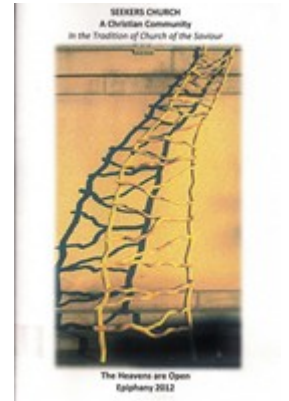


“Broken and Whole All at Once” by Brenda Seat

5 February 2012



The 5th Sunday after Epiphany

“Ministry” is a word we often use in talking about what we do here at Seekers. We have a Ministry of Place, we have the Care Pack Ministry, we talk about ministering to each other, and we are quite clear that we don’t have a “Minister,” but instead believe we are all ministers.

In the Gospel lesson today, we are introduced to Jesus as he is just beginning his ministry. He is returning from preaching at the synagogue at Capernaum and he and these newly-minted disciples, who have just begun to follow Jesus, go to Simon’s home. There they find that Simon’s mother-in-law is sick and in no shape to feed them or make them welcome. But Jesus takes her hand and heals her and she then begins “to minister to their needs.”

Now that is hospitality! Sick one minute and then attending to the needs of others the next!

The verb used here and translated variously as “minister to,” “attend to” or “to serve” is also used earlier in Mark, when Jesus is in the wilderness and “angels ministered to his needs.” In Acts, the noun form of this word is used to describe those who were called to minister in the early Church and from that we get the English word deacon.

This story of Jesus and Simon’s mother-in-law is remarkable because it is the first time in the Gospels where a person is described as ministering to Jesus instead of the other way around. It is interesting to me that it is this woman in such a lowly position: mother-in-law to a fisherman, sick with a fever – which in that day was to be greatly feared – and yet she is the one who gets up out of her sick bed after Jesus heals her and ministers to Jesus as angels had ministered to him in the past.

This story illustrates something important, I think, about ministry. It is really not about what you know, what training you have, or what skills you may have. It is often about opportunity, and receptiveness, and doing what you can in that moment. In this case the woman who was sick, and who was healed, became a minister and healer in her own way and was able to minister to the one who had healed her.

The healed, healing the healer.

This seems truly subversive to me and, just like our reflection piece says, it is a glimpse of God peeking through that curtain and showing us a different way – God's way.

Ministry comes in unexpected ways. Healing often helps us be open to ministry.

For many years the Preparation portion for our communion liturgy said the following:

We gather now as one body, joined around the table.

Here we celebrate God's presence among us

united in Christ's spirit, broken and whole all at once

Broken and whole all at once...

In 1985, when we first came to Seekers, Marian was just a baby and shortly after we arrived I became pregnant with Lauren and she was born into this community in 1986. We looked like we were a whole family, a complete package; but we had also carried the ashes of our other daughter with us when we moved to this area – the ashes of Marian's twin, Erica. Ten years after her death, in March of 1995, with the encouragement of Marjory and Peter, Keith and I finally decided that we were ready to plan a memorial service for the daughter that we had lost so long ago. Since she had died in utero at the same time Marian was born, there was a disconnect for us on how to mourn her loss at the same time we were celebrating our first child's birth. It seemed impossible to do both and so we never did anything. Erica's urn with her ashes sat on a bookshelf in

our home – a silent but somehow comforting reminder of her when we had no other way to affirm her existence in our lives. In the middle of our wholeness and completeness as a family there was also this brokenness that had never been taken out to be looked at or resolved in any way.

The process of planning the memorial service was of course painful, but it was also cathartic. But even as we were planning a memorial service, it still had not occurred to me that we needed to do something with Erica's ashes...until one evening when Keith told me that he had been talking to Marjory. She had gently and insistently urged us to do something with the ashes and suggested that we spread them on the Lake of the Saints at Dayspring. I remember that my first reaction to that was a huge NO! and I broke down sobbing.

Healing is complicated and messy.... Ministry is complicated and messy....

When we read about Jesus' healing ministry, and especially in the readings for last week, there is great resistance to being healed. Much like my reaction to being urged to let go of what was holding me back and blocking my healing, the "demons" in the Gospel resist and don't want to be healed either. I don't know how to think about demons and what they mean in the Bible, but I know that just like those demons I was very resistant to being healed. (Well maybe that's not quite right. I wanted to be healed, but I didn't want to deal with the messy process of getting there!) It was like ripping away a band-aid that covers a sore that has never quite healed. You know it isn't good idea to keep ignoring it, but it's really too painful to peel it back and to deal with it at the source.

Like Jesus, Marjory and Peter were insistent with Keith and me, urging us to healing and wholeness.

