

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
“Cultivating Compassion”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, August 2, 2020

Genesis 32:23-31

He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.' So he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' Then the man said, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.' Then Jacob asked him, 'Please tell me your name.' But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.' The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

Matthew 14:13-21

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Let us pray. Gracious God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of your spirit. Take whatever words we have coursing inside of us. The words that we offer in song and in prayer. The words of scripture and the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Bless all these words and transform them into your word. The living Word. The Word of Christ and let that word live within us. Let it teach us, guide us, comfort us, and challenge us and this day let it bless us. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

First of all, I want to acknowledge how wonderful it is to be back home and to be with all of you even if it is virtually. It was nice to be away in Chicago and know that even when I was gone, I could still partake in the worship services as so many of you have done now for many months. I also want to offer a huge thank you to Karen, Bill, Paula, Rob, Jane, Travis, Dee Colleen, and Tom for carrying on and for giving me peace of mind while I was away. I also want to thank whoever came up with Zoom which allowed me to attend virtual meetings of the session and the reopening task force while I was away. It's good to stay connected even when we are physically apart.

The reason I was gone is I was attending this pain management program and I spent a month working with physical therapists, occupational therapists, pain psychologists, yoga teachers, biofeedback counselors, pool therapists, doctors, Thai Chi leaders, relaxation coaches, people who were working with ergonomics, stretching, pharmacologists, nutritional counselors, and breathing coaches. But I'm glad to be back and bring a new sense of who I am. A new opportunity to care for my pain and to attend to it differently than I have before and to really honor in a sense the healing power that God gives us together. And as I came back, one of the rituals that I have with my wife is to share coffee with her in the morning and so we went and sat in our

usual spots and one of the first things out of her mouth was, did you see the Hollyhock outside the window? The Hollyhock is huge, about this tall, with flowers that are this amazing color of pink, a little bit redder at the center but it looks like each petal was painted by an angel. Just gorgeous. Open and smiling and bright and beautiful and I kind of laugh because I said do you remember when we got those seeds, Jani? I had gotten the packet of Hollyhock seeds, and she invited me to germinate them and plant them in these little tiny jiffy pots, the kind that look like little pots that you fill up with water. I didn't know that a Hollyhock seed was essentially this microscopic black dot that you could barely see. I soaked the seeds in water for about 18 hours, tried to get them into the little jiffy pots. A couple of them took and one of them now is this beautiful, enormous, pink, glory that's shining in our backyard. A little black seed that cracked open, and this amazing goodness emerged out of it.

For weeks, in a sense, we've been talking, or I've been talking about our conscience that has cracked open, the conscience of our nation and people around the world that at the death of George Floyd, something in all of us or most of us broke open. And now, there's this straining desire for goodness and justice and racial equality making its way through the fabrics of our nation and our world because of what happened in Minneapolis for 8 minutes and 46 seconds and since then. But today, rather than addressing that kind of societal awakening or breaking open, I want to stick with that smaller opening, the opening that each of us, like those little, tiny Hollyhock seeds, can attain the breaking open of our own hearts. And the reason that I want to do this is because in the passage from Matthew which often focuses on the amazing ministry of feeding the 5,000 with five loaves and two fishes, I want to focus on the first two verses. It says, "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place." What he had heard was that his second cousin, John the Baptist, had been beheaded and that his head was taken on a platter to the king who gave it to the girl, who took it to her mother, who asked for John's head. John's followers came to Jesus and told him this. And then in this part of the verse, he goes away to a deserted place and mourns for his beloved John. He grieves, he prays. We don't know how long he spent there. It could have been hours, but it also could have been days. The next that we hear of Jesus is that crowds are coming to find him, to follow him on foot. From the towns, they come out to this deserted place, and when he got back in the boat and went back across, he saw all of them and had compassion for them and healed their sickness. In these two verses, Jesus shows us the way of compassion, the way that's picked up later in the verse, the part that we often hear about of the loaves being blessed and broken open. But in this first part, if we read it slowly, we see Jesus being broken open. And what flows out of him is compassion for all those that have come and gathered to be with him in this deserted place and especially for their sick. I want to explore that notion of compassion for us rising up out of our own sense of brokenness.

Now, one of the things that I had to do when I was in the pain management program was that I had a little bit of homework to do. One of the things that I talked to the counselor about was that I-- the story inside my head that kept playing because of this pain was that I'm hurting. Nothing will fix it. Nothing can help. I'm at the end of my wits. I'm exhausted, on and on and on. These stories kept playing around in my head, these ideas, these feelings. And so, she said to me, "You need to go read the initial reports of your MRI and myelogram in order to understand how severely damaged your spinal cord is. Start with the facts." I said, "Okay. I'll do that."

