**Holy Vessels: Different Pictures**

**John 4:5-18, 28-30**

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If you heard Nadia Bolz-Weber speak here in our sanctuary last week, you might remember that someone asked her about her use of the word “queer”.  When I was a kid, to call someone queer was a heavy-handed insult. Queer meant gay and gay meant something was wrong with you -something you should definitely be ashamed of.  Thank God times are changing.

Nowadays, that word has been reclaimed and repurposed, taken back by many in the LGBTQ+ community to be self-descriptive in an affirming way. And that is what Nadia Bolz-Weber spoke about.  Rather than rejecting the word, she likes seeing it be repurposed. The title of her first book, “Pastrix”, provides another example. The word pastrix is an insult used by church people to describe female pastors.  When Bolz-Weber first began blogging, she received all sorts of critical and mean-spirited comments on her blog including people calling her a pastrix. Rather than be offended, she reclaimed the word, and made it her own so that it wouldn’t have power over her anymore.

We are coming near to the end of our Lenten sermon series which has focused on the journey from brokenness to healing to resurrection.   Oftentimes, I believe the journey from brokenness to wholeness includes some amount of reclaiming what has been taken from you or damaged within you and learning to see it or use it in a new or different way.

Words like pastrix or queer are one example of ways in which we hurt each other.  Of course, there are many things we do that hurt each other, as well. Abuse, misuse, controlling or holding power over another person, manipulating, ignoring, rejecting - all of these are ways that our tender hearts get broken.  And our tendency is to take in what is said about us - the words others say, the names they call us - and think “I deserved that”. We come to believe the worst about ourselves and soon we treat ourselves badly, too.

But, part of this journey of healing that God takes us on is to reclaim our sacred worth and then put our experience to use for others.  When we do, we begin to paint a different picture of who we are and what our lives might come to be like.

That’s exactly what happens when Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well.  When Jesus arrives at Jacob’s well, he sits to rest while the disciples go in search of food.  He is thirsty, of course, but he doesn’t have a bucket. Just then, a woman comes to draw water for her family.  He asks her to give him some water, and her response tells us a lot about how she feels about herself in this circumstance.  “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” She is naming already two ways in which she might be considered “lesser”.  She is a Samaritan - a group of people generally looked down upon by the Jews. And she is a woman - in a society in which women were more like property than equals to men.

As the two begin to talk, we learn that this is a woman who has a complex story. She has lost five husbands and the man she is living with now she is not married to.  To live with a man to whom she wasn’t married was the equivalent of adultery in the eyes of the Jews. The fact that she had been married so many times probably means that her first husband died and she was passed on from one male family member to the next.  Jewish law required that widows be cared for by a male family member, but obviously none of these marriages worked. The most likely explanation for why is that she was barren.

In a society where a woman’s value was defined by being a good wife and mother, this woman would be at best pitied and, more likely, judged and shamed.  Notice that, as he always does, Jesus turns that upside down. First of all, he acknowledges her and speaks to her. Then, he engages her in a discussion - treating her as an equal.  And his message to her is, “if you accept this living water I offer you, this cleansing, nourishing water of my love and grace, you will have eternal life.”

So often when we hear about eternal life in scripture, we think it means life after death, life in eternity.  But, more often than not, and especially in the Gospel of John, eternal life means living an abundant life now - abundant and joy-filled because we fully know and have a right relationship with God.  So, Jesus is saying to this woman, accept my love and my grace, and you can let go of all the baggage people have put on you, all the reasons you’ve been given to think poorly of yourself, to see yourself as less than worthy. All the hurt can be washed away by living water and she can reclaim her own sacred worth, reclaim her identity as a child of God.

Author Glennon Doyle began her career as a blogger in 2009 when she started “Momastery”, her blog about faith and mothering. In the course of a few years, her blog became immensely popular among young Christian women, and she soon published a great book, “Carry On, Warrior”.  About that time, her husband confessed to having had numerous affairs during their thirteen year marriage and, not surprisingly, her world fell apart.

Recently, I heard her interviewed about that time in her life.  She spoke about watching everything she thought she needed - marriage, stability, belonging - fall away.  What was left over was her faith, her hope, and her love. What was left was the one identity that no one could change or take away from her, child of God.

She and her husband divorced, and over time, she began putting her life back together again.  She says, “people who hit rock bottom and then recognize that they will always be children of God, those are the ones who become brave and kind and wise.”  She met and married, US soccer icon, Abby Wambach, wrote another book, and began a non-profit agency called “Together Rising” which has raised more than $15 million to help women and children in crisis.  With God, she has created a different picture of herself and of her life.

All of us have that opportunity.  All of us can allow God to wash away the hurt, the bad feelings we have about ourselves, the mean things that have been said to and about us, the shame and guilt of the past.  But, it’s not always easy to do. It takes a great deal of courage to confront our demons and then let them go.

When we do, we experience eternal life - a freedom from hurt and self-doubt that some of us haven’t felt for a long, long time. But, for many of us, the journey doesn’t end there. Once the Samaritan woman heard and began to absorb what Jesus said to her, she went off to tell others.  To offer to them the same love and grace. I think for a lot of us, this is the next step in our own journey of healing. Like Glennon Doyle, as we begin to feel the freedom and relief of letting go, we want to help others find that, too.

Henri Nouwen took up this idea in a number of his writings, including his book, “Bread for the Journey”.   Nouwen says, “Nobody escapes being wounded. We are all wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually.  The main question is not, “How can we hide our wounds?”, but “How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?” When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers”.  So often as we begin to heal, it is our natural desire to try to help others. That, I truly believe, is God at work.

Throughout our sermon series, I have used images related to glass to illustrate this journey from brokenness to healing. Last week, we talked about beach glass - how God takes the fragments left of our broken selves and smoothes and shapes them over time much like the waves and the sand will smooth out a piece of beach glass.

The other interesting thing about beach glass is that you can’t see how beautiful it is without water.  Dry, it is has a sort of dusty film over it, but place it in water, and you can see the pure color underneath.  We offer our broken selves to God and the living water washes away the dust and grit of the past and brings out the beauty.  And then God takes all those beautiful, polished, smooth, lovely pieces of ourselves to create a picture in glass of what our lives might become - a beautiful mosaic.

Whatever your personal experience of brokenness is, God can repurpose what once was broken and create a new kind of whole. You are no longer stupid or fat or incompetent or unattractive or unsuccessful or unworthy.  You are no longer the woman he cheated on or the one who cheated. The alcoholic or addict. The failure or black sheep. The queer or pastrix. You are not rejected but repurposed. You are a different picture of yourself, a new creation.  And you have so much to offer toward the healing of the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.