

I keep breaking our cross, and I'm really, really sorry. I try to carry too much down from the storeroom, and it slips and falls, and parts break off. Rich fixed it last month, and then I dropped the base and broke off the pegs that the cross slips onto. After preparing this week's sermon, though, I'm hoping that all the breakage and the mending actually increases the cross's value. I read about an episode of *Antiques Roadshow* in which a young couple brought an antique dresser to be appraised. The dealer told them it was probably worth about \$500. They were disappointed; a new one would cost about the same, and this was over a hundred years old. Then the dealer added, "Of course, it would be worth ten times that much if you hadn't refinished it." That is a parable about the Christian life. Our value to God is not in our perfection but in our scars, our wounds, our broken places.

The novelist Michael Chabon says that as we grow from childhood to adulthood, we experience the world as broken. "Sooner or later, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, we all learn the bitter lessons of our broken world — 'heartbreak, violence, failure, cowardice, duplicity, cruelty, and grief.'" In adulthood, he says, we respond to that brokenness in different ways. Some of us break the pieces even smaller. Some just let the shards be, and try to survive.

"And some people," he writes, "passing among the scattered pieces of that great overturned jigsaw puzzle, start to pick up a piece here, a piece there, with a vague yet irresistible notion that perhaps something might be done about putting the thing back together again."

<http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20130408JJ.shtml>

We build imperfect replicas of the half-remembered perfect world, with pieces missing. But our replicas are themselves beautiful, suggestive and faithful maps of the kingdom of God.

The gospel story today revisits Peter the fisherman, shattered by the loss of his rabbi and the raw memory of his denial of relationship. He has returned to fishing, when Jesus appears on shore and invites Peter and his four companions to breakfast. As they sit at the table, Jesus invites Peter back into discipleship, asking him three times, "Do you love me?" Every time Peter says Yes, Jesus says, "Feed my sheep." Peter who had deserted Jesus in his hour of need and refused discipleship is being called back to discipleship, with his history of failure firmly in mind. It is not only a forgiveness of Peter, but a call to his whole self, the self who had failed because he was afraid.

We also read the story of Saul on the Damascus road, a story that's usually referred to as Paul's conversion, but could just as well be seen as a story of his call. Saul the Pharisee, "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord," was loaded for bear, trying to stamp out the Jesus movement. He is stopped dead on his way to Damascus, blinded, and put into a room where he neither eats nor drinks, so stunned is he at his encounter with the risen Lord. God calls a Christian named Ananias to visit Saul, and Ananias points out what a bad idea this is: "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." But God insists: "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen." A really bad instrument, Ananias would have said, but to his credit he not only goes but addresses Saul as "Brother Saul." And Saul regains his sight, eats, is baptized, and "immediately" begins to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

Paul never forgot his past; indeed, he refers to it periodically with brutal honesty:

"I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man." He considered himself "the worst of sinners." But as with Peter's restoration, after his conversion Paul also transcended his past, however imperfectly: "forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward."

Neither Peter nor Paul can deny who they are and what they have done, nor do they try. It seems that they consider even their failings to be integral to their value to God. After all, an antique dresser, beat up as it may be, demonstrates that it has been sturdy and useful for a long time. A shiny, pristine dresser does not demonstrate longevity.

Michael Piazza of the Center for Progressive Renewal writes that only those who have failed and really absorbed their failure can enact the kind of reversal, or grace, that Peter and Paul enacted. He says,

- We all think forgiveness is great, until we have someone to forgive.
- We know Jesus is right about loving our enemies, until we have an enemy to love.

We all endorse the scripture about turning the other cheek, until someone comes along and smacks us a good one.

But:

- The only people capable of forgiving are those who have needed and known great forgiveness;
- The only person who can really love their enemy is the person who has been an enemy to someone;

And the only person capable of turning the other cheek is the person who, at some time, has struck out at another person. The slapped Christian absorbs the blow and the brokenness behind it, not as a victim but taking responsibility for the outcome, knowing that the stronger person chooses grace rather than escalating conflict.

The only people capable of assembling the shards of a broken world are those who

contributed to its breakage. God does not expect us to have clean hands; God invites us to use our dirty hands and the knowledge of how they got dirty to clean up the mess.

The Trappist monk and Buddhist scholar Thomas Merton wrote,

A tree gives glory to God by being a tree. For in being what God means it to be it is obeying him. It "consents," so to speak, to his creative love. It is expressing an idea which is in God and which is not distinct from the essence of God, and therefore a tree imitates God by being a tree.

The more a tree is like itself, the more it is like him. If it tried to be like something else which it was never intended to be, it would be less like God and therefore it would give him less glory.

For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self. Trees and animals have no problem. God makes them what they are without consulting them, and they are perfectly satisfied.

With us it is different. God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can be ourselves or not, as we please.

Thomas Merton 1915-1968

The New Seeds of Contemplation

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We are born into this broken world, and we contribute to its brokenness as we ourselves also break. But Merton is right; who we are is key to our calling, and if we are flawed, well, that's part of who we are and what we have to offer. It doesn't mean we persist in doing something we know to be destructive; it does mean that we own that memory and those qualities, and let God use them.

Jesus' Resurrection does not just mean Jesus got to stop being dead, and it doesn't just mean we live beyond this life. What it really means is that God is always redeeming; what we cannot repair, God uses. **We are apt to mistake our**

vocation by looking out of the way for occasions to exercise great and rare virtues, and by stepping over the ordinary ones that lie directly in the road before us.

-Hannah More 1745-1833

If we take Resurrection seriously, we will offer ourselves with bold humility to be used for purposes we find far too important for our flawed selves.

Living God,
long ago, faithful women
proclaimed the good news
of Jesus' resurrection,
and the world was changed forever.
Teach us to keep faith with them,
that our witness may be as bold,
our love as deep,
and our faith as true. Amen.