

“Speaking of Brokenness? Speaking of Sin”

Sunday, 15 September 2013

Proper 19C

Psalm 14:1-7

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-10

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I learned this past week that a couple I married a little less than a decade ago have separated, and are thinking about divorcing. The news, while not a complete surprise to me (we've kept in touch over the years), made me deeply sad. I don't know how many of the marriages I've blessed over the past 18 years have not survived. But I, like most of you, have known too many friends and relatives whose marriages have ended in divorce.

It's always painful. Even when it's clear that it's the right thing—often the best and most loving thing—to do.

Watching family members or friends go through the process of divorcing is painful for those of us who were present at their wedding, because we remember the hope and the promise and the joy that was palpable back then; we remember how in love the couple was, we witnessed their devotion, the vows they took with such robust hope, conviction, and certainty. And just about every couple I've ever talked to about their decision to divorce has said that *their* memories of those very same things is part of the wreckage they inevitably feel. In that moment, at the wedding, it seemed like they were invincible. And that kind of hope and conviction, that love and devotion are all life-giving. Don't we just feed off the positive energy that's present at weddings?

Some of us here this morning have first-hand knowledge of divorce, and would probably argue that 'painful' is too glib a word to describe an experience that is thoroughly shattering, utterly crushing. The wife of the couple I heard from last week admitted that she's "sad, and hurt, and feel broken in a way I could never imagine."

Few things "speak" more compellingly to us about human brokenness than does divorce. Those who've been through it, or accompanied loved ones going through it, know the ways in which a divorcing couple is forced to confront their own deeply flawed and finite nature, individually and together. And they're forced to acknowledge the ways in which they can no longer find their way back to a state of holy union—that sacred condition alluded to as the wedding partners face each other and exchange vows and other words expressing mutual delight in knowing and being known, promising mutual trust and loving commitment.

We all know that no one is perfect. We all have limits and we're all flawed. Broken, even. Our brokenness frightens us. We don't like to think about it, much less talk about it at

length—especially at church, where we’d much rather hear about how much God loves us and accepts us just as we are.

Because our experience is that so much of the rest of the world just *doesn’t* love us or accept us just as we are. The world is constantly judging us, constantly telling us we’re not slim enough or beautiful enough or young-enough looking; we’re not dressed smartly, or moving in the right social circles; we’re not driving the right car, or using the right detergent, or living in the right kind of house or neighbourhood. Or, we’re not doing enough to save the earth, or save the children, or defend the animals. And all of these messages come from watching television for a single evening, or paging through the daily paper!

We feel judged. Okay, so we can set the materialistic agenda aside for what it is. But, well, the parts that prick our moral conscience about not doing enough to save the earth or the children or the animals or the destitute—it’s probably true. We’re not. And in some ways, we can’t—not on our own. We are deeply flawed—more deeply flawed and limited than we sometimes acknowledge. The biblical word for it is *sin*. We’re all sinful, corrupted—ourselves full of sin, living and participating in a world thoroughly infected by sin. On our own, there would be no hope for us. But—wait for it. . . that part’s coming.

I need to return first to the sin part, because most people don’t like to talk about it or hear about it. Which means there’s probably something about it that we need to pay attention to, possibly something that we don’t yet fully understand.

If you look up the word ‘sin’ in the Oxford dictionary or Webster’s, you’ll probably read something like this: “an immoral act considered to be a transgression against divine law”; or “a transgression of a religious or moral law, especially when deliberate.” And that’s why most people recoil from the idea that we’re *all* sinful. “I don’t do *immoral* things,” we might reassure ourselves; “Certainly, I don’t *deliberately* commit acts against divine law.” (Though I bet there’d be a vigorous debate over what constitutes ‘divine law’ in our society.)

But those definitions of sin—whilst not entirely inaccurate—are quite narrow. *Harper’s Bible Dictionary* defines sin this way: “That which is in opposition to God’s benevolent purposes for his creation. According to the biblical writers, sin is an ever-present reality that enslaves the human race and has corrupted God’s created order. . . . all sin is ultimately against God, God’s laws, God’s creation, God’s covenant, and God’s purposes. It is the basic corrupting agent in the entire universe.”

Barbara Brown Taylor put it this way: “Contrary to the legal model, sin is not simply a set of behaviours to be avoided. Much more fundamentally, it is a way of life to be exposed and changed, and no one is innocent.”¹

So, sin is not merely discrete acts that we commit in defiance of God’s will—although they do participate in it. Sin is the condition in which we live; it’s the reality of brokenness and

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin*, p. 58

alienation from our ideal state of unity with God and God's intended order for things. It's what so many of the biblical stories are trying to describe, starting with the story of Adam and Eve.

