followers, and once they heard that might involve death, were they still interested?

The crowd heard Jesus say the hour was coming for God's name to be glorified. I don't know about you, but I would have imagined that involving lots of bright light and maybe some trumpets or Alleluias ringing from the heavens. Isn't that how it happened for the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night? But here he was, clearly talking about dying, explaining the necessity of being broken open in order to bear fruit. And so when that Voice from heaven affirmed that yes, that kind of glorification was on the way, the people couldn't deal. It's obvious from what Jesus said that he knew they understood those words. But "oh that was probably thunder, right?" "Maybe an angel?" Definitely not the voice of God agreeing with Jesus that this thing he's doing is going to lead to death!

Why are we so afraid of brokenness? It does feel like things are breaking open all around us. The structures of society that we've trusted to remain stable for decades are crumbling. The assumptions we've relied on to make sense of our identity and our place in the world have frayed and tangled. Our bodies are letting us down. The very planet we live on is creaking and popping in alarming ways. And yet, the central story of our faith assures us that it is out of brokenness that God makes wholeness and newness.

We are like Peter on the mountaintop, faced with the glory of Jesus and Moses and Elijah, clamoring to build little booths to preserve them in, to capture the moment, to freeze time and never have to deal anything other than shininess again. But here is Jesus, insisting that stasis is not living, that God wants us to live and live abundantly, and that means change, that means growth, that means breaking open. The lesson is unfolding all around in in all Creation, showing us that new life requires a breaking open of the old. It's not just grains of wheat being planted in the field. The clouds break open to show the sun. The buds break open to let the flowers bloom. The eggs break open to release the baby birds.

And what's amazing about this lesson is how universal it is. It's happening all the time on every level. And it makes us anxious on every level much of the time. It's happening in society, and it brings division and fear and aggression. We are starting to see that we can't go forward the way we've been going, but we can't see yet how to

do things differently. We've invested so deeply in the way things were, we struggle to imagine anything changing, and certainly not changing for the better.

Things are breaking open in the church as well. We're in a new moment when we have to justify our existence by truly living the gospel as clearly and convincingly as we can. We can no longer rely on folks showing up to do what we've always done, because this new moment requires a different approach. We have to do the hard work of sifting through the rubble and deciding what to keep and what to discard. But everything that is broken open makes a portal through which something new can emerge. When one person steps away, space is made for someone else to step up and try something new. When we stop expending all our energy on maintaining the old ways of doing things, we open ourselves new capacities and new perspectives that can lead to growth. Can you imagine what is going through a caterpillar's mind while it's still wrapped tight in its cocoon? (I mean, probably nothing, but pretend it could think!) Can it feel its wings growing? Does it know the world still exists? Can it even conceive of being able to fly? Does it lament the loss of all those legs? Do we want to be a church that won't test out its wings because we're too sad about only having six legs now? Or do we want to fly?

The blessings of breaking open even happen in our own hearts. That is what the psalmist is talking about. I could easily argue that the whole story of Lent is contained there in Psalm 32, verses 3-5. "While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;

my strength dried up as by the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,” and you forgave the guilt of my sin.” It is when we allow our hearts to be broken open to God’s mercy that we find release from all that weighs us down. It’s like God is whispering a Sinead O’Connor song to us: “U sit with me and I will listen. You’ll feel much better when u open.”

So why, why do we resist? Why do we imagine that we prefer things to stay the same, when stasis is the real death? Why do we keep forgetting that breaking open is the beginning of blooming, the emergence of new life, the unlocking of doors that lead to unimagined blessings? Jesus is saying it over and over: Fear not. Fear not. Do not be afraid. Those who give up their lives for me and for the sake of the gospel will live. The grain that breaks open bears much fruit. Over and over. God pulls wholeness from the wreckage of brokenness. If things seems fragile, it may very well mean that God is up to something. If you feel like crying, go ahead; some of the best new things flourish when watered with tears. If you want to hold this moment tightly to keep it from shifting, do it, but only for a few seconds. Because if you can release it, wonders may emerge. This is what our faith teaches us. This is what it means to follow Jesus. May our hearts, our lives, our church, and our world be broken open to the splendors of God’s renewing love and mercy, that new life may blossom and flourish. Amen.