In the end, as many of you know, we did spread Erica's ashes on the Lake of the Saints in a beautiful unfired pot that Marjory made and which was decorated by Marian and Lauren, along with the other children of this community. And so the band-aid was ripped off and we were able to begin a healing process that continues to this day.

Have you ever noticed that healing and salvation are joined together at the hip? It seems to me at least in my own life that whenever there was healing, salvation seemed to appear, or whenever I felt saved, there was healing of some sort or another.

Ministry is often about offering others opportunities for healing or opening our eyes to what can save us from the things that sabotage our own wholeness; it allows us to see what will save us for being what we were meant to be in the world. Salvation, as Pat Conover often says, is both being saved from and being saved for.

In our lesson from Corinthians, Paul talks about his ministry and how he goes about it. He talks about being a servant to others, of being all things to all people in order to present the healing power of the Good News.

Paul is challenging for me! Whenever I read this part it always sets my teeth on edge. It sounds so swarmy somehow...like he is a car salesman or something, right? Being all things to all people?

Almost 5 years ago my mother died from cancer. In the aftermath of her passing I comforted myself by giving myself permission to not do the things that I didn't like to do – like exercise – and to eat all the things that I loved and were comforting. I thought that I was being good to myself when in reality, as the pounds kept piling on, I was drowning myself. When I finally woke up enough from my grief and realized what I was doing to myself, I floundered around trying this and that, whining and complaining because it was so hard, and being mad at my body for “betraying” me. But I could never find that thing, that magic whatever that could save me from what I had done to myself and get on a path back to health. And then I found Gina, a trainer at the YMCA.

Gina has been slowly but surely healing me and saving me. She was very tricky, initially...asking me only to do 15 minutes a day, 3 times a week to begin with and giving me really easy things so that I could feel competent about what I was doing. And it worked! She encourages me, she exhorts me and she pushes me beyond what I think I can do. She says, “Come on...you can do it!...30 more seconds!...you can do it...see, there you did it!” She listens to me and she counteracts the story I have told myself for years: that I am not strong, that I am not agile, that I am not able. And she tells me a new story: that I am strong, that I am agile, and that I am able. She gives me counsel, and information; she inspires me and works me to my maximum potential and then some. She is a minister of healing to me – and as I am healed, I am also saved. Saved from the story that keeps me from my fully strong and healthy self, and

saved for fulfilling the new story that I am composing with her help.

I think Paul was talking about this kind of ministry...the ministry of being with people, of walking with them, of reaching out to them where they are at, of asking them to take small incremental steps and commiserate with them when it is hard. And listening...endless amounts of listening, as people tell their stories until the places where pain and blindness are blocking their path become clear.

Ministry is often like being a cheerleader...you aren't doing the work, but you are encouraging, persuading, kicking butt, soothing hurts, commiserating, and being insistent and authoritative when needed. It is taking someone's story and wringing hope out of it. Of seeing the possibility and potential that God sees in that person and the power that resides in them, whether they recognize it or not.

Isaiah was a cheerleader for the people of Israel. At the time when he was a prophet, the people of Israel were discouraged. The temple had been destroyed, they were living in exile; all was lost and their lives were in tatters around them. There was a sense of doom and a loss of groundedness. And what does Isaiah say?

Do you not know, have you not heard?

The Lord, the Eternal God, Creator of the earth's farthest bounds does not grow weary or grow faint;

God's understanding cannot be fathomed. God gives vigor to

the weary, new strength to the exhausted.

Young men may grow weary and faint, even the fittest may stumble and fall;

but those who look to the Lord will renew their strength,

they will soar on wings like eagles;

they will run and not grow weary,

walk and not faint.

From the story of despair, from their tattered lives, Isaiah wrung out a message of hope that God is present even when all seems to be lost, that we can find God present among us and with us, giving us strength.

Kate Cudlipp was often a cheerleader for me...as she was for many of you. When I first joined the Servant Leadership Team, I was unsure of my role, my place and how to use my gifts. Kate was so encouraging and supportive...and helped me negotiate the tricky steps between serving and leading. She invariably could see the bigger picture, the wider vision, the deeper understanding, and helped me to not give up, to not grow weary, and to trust in God.

In our loss of Kate we have had to dig deep. In our recent series of illnesses within the community we have had to dig deep. Our circumstances are calling forth from amongst us new opportunities for ministry and challenging us to find new ways to be in ministry to each other. And even as we are in the midst of calling forth new leadership to join Peter and me on the SLT, we are being reminded that ministry in Seekers is not

just for a few...it is for all of us.

Each of us ministering to each other – completing the circle of healing, like Simon's mother-in-law, who when she was healed ministered to her healer, broken and whole all at once – we pass that healing forward, ministering to our healers and to the world beyond, carrying forward the hope that we have found in being healed; being saved from our brokenness and saved for the story of wholeness that God has for each one of us.

Thank goodness we are all in this together!

Amen