

Becoming the Beloved: Broken

A Sermon Preached for Calvary Baptist Church

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*"I am not a stranger to the dark
Hide away, they say
'Cause we don't want your broken parts*

*I've learned to be ashamed of all my scars
Run away, they say
No one'll love you as you are.*

*But, I won't let them break me down to dust
I know that there's a place for us
For we are glorious...."*

If you haven't heard the song, "This is Me" from the movie *The Greatest Showman*, I cannot begin to do it justice – so everyone needs to go home and listen to it today.

And even if you have heard it, you may not know that the lead singer, Keana, was actually terrified to sing it in the early stages of the movie. In fact, during their first official run-through of the song, she stood glued behind the music stand during these first few lines, her voice shaking in fear, not because she was scared to sing but because she knew how true these words are. On one level, they tell a story about the so called "oddities" who are part of PT Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth – people who have hidden in the dark away from the world for most of their lives because the world didn't want their "broken parts."

But the song doesn't just tell the story of a bearded lady, the dog faced boy, or the world's smallest or tallest man. It tells the story of anyone who has felt broken and bruised by the world, searching for the courage to show up in this life. Which, in fact, is the story of people like me, and probably people like you, too. "This is Me" could not be a more fitting title.

Today, we are continuing our worship series inspired by the book *Life of the Beloved*, by Henri Nouwen. In the book, Nouwen invites us reflect on Jesus' actions at the table with the disciples, when he takes a loaf of bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to the disciples. Nouwen says that in every moment of our lives, "somewhere, somehow, the taking, the blessing, the breaking, and the giving are happening" – and that these four experiences have much to teach us about living as beloved children of God.

But this week, our series takes a twist. Because we want to be chosen. We want to be blessed. But I would venture to guess that none of us would say that we want to be broken, or that we would ever choose an experience of brokenness if we were given the possibility to opt out.

Maybe it's because we already know the pain of brokenness all too well. When you hear the word, "broken" – what experience comes to mind for you?

For me, I immediately go to broken bones. Many of you know that I have a brittle bone disorder that causes my bones to break easily. I realized that I couldn't preach a sermon about what it means to be broken without naming that. I know what it feels like for my body to be broken. And the pain is excruciating.

But the reality is that many of us know that pain, in one way or another, don't we?

- We know the pain of being broken hearted – of just trying to get out of bed and to put one foot in front of the other some days.
- Or we grew up in what others called a broken home. We constantly moved from place to place and were passed from person to person, and we always felt torn between two worlds; perhaps we never felt whole.
- Those of us living with depression or mental illness often speak of having a mind that is broken, a condition for which there is no quick-fix, and sometimes there's no fix at all.
- Or we talk about trying desperately to fix a broken system – which can often be a one step forward, two steps back kind of process.

Sometimes, we have contributed to our brokenness. We have participated in creating the broken systems. Our actions have led to broken relationships. Sometimes, we have been part of the breaking.

But many times, brokenness just happens to us like a broken bone because life is fragile – its sharp, jagged edges catching us completely by surprise. And try as we might, no amount of spiritual gorilla glue or duct tape could piece it all back together again.

Which is why the apostle Paul compares us to clay jars in today's text 2 Corinthians 4. He didn't come up with the metaphor – earthen vessels are often used to describe human beings in the Old Testament, like when the prophet Jeremiah says that you and I are like clay in the potter's hand.

But, the focus of the text isn't on the fragility of the clay jar- that's a given. The focus is on what's inside the jar. He writes in verse 10: "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."

I will never forget studying this text with Hulitt Gloer when I was a seminary student. He completely reframed the passage in such a way that I've never read it the same since. He talked about how, at this time, it was common for people to keep their treasures, or their prized possessions, hidden in clay pots. It was an unlikely place that a thief probably wouldn't think to look for something valuable. And even if they did, the treasure would be so deep within the jar that if someone were to reach down to try to get it out, their hands would get stuck in the top of the jar. Oftentimes, the only way to get the treasure out was to break the jar.

And so for Paul to say that WE are these clay pots – and that we carry within us this treasure – it also implies that brokenness is going to be a part of all of our stories.

This week, Mandy McMichael brought author Kate Bowler to speak at an event at Baylor – several of you were there. Bowler’s book, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I’ve Loved*, sold out within its first days on Amazon and is already on the New York Times Bestseller list.

In her book, Bowler shares about how she was happily married, with a beautiful son, and even landed her dream job at Duke University after receiving her PhD. Life was beautiful and “shiny” she says, until one day in 2015, Kate was unexpectedly diagnosed with Stage IV Cancer at age 35.

One day during Kate’s chemo treatments, a lady showed up at her house to drop off a casserole for her family, and as her husband was talking to the lady, she comforted him by saying, “I’m so sorry for what you all are going through. But you know, everything happens for a reason.” These weren’t the words that a husband whose wife was undergoing chemo treatment for stage IV cancer needed to hear. These aren’t the words that anyone in a significant time of brokenness needs to hear. What reason could there possibly be for something so horrific?