And then another part of the homework, which I'll get to in a little bit, was that I had to write a new narrative for myself about what was going on inside of me, the pain and all the other things that are happening and ideas and notions, fears, hopes, and I had to come up with a story that made sense in the face of chronic pain. In a sense, she was inviting me to go look at my broken places. So, with homework in the back on my mind, I kept working the program. And one of the things that we learned was Anusara Yoga, which was a school of yoga. It's quite simple. It's just some gentle movements that you can do to settle yourself and settle your nervous system down. You do it to remind yourself that you're okay. You do it to allow peace to come and touch your life again. And so, as I was exploring what this yoga school was all about, I ran across an invocation that is used by those who practice this type of yoga seriously. And the translation of it is, "I open my heart to the power of grace that lives in us as goodness, that never is absent and radiates peace and lights the way of transformation." I read that and I wept because for too long I had closed off my heart. I couldn't taste my own goodness. I didn't have peace. I didn't have light. And I wasn't sure what the way of transformation looked like. I was more sure that it was simply the way to more pain. But I loved this idea of opening my heart to the power of grace. I, of course, made it a little more Christian by saying that it never is absent and that it radiates the peace of Jesus Christ. But in reading that invocation, I began to move in a different direction internally. In a sense, the compass of my soul was redirected to a true North, if you will. That maybe there was something in my opening up to the reality of what was going on that I could find and feel God's grace again. And so that led me to a poem that I had remembered from Hafiz, who was the greatest Persian poet. He lived between 1310 and 1390. And his lyrical poetry, they're called ghazals. And what it means is a poetic expression of both the pain of loss or separation and the beauty of living in spite of that pain. The beauty of living in spite of that pain.

The poem is called *The Seed Cracks Open*. This is what he wrote: "It used to be that when I would wake in the morning I could say with confidence, what am I doing? What am I going to do? That was before the seed cracked open." Now Hafiz is certain,

there are two of us housed in this body doing the shopping together in the market, tickling each other while fixing the evening's food. Now when I awake all the internal instruments play the same music. God, what love's mischief can we do for the world today? Hafiz goes from thinking that he's living life alone and separated from God to realizing that he and God are partnering together in this life. That was before the seed cracked open. Again, my homework was to find this new narrative. Something that honors where I was and points towards a better future. Hafiz was one piece of my contemplation about that. And then I remembered a gift that I had gotten for Dr. Boland, the neurosurgeon who's operated on me four times. A couple of months go by after I knew I was going to Chicago for sure this time. I had decided to get Dr. Bowland a gift to express my gratitude for all that he's done for me and also to sort of mark a transition in my life from a time of constantly needing to be fixed to now maybe walking towards the future. And so, I found a piece of pottery done in the Japanese-style of kintsugi, which is pottery that is broken and then very carefully put back together not with glue, but with a very special tree sap lacquer that is dusted with powdered gold. So, the seams of where the pottery is broken is now just this little tiny vein of gold, conspicuous cracks of gleaming, yellow goodness. This method celebrates the unique history of that artifact by emphasizing its breaks, its brokenness instead of hiding them or disguising them. This pottery, in a sense, stands against what we as Americans often imagine about ourselves and others, that only the perfect get ahead, that somehow, we, in our brokenness, are not good enough, that we, knowing our imperfections need to hide them. What kintsugi pottery makes quite clear is that the repaired pieces become even more beautiful than the original, more precious, if you will. This practice of pottery also encompasses part of the Japanese philosophy of wabi-sabi, which calls for seeing beauty in the flawed or imperfect places. So as I was thinking about reformulating the internal narrative, I recalled this pottery that honors the brokenness, honors the notion that it's okay to show our brokenness, honors the value of repairing that brokenness, and holds the powerful idea that we as individuals, as a society, as the people of God become more beautiful and valuable when we show those broken parts, when we allow that grace to repair the cracks of who we are. And rather than hiding them like we've been taught, we show them. We show them to all. This sermon is a lot about me and my narrative, my work, the work that I began and the work that I'll continue to do probably for the rest of my life, not just stretching or exercising or breathing or meditating or pacing my way differently through the day or the week or the month but also, re-writing and re-working all those things that are going on inside of me.

I'm hoping that this sermon about my process and journey is also provoking in you some ideas about what you might be able to do with your brokenness. And what God might be able to do if you offer that brokenness to God, allowing that grace to come and to fill and mend those broken places where you allow God to put you back together. And as Jesus says, or as the scripture says about Jesus, so that you might go forth and bless the people. Those that came, those that are hurting, and those that are hungry. The brokenhearted Jesus blesses the crowd, cures the sick, and takes the bread and blesses and breaks it and feeds the 5,000, plus the women and the children. The way of Jesus is, in a very real sense, the way of brokenness, but not staying broken only for the sake of being broken. Being broken in order for God's power and beauty and grace to mend and flow through you to others. So, before I could graduate, I had to turn in my new narrative. This is what I wrote: *I am continuing to gently expand my capacity for life through a paced rhythm of mindful attention to solitude, family life, self-care, work, fun, and pain. I'm engaged in these intentional practices because I live with chronic pain due to significant past injuries to my spinal cord, as well as ongoing degenerative issues. My neurological issues, which for too long I have tried to hide, generate a tremendous amount of stress, fear, discomfort, and exhaustion, all of which erode the richness of life. I now feel equipped to diminish the impact of that pain on myself, and especially on others. By deliberately expanding the boundaries of my life through self-advocacy, intentional practices, mindful attentiveness, and opening my heart to the grace of God so that the compassion and peace of Jesus Christ will flow forth through me and into the lives of all those around me. In a sense, my new narrative is also my deepest prayer. That which has held me back, made me smaller, more angry, more frustrated, more quiet, more distant, more whatever, if I allow it to open and allow God's grace to flow through it, that somehow new life like a beautiful hollyhock will be able to grow, and others will be able to see that beauty and be blessed by it.* All of that work I did in Chicago, that which I just shared with you, I did without any knowledge that when I returned on the first Sunday after that time, I'd be preaching on this passage. A passage that honors brokenness. Jesus' heart being broken by the horrible news of John's death, and the five loaves being broken to feed all those that are hungry.

God loves us all enough to fill those broken places so that we can bless others who are broken. Amen.