

Blessings in Brokenness

Psalm 34
Mark 9:14-29

November 19, 2017
Faith Community

This story in the Gospel of Mark is one of my all time favorites. I'm touched so deeply by this persistent father, and maybe it's because I'm a father myself. I discovered many years ago that when you're a parent you can be hurt in ways that you never knew before, but that's because you've discovered a love that you never knew before, and so this story has tremendous meaning for me.

And that leads to the first thing I have to say to you today. Your heart **will** be broken. It's guaranteed. You can take it to the bank. And more often than not, your heart will break because of love.

C. S. Lewis said, "Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to keep it intact, give your heart to no one, not even to an animal....[But if you do that,] your heart will change. It won't be broken; it will become unbreakable, cold, impenetrable.... The only place outside Heaven where you can be safe from the dangers....of love is Hell."¹

Peter, James and John had just come down from a mountain on which they'd had a mountaintop experience, the Transfiguration. They were up there with Jesus; Moses and Elijah put in guest appearances, and it was all so very spectacular.

Peter wanted to stay right there, and you can't blame him. Life's pretty cool on the mountain. But that's not where life is lived, so down they went, and right away ran into a problem.

There was this guy, see, and he brought his son to the other disciples to get healed, but they couldn't do it. Teachers of the Law got into the act, seeing a chance to embarrass the whole team, and Jesus and his crew got caught up in it, and there's Peter, thinking, 'I told you we should've stayed up there.'

The father of the boy burst through the craziness and spoke up.

¹ C. S. Lewis, The Four Loves

He said his boy was possessed by a spirit. Some look at the symptoms and see epilepsy; Matthew calls it a seizure. The Greek translation of the word is 'moonstruck.' The important thing though was that his boy was in trouble and the disciples couldn't help, and right in front of him was the big guy himself, so let's have at it. When someone you love is in trouble you don't worry about propriety. You get the job done.

Whatever might happen to the boy, the father was discovering the gift of a broken heart. That's the second thing I have for you today. A broken heart is sometimes a gift.

Friends, the greatest growth of your life can happen when your heart is breaking. It's what drove the father to Jesus. What do you do with yours?

Psalm 34 says,

The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. (v. 18)

It's the gift of a broken heart.

And there's something here that I'd never seen until preparing this sermon. The boy puts on a clinical display of his problem. Bang, on the ground he goes, frothing at the mouth, writhing, convulsing and in obvious pain; he could very well die. Jesus saw it but just kept on talking with the dad.

How could he do that when the father was so desperate?

How could such a thing be with you?

Why doesn't God heal you or the person you love?

Why won't the pain go away?

Why can't you find a way out from whatever it is that has you?

The father keeps pressing, though, and says, "If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." Notice the "us" here. It's not just his boy. The father's in need too, and he knows it.

But Jesus throws it right back at him all the while the boy is struggling and says, "If I can? Everything is possible if you believe."

Now we've hit the wall. His son is on the ground, and Jesus keeps talking. The father can take it no longer and shouts out,

I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief! (Mark 9:24)

And there you have it. The man reached his limit. There's nothing left but his soul, and he puts it on the line in one of the most honest and intimate displays in all of Scripture. Then and only then does the transformation come for both of them. The father discovered the gift of a broken heart.

After it was over, father and son go home, disappointed teachers sulked away, and curious gawkers wandered off with a great story to tell. The disciples asked why they couldn't pull it off themselves, why hadn't it worked for them, and Jesus said it could only happen through prayer. I don't think he meant formal high church stuff; neither was it to be a simplistic "God is great, God is good" thing. Instead, it had to be straight from the heart prayer, and I think he told his disciples they had to pray like that father just did. And so do you. And so do I.

Healing for his child took place when the father was honest about his own life. It was what he did with his broken heart that made the difference for his boy.

John Ortberg tells a wonderful story about his father in law whom he calls Al. Al was "...an uncomplicated man, a natural athlete and avid outdoorsman who loved to hunt and fish. Al was the kind of man who didn't mind what was said about his wife or daughter [Nancy, John's wife], but he never tolerated an insult to his dog. Eppie was (to tell the truth) sadly obese, but Al wouldn't hear of it. He insisted she was a special breed, 'a short-legged Lab' which was why her belly was so close to the ground.

"Al's ragged edge ran toward the bottle. He was an alcoholic, as were his father, uncle, and brother. Nancy said she knew her dad loved her, but it was in his own way, a ragged way. He never said it outright... He wasn't that way.

"One fall his skin turned yellow - the shade of an overripe banana - and the doctors told him they wanted to check him for pancreatic cancer, which at that time was almost always fatal. We were waiting at his house for him to come home with the test results. 'Got it!' were his first words when he came in the door. He didn't say much more about it.

Sometimes we'd see him staring out the window, but it was hard to know what he was thinking. He wasn't that way.

"He'd never been very concerned about God one way or the other. We tried to talk with him now but didn't get far.

"Until one day when John's mother was visiting. She talked to Al about how they shared the same grandchildren, about how life was unpredictable - maybe she'd go first - but if Al should die, and the grandkids ask someday about him and God, what should she say? How was it between Al and God?

"Fine. Everything's fine with God and me. Why shouldn't it be?"

"She pressed further and said how 'God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.'

"The light dawned, the ice melted, and Al prayed and gave his life to God.

"And God began reconstructive surgery. Al and I began to read together from the gospel of John. He'd study some on his own, then we'd talk, and generally pray after. Once or twice we even prayed holding hands.

"One day when the cancer was quite advanced Al was lying in our bed, too weak to sit up, and we'd finished talking about Jesus.

"Now let's pray,' Al said, which was striking because he hadn't often initiated prayer before. 'And let's do that hand thing.' He reached over and grabbed my hand.

"And it struck me that the hand that had spent a lifetime throwing footballs and swinging golf clubs and casting and shooting and lifting countless cans of beer was more beautiful in weakness than it had ever been in its strength.

"Not long after that Al went into the hospital. On a Friday night, he called for Nancy. They talked for a while, and then before she hung up the phone I heard her say one of the few phrases that I'll remember as long as I live.

"I love you *too*, Dad,' she said.

"I asked if that meant what I thought it did.

"Yes, her dad said he loved her....

“The last time she heard her father speak was the first time he ever said, ‘I love you.’”²

“I do believe,” the father said. “Help me overcome my unbelief!”

Friends, healing comes in many ways. How might it come to you? How might it come to someone else through you?

Can you be as honest as Al was, as honest as the father in this morning’s passage? Al showed us it’s never too late. As tough as it might be, can you choose hope even when your heart is breaking? Can you let your broken heart drive you to Jesus? It just might be the path to healing for you. It might be the same for someone you love.

² John Ortberg, Love Beyond Reason: Moving God’s love from your head to your heart. (Grand Rapids, Willow Creek Resources/Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), pp. 25-7.