

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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November 4, 2018 – All Saints' Sunday

A Broken but still Holy Hallelujah

The man who was dead (Lazarus) walked out of his tomb bound from head to toe in a burial shroud, and Jesus said, "Untie him, and let him go." - John 11:32-44

I brought along with me this morning a few pieces of pottery. These pieces are all greenware, which means they have not yet been trimmed, glazed or received their final turn in the kiln. Therese and I like pottery and we have many finished pieces in our kitchen, and the funny thing about pottery, and perhaps one of the reasons we like it so much is that we don't have any perfect pieces. Every one of them has a flaw. Some are a bit warped. In some of them the glaze is a bit off. Many of them have been cracked, chipped or broken in some way. Pottery is fragile, and every piece of pottery we have is cracked or flawed in some way or another. But in many cases, the flaws add to the beauty of the piece.

The apostle Paul once said that we are as fragile as clay pots.

- We are fragile as individuals – we are mortal, and someday we will die, but often, long before that, we are hurt or broken in some way: physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually. (*One of the pots is "accidentally" knocked off the pedestal and shatters on the floor.*) Sometimes we are broken, and that makes a mess.
- We are also fragile as families – family life is not easy and families are often broken. (*Another pot is broken*)
- And we are fragile as communities – groups of all kinds, including congregations, sometimes run into trouble, sometimes run into conflict. (*A third pot falls to the ground and is shattered.*) Sometimes life in community can feel pretty broken.

We humans are cracked pots, says Paul – crack pots! You probably jumped when those pots broke, just like you are startled and disturbed when our lives,

families and communities are broken. The wreckage of our lives creates a mess, with sharp and dangerous edges, which can inflict further damage. Tread carefully here, in the mess of these cracked pots. We need to tread carefully in the mess of shattered lives, families and communities.

That's the bad news. The good news is that we have a treasure that lies within these fragile containers, within our mortal bodies and our fragile families and our conflicted communities, and that is the indestructible treasure of the good news of God's grace. Even when we are not graceful, God remains so. Even when we are at our worst, God is at work bringing out the best. Even when we are weak and breaking, especially when we are weak and breaking, God is strong. Even in our death, especially in our deaths, God is bringing about new life.

John's gospel normally portrays Jesus as strong and in control, even on the cross. But there was a time when Jesus was weak. His friend Lazarus had died. And the story displays several common responses to traumatic events:

- Martha and Mary are angry and blame Jesus: "If you had been here, my brother would not have died!" In the same way, people in grief will often blame God, their family members or even the person who has died, for what has happened.
- Then there those who point out that the stench will be unbelievable if the stone is rolled away from the tomb. They are matter of fact and practical. And there are some that respond to trauma in exactly the same way. They get their emotions firmly under control and get on with the practical details of what needs to be done. They will do their grieving later, if at all. Often it is not at all. We have all heard about how soldiers and others who do not find ways to deal with their emotional response to trauma can suffer for years.
- Then there are the companions who are moaning and weeping, and who display their emotions openly and deeply. Jesus himself is in this category. The story repeatedly says how disturbed he was, and that he wept. And there are some who respond to a traumatic event in this way as well.

- But what everyone in this story does is come together. Not everyone does this. Some isolate themselves in a time of grief and need to be sought out. But most feel the instinctive need to gather for comfort and mutual support. Most of us need to gather in a time of crisis. We need to come together to support one another. Not everyone wants to do this, but most eventually find it helpful.

Jesus wept, but he did not stop there. He orders the stone removed from the opening to the tomb, and then he calls out “in a thunderous voice, Lazarus, come out!” And Lazarus does come out, and is unbound and set free.

This part of the story is not a common experience. Anger, practicality, weeping, gathering – these are all common responses to death and trauma. But it is not at all our experience of death that the dead climb out of their caskets and walk free. There is something unusual at work here, the power of God to raise the dead from their graves and to bring treasure out of the fragility of these crack pot lives, to fashion a community in which the dead are unbound and set free to bless and inspire the living. We are a community of the living and the dead, and that is unusual. It is not within our power, but a gift of a generous God.

Being fragile is part of being human, part of being family, part of being in community. We know that. But as a church, as a faith family, as individuals who are entrusted with the good news of God’s indestructible grace, we are not defined by our fragility, by our brokenness. We are defined by our response to that fragility.

My title for this sermon is drawn from Leonard Cohen’s wonderful song Hallelujah, in which he sings of a holy and a broken Hallelujah, a cold and a broken Hallelujah. He sings of how hallelujahs emerge from the ordinary aspects of human existence, from flawed and strained relationships. And yet they are still Hallelujah. We can still sing praise and hallelujah, even in the

most troubling circumstances, because there is something more at work in us than our fragility.

There is a verse from another Leonard Cohen song that I love:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

The light, the Hallelujah, is not just in spite of the cracks, in spite of the fragility. If we were not cracked pots, we would not need the light of God's grace. If our bodies, minds, families and communities were not fragile, we would not need the light of love, care and support. My own experience is that it is when I have been most vulnerable, in times of illness and injury, that I have felt closest to those who care about me. I have felt that light coming through the cracks in my own fragile self, and warming my heart and my soul.

And so, at this time of year, we remember our fragility and our mortality, and a community of the living and the dead that depends on God's grace. Next week we celebrate Remembrance Day and those who suffered and died in war. But at the beginning of November, the tradition of the church is to celebrate All Saints' Day and All Souls Day on November first and second.

These are days to honour those who have died, and acknowledge that those who have passed on are still part of our lives. Sometimes those who we remember are the great saints of the church: people whose faithful witness continues to be remembered centuries after their death. Sometimes, those whom we remember are people who have touched us personally, parents, and grandparents, friends and neighbours, people we knew and admired. Sometimes, we remember those who have influenced us at a distance through their writing or their example. So I invite you to think about those who have

let in the light of God's grace through the cracked pots of their fragile lives as we celebrate today. Amen.