But the reality is that many of us have come to believe things like this – without even realizing it. For instance, Kate said that before she was diagnosed with Cancer, she thought, “Because I was on God’s team, I think I just assumed that there was a tiny asterisk beside my name that meant my life was going to be just a tiny-bit better. Instagram-worthy, even. Until it wasn’t.”

And perhaps this is true for all of us, isn’t it? It’s the age-old question – why do bad things happen to good people? I remember pleading with God about this question as a middle schooler – often during late nights in the hospital when I was recovering from another surgery or broken bone. I was just trying to make sense of it all – that’s what our minds want to do, don’t they? And my middle-school thought process went through all the things I thought I was doing right - I think I’m a good person, or at least I try to be. I go to church. I read my Bible. I make good grades. I’m nice to people. I try to follow God in every way that I can. I even feel called to ministry. So why is God letting this happen to me?

I think these are questions we all ask – at some point or another - whenever we face the harsh realization that there’s not a tiny asterisk beside our names. Until we realize that there is no sufficient answer. At some point or another, we begin to discover just how fragile and completely unpredictable life is. We realize that we are broken – in one way or another – or the possibility of being broken again is always before us.

As we grow older, we also learn that there is no tally for our brokenness. We don’t necessarily reach our quota for “hard things” in life after one or maybe two, even though that would make it feel more fair, wouldn’t it? And one of the hardest lessons we learn is that we are not in control, despite our relentless efforts at trying to be and convincing ourselves that we are – and

that all the kings horses and all the kings men can't even begin to put the pieces back together again.

Kate is now three years into her journey with Cancer, and her book chronicles the ways in which she has come face to face with her brokenness and helplessness over the situation. But even in the midst of this journey, she also said these words to a packed room at Truett on Wednesday, with tears in her eyes. "With chemo, everything feels like death. But God feels strong, and real, and clear. And in my helplessness, God shows up."

And I couldn't think of a better modern-day translation of today's text than that. We have this treasure in jars of clay, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. And even when we are completely broken, even when we have absolutely nothing left to offer because it feels as if our body, our life, our family, our systems, and our world is broken pieces shattered on the ground - even when we are at our absolute weakest, that's when God shows up best.

Which is perhaps why Paul continues to write, "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed." Because in our helplessness, God shows up.

I love the passage by Anne Lamott that Meghan and Ellie read for us earlier. She talks about the ancient Japanese art of Kintsugi, which may have begun as early as the 15th century. Legend has it that the Shogun at the time broke his favorite tea cup and sent it to China to get it repaired. They sent it back to him with what looked like metal staples holding the broken pieces of the cup together, which not only wasn't attractive, but it also wasn't functional.

The Shogun insisted that there must be another way, so he sent it to a Japanese craftsman to repair it. This craftsman was inspired by the Shogun's desire to fix what was broken, and he wanted to make it into something beautiful. So, he filled its cracks with gold – and the art of Kintsugi, which means "golden repair" was created. Instead of hiding or disguising the imperfections, cracks, and breaks, Kintsugi highlights them with gold for the world to see.

What if we were to view our brokenness in the same way? What if, instead of trying to hide it, deny it, suppress it, or ignore it – we were simply to name it, for the world to see? I wonder how that might begin change the way we view ourselves as beloved children of God? I wonder how that might begin to change the way we see one another, as broken, beautiful, beloved children of God?

I don't know that any of us would choose the brokenness we have experienced in our lives. However, I can say this – not speaking from any one else's experience, but my own. And that is that I have come to know Christ more deeply, more intimately, and more fully in my brokenness than I have at any other time in my life. In my helplessness, God has shown up, time and time again.

In my weakest moments – in hospital rooms, in physical therapy, in learning to walk over and over and over again – a strength has come to me that is SO not of myself. And while I certainly would not choose any of my experiences of brokenness – they're part of my story. They're part of your story. And as followers of Jesus Christ, brokenness is part of our story.

And if there were ever a time of year to walk in the reality of our brokenness, it would be now, wouldn't it? During the season of Lent, these 40 days when we journey with Jesus toward the cross. Because if there were ever anyone who knew the pain our brokenness, it would be Jesus. And it was in Jesus' brokenness that God showed up in the most radical, unbelievable, unprecedented way, wasn't it? Because in our helplessness, God shows up.

When Keala sings "This is Me" for the first time when the idea behind *The Greatest Showman* is being pitched to the producers, there's a moment when she says she was so scared, she grabbed Hugh Jackman's hand, just so that she would have someone to hold onto. But then, in a moment of unexpected courage, she lets go, pushes the music stand down, walks to the center of the room, and sings the performance of her life. And the energy in the room is electric. The whole room begins to stand and join her, overwhelmed by the power of the moment. And it was after hearing this song that a producer leaned down to the director and said that the film had the green-light to move forward with production. The director said, "It was one of those moments that will stay with me the rest of my life."

Friends, life is hard. Fragile. Completely overwhelming, sometimes. But even in the midst of our brokenness, God gives us the courage to do hard things. To push down the obstacles in front of us and to walk into center stage. To throw our hair back and to sing like we've never sung before. Because though we are fragile, clay jars, we carry within us this beautiful treasure. Each and every one of us. It's not from us – we are simply the container. But in our brokenness, it shines through. In our helplessness, God shows up. Amen.