**Holy Vessels: Stories**

**Luke 13:10-17**

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Over the last few weeks, in our Lenten sermon series, we’ve been talking about the journey from brokenness to healing to resurrection.  So far, we’ve mostly focused on being broken - all the events and experiences in life that can leave us feeling shattered, worthless, and full of self doubt.  The first week I asked you to place a piece of broken glass in this vase as a way of offering your brokenness to God. Last week, we talked about what it means to be a community of brokenness, all together in our journey of hope.  Today, I want you to imagine a piece of broken glass, tossed into the ocean where it is pounded against rocks, carried by waves, possibly for years, until it washes up onto shore no longer sharp and rough but smoothed and shaped into something new.  Beach glass is one of those wonderful finds when you wander the beach. Each piece has a story. Just like each of us does. A story of transformation from something broken and without value into something unique and beautiful.

Today, we’re going to tell stories.  Stories of how God has taken us on that journey of transformation.  The story of Jesus healing the bent over woman is one of my absolute favorites. Like so many of the stories from Jesus’ ministry, it is rich with learnings and inspiration for us, but for today I want to focus on the woman herself.  Who is this woman? And why has she been bent over for eighteen years? As is so often true with women in the Bible, she isn’t given a name, which I think invites us to consider her a sort of Everywoman. To find ourselves in her story. There are a lot of theories about what physical ailment may have caused this woman to be bent over.  Yet, the scripture speaks of a spirit bending her back, so I tend to think of this being more related to life experience, to the weight of hurt and brokenness she carries, rather than to a specific disease from which she suffers. Imagine her life - for eighteen years, she hasn’t been able to see what surrounds her - the leaves on the trees, the blue sky, the landscape.  And for eighteen years, she hasn’t been able to look another person in the eye, to see the face of the person she is talking to. Her world has been just what she could see on the ground right around her.

Until Jesus sees her and calls to her.  Out of a sea of people, he recognizes her pain, her need for healing.  “Woman, you are set free,” he says and then lays his hand on her. The English translation says, “Immediately she stood up straight” but the Greek actually says “she was straightened up” making God the agent of the action.  God straightened her and, rightly, she began to praise God for the miracle she had just experienced.

We all have baggage that bends us over.  We all have had people and circumstances that have left us broken.  But this story reminds us that despite all the ways that life can break us, God will not leave us bent and broken.  God straightens our backs -moving through our lives with healing, forgiveness, restoration, and new beginnings.

Early this week, I invited you to share your stories of God’s healing with me.  I truly feel honored by how many people entrusted me with their stories, and I want to share a few of them with you because I think they witness to the hope we can have when our own lives are broken.  One story I received was from a gentleman who was always short and stocky as a teenage boy. He was terribly insecure about his body. His mother would come hear him play in the band at high school football games, which was a loving thing to do, though she would tell him she could always find him out on the football field because he was “the short, fat one in the trumpet section”.

However, in his church, there was another lady - an elderly lady who loved all the children in the church and called them her little boys and her little girls.  A few years ago, she passed away and at the funeral, someone mentioned to him that she had always considered him “her special little boy”, and he remembered that she had called him that just recently.  He says, “When I realized that she had done that for years, I also realized God put her in my life to have someone to especially care about me.  She didn't know all the silent concerns I had about who I was, but I think she "knew" that I had some issues that I just needed her special loving care; prayers, hugs, and that phrase "there's my special little boy".

Another story comes from a woman in the congregation who, after struggling to conceive her first two children, unexpectedly became pregnant with a third.  After prayerfully considering her life circumstances, she decided to have an abortion. It was a heartbreaking decision for her, and it took her years to believe that God could forgive her and even longer for her to forgive herself.  The biggest step happened at an Ash Wednesday service when she embraced God’s forgiveness and began to realize that nothing could separate her from the love of God. If God could forgive her, she could learn to forgive herself.

Then there is the story that is three stories in one.  It comes from a woman who three times in her life has felt intensely afraid.  Three times in her life has felt totally alone. Three times in her life has felt her mind swirling with so much confusion she not only didn’t have answers, she didn’t even know the questions.  And each of those three times, she says, “I felt “caught” for a moment in silence, as if time had stopped. I literally could not hear what was happening around me for an immeasurably brief moment.  And in that quiet space, I suddenly felt calm and centered and no longer alone. Then it seemed that I was right where I should be, that I would know what to do, and that all would be well even though I didn’t know what “well” meant. I believe those moments of connection were God.”

Finally, there is the story of a young woman who a year or so ago became overwhelmed and depressed by the chaos and stress of trying to raise young children and lean into her career.  She felt the pressure to be a super hero - both as a mom and at work - wanting to make an impact on the world. But, she felt she never gave enough. When her work environment became toxic and negative, she became disillusioned as people she expected to like and respect became mean and cruel to each other.  The pressure and disappointment led her to near rock bottom. But, slowly God began to work in her life - through her own prayers and through words she heard at church. Ultimately, she decided to seek joy. She quit her job and decided to stay home with her kids. She is reclaiming her life and trusting that right now parenting is God’s call on her life.

I have one more story of healing for you to hear, but I’m not going to tell it. It’s going to come straight from those who experienced it.

(Sherry Root and Roger Craig tell their story.)

God works in the most amazing ways to take the fragments of our brokenness to create something beautiful and new.  Sometimes, it takes us a long time to recognize where God was at work in our lives even when we were children. Sometimes, that transformation can’t happen until we willingly accept God’s forgiveness and grace.  Sometimes, God appears to heal us completely unexpectedly in a moment of silence and connection. Sometimes, God lifts us out of darkness and into joy. Sometimes, God births something new from the wreckage of loss and grief.

Like all these stories, you have a story. You, too, have felt shattered, fragmented, sharp and jagged.  Maybe you feel that way now. May these stories we’ve heard today give you faith that God is always at work, polishing, shaping, smoothing out the rough edges of your life, and calling out the beauty in you, and creating for you a new beginning. Amen.