

6th Sun. After the Epiphany
Good Shepherd Episcopal Church
Centennial, Colorado
The Rev. Craig MacColl

2 Kings 5:1-14
I Corinthians 9:24-27
Mark 1:40-45
Year B

When Open Hearts Become Broken Hearts

As Valentine's Day approaches we've all been subjected to countless advertisements for greeting cards, chocolates and jewelry. One of the jewelry advertisements that caught my eye is for a necklace designed by the actress Jane Seymour. It's called the "Open Heart" collection and features a heart shaped pendant with a difference. The heart has been twisted open to symbolize what Jane Seymour means when she says, "when your heart is open, then love will enter in."

What Jane Seymour doesn't say and what her necklace doesn't convey is something that most of us have discovered in life: the reason our hearts are open to other people is because, at some point, our hearts have been broken open. In fact, many people would say, there is no way to be truly human without having one's heart broken.

This is one of the great mysteries of life. When something happens to us that breaks our heart – being injured by another person, being socially shunned or ostracized, being physically attacked, being betrayed by someone we trust – we have a choice. When our heart is broken, Parker Palmer says, it can shatter into a thousand shards, sharp-edged fragments that sometimes become shrapnel aimed at the source of our pain." "Here," Palmer says, "the broken heart is an unresolved wound that we carry with us for a long time, sometimes tucking it away and feeding it as a hidden wound, sometimes trying to 'resolve it' by inflicting the same wound on others."

Or we can do something else. In order to understand the second choice, we have to imagine the heart as a small, clenched fist that becomes "broken open" into a greater capacity to hold one's own and the world's pain and joy. We know that heartbreak can become a source of compassion and grace because we have seen it happen with our own eyes as people we know who've had their hearts broken develop a capacity to empathize on a deeper level with others and become more attentive to the suffering of others.

Transforming heartbreak into new life is the aim of every religious tradition at its best, as demonstrated by this Hasidic tale. A disciple asks the rabbe, “Why does Torah tell us to place these holy words upon your hearts? Why does it not tell us to place these words in our hearts?” The rebbe answers, “It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay until, one day, the heart breaks and the words fall in.”

In the Christian tradition, the broken-open heart is almost identical to the image of the cross. It was on the cross that God’s heart was broken for the sake of humankind.... broken open into a love that Christ’s followers are called to imitate in their lives. When we look at the arms of the cross we see the cross-beams stretching out in four ways, pulling against each other left and right, up and down. But those arms converge in a center....converge into a heart that can be pulled open by that stretching..... by the tensions of life – a heart that can be opened so fully that it can hold everything from despair to ecstasy. And when we think about Jesus on the cross, we see how, for him, this excruciating experience was more than a brutal form of torture and it was more than a payment for humanity’s sin. It was an opening into the heart of God. Without the cross we would never have known the breadth and depth of God’s love for us.

Our gospel for today appears to be a simple story about Jesus healing a leper, but it’s much more than that. A leper came to Jesus and begged to be healed. Mark’s gospel then says, “moved with pity,” Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him and ordered the man to be made clean, and immediately the leprosy left him. The phrase “moved with pity” is unique to Mark and it actually means something more like, “filled with righteous anger or indignation.” The word translated “pity” comes from a word that refers to the entrails of an animal that is sacrificed. To be “moved with pity” is comparable to when we say someone responds “from their guts.” When we respond from the guts, we usually are passionate to the point of anger about some situation. Why would Jesus be angry? He’s angry at the evil of this situation....the evil in how this man, this leper, has been completely excluded from society because he is believed to be unclean and impure.

This is just one of many examples of how Jesus’ heart is broken open when he encounters men and women who are held in the grip of illness, prejudice,

injustice or sin. Jesus' heart is broken open and he is moved with compassion and his guts get stirred up with anger. He feels so deeply the suffering of the leper that it's just as if he himself is suffering as a leper.

But it's important to realize that when Jesus' heart was broken open by the leper's situation he went beyond compassion. When he reached out and touched the leper he violated every medical and social taboo. Many of the scribes were already unhappy with Jesus, who seemed to be challenging the roots of their orthodox faith. This act of inappropriate behavior seemed to be the last straw. Leprosy was probably the most hopeless disease in those early days of Jesus. It wouldn't have been too different from the stigma of AIDS in our society today.

What Jesus is doing here is what Parker Palmer calls, "standing in the tragic gap." Because Jesus allows his heart to be broken open by the plight of the leper, he is able to stand in the gap between what is and what could and should be. He is able to stand in the gap that exists between the way the leper was treated by Jewish society and an alternative reality – a world in which lepers might be treated with love and compassion.

To stand in the gap means that Jesus was willing to face the conflict that would inevitably result from the healing of the leper. When Jesus told the leper not to tell anyone about his healing, he showed us that he was aware that the religious officials wouldn't be pleased at what had happened. Jesus wasn't someone who just went about his merry way healing people and being oblivious to the consequences of his actions. Remember when he healed the demoniac on the shores of the Sea of Galilee by sending the demons out of the man and into a herd of pigs, which then went crashing down the hillside and drowned in the lake? This healing miracle left a lot of townspeople angry at the loss of their valuable herd of pigs. The demoniac was free but their pocketbooks were injured.

But, time and time again, when Jesus healed people we see that he was willing to step into the gap that exists between the way things are and the way things might be and should be. He was willing to risk conflict for the sake of healing. He was able to hold in his heart the conflicts and tensions of a world that often deals with disease, mental illness and social problems by wishing they would go away or by seeking quick fixes. The more Jesus served his Father, the more he came in

conflict with the authorities of the church and of all authority around him. Yet, he knew no other way to live in the world. And this conflict ultimately led Jesus to the Cross where he showed compassion to those who drove the nails into his feet.

Where are those situations in your life where God is calling you to live “in the gap?” Those situations where you are being invited to allow your heart to be broken open in compassion for someone....and because you allow your heart to be broken open, you are willing not just to seek quick fixes, but to hold the tensions of life in your heart and to hold up these tensions to God in prayer.

As we come to the end of the Epiphany season, this gospel reminds us what may happen to us when we attempt to shine the light of Christ into the world around us. If we allow our hearts to be broken up by another person’s needs, we may find ourselves standing with Jesus in that lonely, stressful gap between the way the world often is and the way things could and should be. We may find ourselves standing in the gap with people like Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Mother Theresa. The question is, as disciples of Jesus Christ, are we drawn to this kind of life where we are willing to take responsibility for others? Are we willing to stand in the gap and allow our open hearts to become broken hearts? **Amen.**