**Holy Vessels: Fragments**

**John 8:1-11**

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NOTE: Sermon opens with the sound of shattering glass

That sound carries so much with it, doesn’t it?  It’s the sound of brokenness. The feel of your heart in your throat and clenching in your stomach as you realize that what once was whole has fragmented into pieces and will never be the same.  Maybe it is a glass that you drop as you empty the dishwasher. Maybe something much more intangible.

 There are so many things we speak of as broken.  Broken hearts, broken lives, broken spirits, broken relationships, broken systems, a broken church.  At some point, or points, in our lives, I think all of us experience the kind of internal, invisible brokenness that we feel as a gripping, ceaseless ache deep down in the gut.  The ache of grief over the death of a loved one or the end of a marriage. The ache of fury after the betrayal of a person or institution. The ache of guilt or shame for mistakes we’ve made that lie unresolved in our conscience.  The ache of emptiness after too many hours, weeks, months or years alone.

 So many things can lead to brokenness. So many, in fact, that the Christian church sets aside a whole season in the liturgical year for us to uncover the broken places inside us, name them and claim them, and lift them up to God for healing.  This season of Lent, the six weeks leading up to Easter, are traditionally used for the kind of gentle introspection and prayer that lead us toward healing, redemption, and, ultimately on Easter morning, resurrection.

 So, that is the journey we will be taking through Lent with our sermon series entitled “Holy Vessels”.  God has made each of us a holy vessel - a beautiful and unique chalice, cup or bowl created to hold God’s love within us.  But, inevitably, there are times when we get broken, fractured, or cracked. Perhaps through our own actions, perhaps through the actions of someone else.  Yet, it is the promise of our faith that God will not leave us in pieces. So, using imagery of glass - broken, polished, recycled, recreated - we will explore our brokenness and healing on the road to Easter.

 We begin today with a theme of fragments.  No matter what has broken us, once broken, we can feel as though our lives are left in fragments - fragments of a family, of a heart, of a hope, of a self.  Those fragments have sharp points and edges. It can be difficult to see how so many pieces can ever be made again into something whole.

 And in our fragmented state, we sometimes believe we no longer have any value.  What good are the broken pieces of a vessel when it can no longer hold anything?  What purpose or value does it have, do we have? We become despondent or, over time, simply resigned to the fact that we don’t have any worth any more.

 Once we begin to question our worth, we tend toward making unhealthy decisions.  We spend time with people who hurt us because we don’t feel worthy of the kind of respect and compassion that are part of healthy relationships.  We turn to the kitchen pantry or the wine bottle, to gambling or an extramarital affair to numb the feelings of worthlessness. We stay in unhealthy jobs or relationships because we don’t have the self-esteem to pull ourselves out. It’s so easy for brokenness to lead to more brokenness.  Shattering to lead to more shattering.

 Some of you may be feeling this way about the United Methodist denomination right now in light of the recent General Conference.  Why stay in a denomination that feels fractured? How do we find the value in the denomination right now? It is a time of holding all that we feel and actively waiting to see what new thing God will create.

This season of Lent is also one we associate with sin and repentance.  We think of sin as the rules we’ve broken, the ways we’ve failed, the mistakes we’ve made. But, I read a beautiful blog post the other day by a woman named Barb Morris who said what if our sin isn’t so much about what we’ve done as about refusing to do the work of healing and reconciliation, clinging to our brokenness and using the sharp edges to hurt ourselves and others?

 It can be hard to face God when we are angry, hurt, or ashamed. Yet, here is a truth of our faith that is fundamental.  No matter how broken our lives may be and no matter how hard it might be to see our own worth, God sees the core of beauty within us.

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways...If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,” even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.  For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.”

 There are so few relationships we have in our lives in which we truly feel known, but God knows us deeply.  God knows our penchant for making mistakes. God knows our insecurities. God knows our secrets. God knows our deep desire to make things right.  God knows the pain we feel. God knows all the worst and still believes in the best in us.

 Being so deeply known by God can be pretty scary.  Being deeply known means being vulnerable, and vulnerability doesn’t come easily to any of us.  Yet, if you follow the research and writings of Brene Brown, you know that she has found vulnerability to be key both to finding our own worth and to resilience.

 The story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery is one of my favorites in the gospels.  It’s often used to illustrate either how often we judge others without considering our own mistakes or how plentiful God’s forgiveness is.  But, what I love about this story is how Jesus relates to this woman. He doesn’t dwell on whether or not this woman has done something wrong.  He doesn’t talk about why she did what she did. He doesn’t judge or excuse her. He simply says, “I won’t condemn you” and then tells her to go on with her life and not to sin.

 The scribes and the Pharisees shame her - making her stand in front of everyone in the temple while they threaten to stone her as punishment for her sin.  Not only that, they use this public-shaming to test Jesus. But, Jesus knows what lies beneath her brokenness. He knows she is fearfully and wonderfully made.  He can see her value, her beauty, despite the mistakes she has made and the pain and shame the officials have inflicted on her. He sees her value and all of the potential for her life if, rather than being stoned to death, she is given the chance to try again.

 We are all broken.  And, right now, our denomination is broken.  Our country is broken. We are all broken. And in our brokenness, we have broken and fractured others.  We have wounded and been wounded. We have caused hurt and received it. And in our pain, we may see only the ugliness within and around us.

 But, God sees the beauty.  God picks up the pieces of our broken selves and shines a light through them.  God sees our capacity to love, our capacity to serve, our capacity to heal. God sees our tenacity and resilience.  God sees those innermost parts of who we are - and loves them.

 Being deeply known by God gives us assurance, a foundation on which to build a new

 sense of worth, new potential for the future.  Next week, we’ll talk about how difficult it is to feel safe when you are broken and how, when we allow ourselves vulnerability with God, God keeps us safe as our brokenness heals and the sharp points and edges are shaped into something beautiful and new.

Until then, each of you received a piece of glass as you came in.  I invite you to spend some time during the offering exploring it with your fingers, finding whatever flaws it might have, and considering what your own experience of brokenness is right now.  What are the fragments within your heart left from a time of crisis, hurt, or loss that you need to offer to God for healing?

As we sing our final hymn, “We Lay Our Broken World”, you are invited to come forward and place your piece of glass into one of these clear glass vases. Let it be for you an opportunity to place your brokenness into God’s hands.  Let God find the beauty within you, and may this be the start of a journey for each of you from brokenness to wholeness, pain to redemption, death to resurrection.

Amen.