

Beauty through Brokenness

February 18, 2018

Have you ever been shattered? Sometimes we're shattered by grief. A friend of mine recently presided over the funeral of a toddler and said that even now, weeks later, barely anyone who is close to the family is able to keep it together. They all have been shattered. Or maybe the way that you have been shattered is at the end of a relationship. For some we shatter over the loss of a career or when our larger dreams don't turn out the way that we expect, when life shifts dramatically. And even for those of us who haven't been shattered, I don't think that there is a single one of us that hasn't at least been chipped.

As we begin this week, I call your attention to the centuries-old Japanese art form of Kintsugi. Lore has it that a Japanese shogun broke his favorite bowl that he used for tea. He sent it out for repairs, and it came back stapled. This just would not do and so he sent it this time to an artisan to repair it. When it came back this time, all of the cracks were filled in with gold. The cup came back after having been broken exquisitely more beautiful than it had been even before.

Thus it has become a tradition that when the Japanese mend broken objects, they aggrandize the damage believing that when something has a history, it is even more beautiful. When it shows both its fragility AND its resilience, it's more beautiful.

As we begin Lent, our Old Testament reading is the story of the rainbow. I suspect that most of us think we know this story. After the flood, God promises never to destroy the earth completely again and puts the rainbow in the sky as a sign of that promise. The flood is usually remembered in two ways: either it's remembered as a benign story of God's salvation of biodiversity and a pretty reminder that the sun will come even after the worst storm, or it's remembered as a story of God's anger at human rebellion which prompts God to flood the entire earth in a fit of rage.

Neither of those readings really captures the fullness of this text. No, the flood story is actually about being shattered. If we look at the previous chapters of Genesis, we see a story of God creating human beings lovingly, tenderly, and then starting already in Chapter 3, human beings behaving more, and more, and more abominably. What starts with lying and hiding quickly spirals down to corruption and murder until we get to Chapter 6 where we read in verse 5, God saw that "every inclination of the thoughts of human hearts was only evil continually." That's quite the indictment. But rather than responding in anger and revenge, verse 6 tells us, "The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and it grieved him in his heart."

Friends, the flood story is not about anger and rage; it's about grief. The flood is a story of God's love being shattered. Now remember Kintsugi? By setting the rainbow in the sky and covenanting with Noah never to destroy the earth again, God mends our shattered relationship with gold, with beauty, with grace. Rather than trying to pretend that there was never any problem, the rainbow highlights the cracks in our relationship with God. It reminds us that our relationship with God can be broken and that we need to handle it with care.

So, you might be asking what this has to do with Lent? So often in good American fashion we take on Lent as an effort to show our strength and discipline. If I can get to Easter without

having dessert, or without having a beer, or if I can get to Easter with having done a good deed every day, somehow it will have been a good Lent.

Instead, this year, I'd like you to think of Lent as Kintsugi. Ask yourself what in your life has been shattered or chipped, what is broken, and invite God to mend your cracks with the gold of divine love and grace. Allow God's healing to mend you. Allow yourself to be healed with God's grace rather than pretending you were never broken. Embrace your flaws and imperfections as signs of life and experience, rather than embarrassments or failures.

Now, to be fair, when something is mended one of two things usually happen: either that thing is stronger and more resilient because of the mending, or it's more fragile than it was before. Both of those images work in our psycho-spiritual lives, don't they? Sometimes when we're healed, when we're mended, it strengthens us, makes us more resilient. And sometimes our cracks, our healed edges, help us to remember how fragile life is and the importance of handling one another and ourselves with care.

In some ways it was Kintsugi that Marjorie Williams was talking about in her classic children's book, "The Velveteen Rabbit."

"What is real?" asked the rabbit one day when they were lying side by side in the nursery before Nana came to tidy the room. Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and stick-out handles?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you. Then you become real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse for he was always truthful. "But when you're real, you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once like being wound up, or bit by bit?"

It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time and that's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you're real, most of your hair has been loved off and your eyes drop out, and you're loose in the joints and, well, very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are real, you can't be ugly except to people who don't understand."

"So I suppose you're real," said the Rabbit. And then he wished that he hadn't said it for he thought the Skin Horse might be sensitive.

But the Skin Horse smiled. "The boy's uncle made me real," he said. "That was a great many years ago. But once you're real, you cannot become unreal again. It lasts for always."

Friends, for too long the American church has told us that our lives are to be flawless, unblemished, pristine offerings to God. Instead, I encourage you to use this Lent as an opportunity to, together with God, create a life of Kintsugi, a life that, while cracked, is mended with the gold of God's healing love and grace. My prayer is that we will all have the humility and the courage to allow God to soothe our brokenness, creating lives through our mended cracks that show both our fragility AND our resilience, and which therefore are all the more beautiful. Alleluia, and Amen.

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