**Holy Vessels: Safekeeping**

**Luke 15:3-10**

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Every once in a while you read a book that opens your eyes to an experience so vividly, so provocatively that you never forget how you felt when you read it.  I can name several books that have had that effect on me but especially Ian McEwan’s “The Child In Time”. The funny thing is I don’t remember very much of the story - what I do remember, though, is McEwan’s incredible descriptions of what it feels like as a parent if you lose a child.

The story’s central character is a children’s book writer named Stephen who, early one morning, takes his daughter, Kate, to the supermarket while his wife, Julie, sleeps.  One moment, they are standing in the checkout line together. The next moment, Kate is gone, snatched away as Stephen is distracted by the cashier. Much of the rest of the novel centers on Stephen’s emotional journey as he searches for his lost child. Eventually, his marriage falls apart, and he ultimately loses hope of ever finding Kate again.  What makes it so powerful, though, is McEwan’s descriptions of how Stephen feels - the intensity of panic, guilt, loss, anger depicted with such sharp accuracy that it hurts to read it.

If you’ve ever lost sight of your child in a busy shopping mall, a parking lot, anywhere really...if you’ve ever suddenly discovered that a child you love isn’t right by your side where you expected them to be...then you know the horror of that feeling, the panic as your heart races and you scan the faces around you looking for that one child who depends on you.  You want nothing more than to see your child across the room, the park, the store, call her name, and sweep her up into your arms as you both begin to sob with relief. Your arms, the one place you know she is safe. Safe out of harm’s way, safe to rest and recover, safe to grow into her life again. Now imagine - if that is true of us with our children, it must be true of God with us.

This is the second in our Lenten sermon series entitled “Holy Vessels”.  Together, through the six weeks of Lent, we are exploring the journey of healing that each of us takes at points in our lives when we feel broken.  Last week, we talked about the many different circumstances in life that can leave us feeling broken or worthless and about how God can see our inner value, our deepest beauty and potential even when we can’t.

That sense of worthlessness, of brokenness, often seems to lead us away from God.  We wander away, run away, or are pulled away by someone or something that offers us a false sense of reassurance.  Like a child wanders away in the grocery store or is lured by a child predator, we end up lost from God, alone with our grief or loss, broken heart or broken life.  Yet, Jesus reminds us that God is always seeking us, ready to call us home.

Two thousand years ago, in the land of Judah, shepherding was a common occupation.  A well-established farmer might have thousands of sheep, and it was the shepherd’s responsibility to care for a given flock.  The shepherd would wake early in the morning to take the sheep out to graze for the day. In the rough and hilly landscape, they might have to wander far from home to find enough plants and grass to feed the sheep.  It was the shepherd’s responsibility to keep the flock together and, at the end of the day, to bring them all safely home again. If one sheep got lost, the shepherd would leave the flock, climbing over crags, looking behind boulders, until the sheep was found.

Of course, we see that metaphor for our relationship with God over and over in the Bible.  When we are lost, broken, wandering in the wilderness, God seeks us out and brings us back to safety.  No matter what leads us to stray, God is ready to forgive our mistakes and welcome us home. In fact, as Jesus says in his lesson to the disciples in Luke, he not only welcomes us - but if need be, carries us.  And then rejoices that the lost is found.

Unlike John Calvin and other protestant reformers of his time, the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, focused much of his theology around the promise of grace.  Wesley taught that there are three kinds of grace - prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying. Prevenient grace is the grace available to us before we are even born.  It is the promise that God loves us and wants to be in relationship with us from the start of our lives until they end. Justifying grace is what brings us to recognize and accept that love.  At some point in our lives, we make a decision to be in relationship with God and to try to live according to the teachings of Jesus. The sad truth is, though, making that decision and following through on it are two different things.  While justifying grace brings us to the decision, it is sanctifying grace that brings us back to the right path when we wander. Sanctifying grace is the voice of the shepherd calling us home. When we are broken, when we are lost, when we wander away from the path of Christ, God is always there, seeking us out, ready to carry us if we need to be carried.

But a shepherd’s job isn’t only to keep the sheep together but also to protect them.  When we are hurting, God not only calls us home but creates a safe space for us to heal.  God provides for our needs, comforts and strengthens us. No wonder Psalm 23 is the most well known and best loved of all the psalms.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.”

In our brokenness, in our vulnerability, God protects us and, in the body of Christ, has created a community where we should be safe - welcome, accepted, loved.  That is what the church is meant to be - a home for the broken-hearted, a place of healing, a community of care - where we can experience the love of God when we are weak and from whence we can carry the love of God into the world when we are strong.

Sometimes we forget that.  Sometimes we forget that the church of Jesus was started by a ragtag group of fishermen and tax collectors who watched as Jesus loved all the people who were judged to be unlovable and were inspired to start a church that would do the same thing.

On Tuesday, we will be welcoming Nadia Bolz-Weber as a speaker in our sanctuary.  If you are not familiar with her, she is the founding and former pastor of a Lutheran congregation in Denver called the House for All Sinners and Saints.  Bolz-Weber set out to love people who believed the church would never love them. She holds to the truth that we are all both sinners and saints and believes in the profound importance of the church in creating a community where we can protect, challenge, teach, help, and love each other despite and through our brokenness.

“It is next to impossible,” Bolz-Weber says, “in isolation to manufacture the beautiful, radical grace that flows from the heart of God to God’s broken and blessed humanity.  We cannot create for ourselves God’s word of grace. We must tell it to each other. As (the apostle) Paul tells us, faith comes through hearing, and hearing implies having someone right there doing the telling.”

Every time we worship here on Green Road/the corner of State and Huron and welcome in someone new.  Every day as that rainbow flag hangs outside our building. Every time we leave a handicapped parking place empty so that it is ready and available for the person who needs it to use.  Every time we offer a ride to someone who can’t get here or home alone. Every time we give a hug, dry a tear, say a prayer, and stand up for justice. We create a community of safekeeping - a safe place for all of God’s people to come together in worship and love.

Last week, at the end of our worship service, I invited each of you to explore a piece of broken glass in your hands - to discover its rough edges, its imperfections, and to allow it to represent the ways in which you yourself our broken.  Then, we each brought our brokenness to God by placing our piece of glass into one of these two vases.

So, here is what I want you to recognize today.  We, in our brokenness, are all together. We, together, create the beauty of what lies in this vase.  And we hold each other up, making room for each other’s rough edges, shifting so new pieces of glass can be added to our community, and creating something unique and glorious - a community of broken people who love God and provide safe haven for each other as we journey through life.

If you weren’t here last week or if you’re new with us today, I invite you to come up after worship, take a piece of glass from the bowl, and place it in with all the others.  Join our community of brokenness and hope.

You may feel lost and alone, a single sheep wandering through the wilderness, a child lost in the grocery store.  But, when you come to this place, you are welcome - no matter who you are or what sharp edges you may bring with you.

May it be so. Amen.