As Psalm 14 pointed out so emphatically,
"But *all* people have lost their way,
each has become corrupted.
No human being can be called good,
not even one person on this earth.
They are not as smart as they think they are,
evil infects every thought and deed.
Many overeat while others starve,
not taking the Holy One into account."²

Individually and collectively, we *are not* constantly paying attention to God's desires, turning toward God, or following God's will. And this ultimately does damage: damage to the earth, and to its peoples, to our family members, our neighbours, and friends, to future generations. Whether out of fear, or self-righteousness, or complacency, or ignorance (sometimes we have no idea we're being complicit in destructive activities and behaviours), the simple truth is that we do not consistently do the right or loving thing. And sometimes, it's the Church that demonstrates too clearly what the Psalmist was saying.

Not so long ago, another couple who are dear to me revealed that they've been struggling because one of them had engaged in an extra-marital affair. The couple are working on repairing their marriage, and apparently are learning from one another about grace and the lived experience of death and resurrection. But they were both bewildered and further devastated by the reaction of their church community, which shunned the one, and ignored or abandoned the other.

It wasn't the first time I'd heard of such a reaction. Regrettably, I've witnessed it on more than one occasion by faithful members of churches I've served across the years. It's shocking and unacceptable behaviour by people who profess to be disciples of the forgiving, redeeming, and life-restoring Christ Jesus.

But as the apostle Paul lamented to the Romans, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." (Romans 7:15) Too often, we find ourselves *not* following through on our better resolutions, but instead, doing the very things we despise. In community and individually, we sin and we're sinful. We cause and endure pain and brokenness. We need help. We need a grace that is greater than our brokenness, greater than our sin.

² Psalm 14, Bruce Prewer translation, <http://www.bruceprewer.com/DocC/C53sun24.htm>

At the end of the day, churches are made up of flawed and broken individuals, many of whom have no idea how to cope with their own brokenness, much less how to engage the brokenness of others. We are sinful, living in a sin-infected world. On our own, there would be no hope for us.

But there is hope. Here's the good news. We're *not* on our own. Sin and brokenness are not the realities we're doomed to inhabit! We may turn and wander away from God, setting our minds and hearts on other things—but God stays with us, refuses to give up on us, will never walk away from us. Like the devoted shepherd who hunts high and low for that wayward sheep, or the widow going over her house with a fine-tooth comb to find that coin: the power of Love, God Almighty, will not give up or give out on you or me. While the rest of the world wags its fingers at us, or quietly judges us and finds us wanting, the God who created us waits for us patiently and whispers quietly, “You're not perfect—but I adore you nonetheless. And I have a plan for you. Come, walk with me.” How astonishing, how infinite is that grace?

Do you remember Paul—the guy who, by the account we heard today, was ‘formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence?’ The point of the snippet we heard from the first letter to Timothy was that God in Christ used even the likes of irascible Paul to accomplish great things after he'd turned his heart back toward God. Energised by the profound gratitude he felt for the grace he was experiencing, Paul wound up mentoring many others in their leadership in faith. Turns out, God is even more forgiving and patient than we are foolish, stubborn, and wrong-headed.

Marriages end—some of them quite badly, despite the truest intentions and deepest hopes of the couple on their wedding day. Individuals, families, communities, and entire nations fail each other; our elected representatives fail to represent us, our leaders fail to lead with courageous moral authority, and we fail to hold them accountable. We live in a world where it truly feels like “all people have lost their way, each has become corrupted.”

But did you notice how that psalm ended? It ended the same way our epistle and gospel lessons ended: with a vision of rejoicing. With promises of hope and redemption.

The psalm is actually a prayer—a prayer of lament and proclamation that invites God to see what's going on, whilst also reassuringly giving voice to the plight of the oppressed. The Psalmist describes with passionate vexation the ways that human beings are behaving badly. But he goes on to recognise and announce God's presence and purpose when neither seems to be apparent.³ The frustrated words of judgement and discontent do not claim the final note. Instead, the song ends with hope and confidence—with an announcement that God is both judge and deliverer, and that God is on the side of the weak, so justice will prevail and “God's children shall be glad and celebrate!”

³ Mark A. Lomax, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, vol. 4, p. 60*

My dear friends, so devoted is God to our human race that he took on this flawed human form in the person of Jesus Christ. And his flesh was broken. His blood was spilled—as a consequence, and as an expression of human sin: some of it intentional and deliberate, some of it ignorant, uninformed, and complicit. The sins of the world were visited upon the One who came only with love in the name of Love, to teach us love by living our life, dying the death we imposed upon him, and triumphing over worst that a broken and sinful world could deliver. The Gospel message in Christ Jesus is that our brokenness and sin does not have the final or defining word in this world, or in our lives.

The mind-blowing grace and boundless love of God in Christ has the last word. So let us speak *that* word to a world that's dying to hear it! Amen.