

The Scars that Bear Witness

Sermon 62 | Greystone Baptist Church | May 24, 2020

2 Corinthians 4: 6-16

On an ordinary Tuesday night in March, 1928, a young mother gave birth to a little baby boy. This mother wanted to be sure she had as much support as possible for what she knew would be a difficult delivery. So she made her way to the family home in Latrobe, Pennsylvania where she would be surrounded by family for the risky birth of her little baby Fred. Nancy, the young mother cared deeply for her son and made sure he knew just how loved he was all of his life.

Young Fred grew up wanting for little. His parents, Nancy and James, both came from wealthy and well-educated families. They were generous people, pouring every ounce of what they had back into the community, and of course, providing everything Fred ever wanted or needed. When Nancy or James learned about a need within their community, they were known to write a check, supplying the need directly from their own pocket. They were revered by everyone in their community, loved by all of adult society. But when young Fred started school, his parents' reputation worked out differently for him. Known for their wealth, other children picked on Fred because he was different from them. Over time, Fred also developed severe asthma which kept him indoors most of the summer and further isolated him from his peers. While Fred play alone in his third floor playroom, his parents could often be found hosting parties and entertaining guests two floors below.¹

The scars of a lonely childhood stayed with Fred his entire life. His solitary struggle with isolation and bullying could have hardened his heart to future relationships, it could have made him cold and callous toward others. Out of his painful experiences, Fred could have chosen to live his life inflicting pain on others (as people often do), because struggle is hard.

Joan Chittister writes: *"Real struggle hurts. It marks us in ways we don't even always realize when it happens. Years can pass before we begin to comprehend the marks and scars trouble hews out of the flesh of our lives. It leaves us wounded and chastened and different for the rest of our days..."*

*Struggle brings us to crossover points in life after which we become new people, sometimes worse, often better, but always different."*²

Luckily for young Fred, for the people of Latrobe, Pennsylvania, and for the world, he did not let the scars of his childhood change him for the worse. Instead, Fred Rogers allowed his pain, his struggle, to transform him into a source of love and healing that children of many generations would come to know as Mr. Rogers of "Mr. Rogers Neighborhood".

¹ Maxwell King. *The Good Neighbor: The Life and Work of Fred Rogers*. 2018.

² Joan Chittister. *Scared by Struggle, Transformed by Hope*. 2003. p.80.

Struggle is an unavoidable reality of the human existence. We all face times of trial. We all experience brokenness, pain, and even failure as we wrestle with the challenges of human life. And each time we do, we become new people and we live the rest of our lives with the scars that mark our past.

The Corinthian church and its founder, Paul, bear witness to this human reality. Paul, once a persecutor of those who followed Jesus, was transformed on the road to Damascus, when he was struck blind by the light of God. Carrying the scars of that encounter, he eventually gained his sight back, but never forgot that powerful, transformative experience. He emerged a new man with a new name, and went on to share the news of his conversion for the rest of his life.

His struggle and transformation did not end with that one, single encounter, but it plays out in his letters to the churches as he grows to understand the expansive power of God's love. First Paul understands the good news for the Jews, then his understanding grows more as he sees God's love and salvation is also for the Gentiles. Before he dies, Paul is convinced that life in God is bigger even than that! It is for the whole world... all people... everywhere... for all of time!

These divine revelations and convictions did not come without a price and the reading for today bears witness to that truth. "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed..." (2 Cor. 4:8-9) Transformation does not come without struggle.

These words from Paul, are written to remind the struggling church in Corinth that they, too, should expect trying and troublesome days. They remind the people that the call to follow Jesus is a call to follow him all the way to the grave. We are "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies."

For Paul, the whole promise of the Christian life was wrapped up in the gift of transformation. He, more than most people, knew first-hand what it meant to die to self, to let go of all that once mattered in order to be made new. And through the words written to his beloved church in Corinth he urged them to embrace and embody that reality as well.

We, like that Corinthian congregation, understand the struggle of transformation. As challenges emerge from every direction, we are beginning to understand that our new life will not come without a certain amount of letting go.

First we let go of the building as our place of gathering. Then we released the idea that we might be together again on Easter, or on Pentecost... Now we are coming to realize that it is not safe for us to sing together, to sit near to one another, to share a hymnal or pass an offering plate. Now we have to accept that even communion, our holiest meal, cannot take place in the ways we have grown to love... the means by which we share Christ's love are all being transformed.

Here in the midst of struggle, we do not yet know what life will look like when we emerge on the other side. But we do know that it will never be quite the same.

We are called to cling to hope and employ the skills that we have learned in all of our individual struggles. When life has taken us by surprise... when relationships are broken, when the rejection letters come, when school schedules change, when diagnoses are revealed, and when our hearts are broken, when we are afraid... we all have to let go of what might have been... and perhaps HOW it might have been.

For many of us, in these times of personal struggle, we have turned to the church and all her familiar comforts. The pews, the smell of the hallway, the Sunday school classes, the old familiar hymns, the candles, and the beauty of the stained glass; they have all been there to remind us of God's presence in our lives, even in our darkest moments.

Now, that very source of comfort is the center of our struggle. How painful it is to be in the midst of crisis and at the same time, distanced from the very spaces of our comfort.

In times like these we are reminded of how fragile those spaces can be.

"We have this treasure, in clay jars," Paul writes. The invaluable gift of God's beloved community held together in the fragile packages of church buildings and sacred rituals. Now, more than ever, we can see that our "clay jars" can and will be broken. But that's just the nature of clay. It can never safely contain the power of the treasure that lies within it because at times, that treasure is dying to break through, dying to bust out, dying to share its gift with all that lies beyond it.

The good news of the Gospel is not contained to the Jews or Gentiles, it is meant for the whole world. The good news of the Gospel is not restricted to male or female, it is meant for all of humankind. The good news of the Gospel will not be contained by building or ritual... it will break forth, cracking every shell that we try to build around it because the love of God will make a way to shine through every darkness.

This image of God's light shining through the cracks in our man-made clay jars reminds me of the Japanese art of kintsugi. Originating in the fifteenth century when a high ranking military official broke his favorite ceramic tea cup. Rather than throwing away the pieces – as you and I might do – he sent it off to be repaired in China. When he saw the product mended with ugly metal staples (as was the common technique of that day), he sent it away once more, this time to Japanese craftsmen, with the hope that they might find a more aesthetically pleasing solution.

As fate would have it, the Japanese craftsmen were able to use a new technique that fused gold with lacquer to mend the broken pieces back together. The end result was a risky solution that didn't attempt to conceal or hide the cracks and breaks from before. Rather, one that celebrated the brokenness of the piece, highlighting the cracked lines with gold.

Now more than 600 years later, the technique remains a highly sought after practice which dramatically increases the value of ordinary ceramics. According to kintsugi, the scars bear witness to the value of transformation.

How will we piece back together the scars of this struggle?

Young Fred Rogers carried the pain of his childhood isolation with him for the rest of his life. Rather than emerging from struggle calloused and cold he imagined a world where all children were seen, and noticed, and valued, and welcomed. For a while he thought he would live out this calling in the church, as a Presbyterian Minister. But through, yet another personal transformation, he realized that his gift, his ability to shine God's light was meant for PBS on his popular TV show, "Mr. Roger's Neighborhood". Through that unconventional platform, children all over the world learned about love and dignity, respect and loving-kindness.

Sitting alone in his playroom, listening to the roar of grown-up community happening two floors down, Fred never dreamt of what his life and legacy would become. But he remained remarkably committed to the treasure that he knew was found in God's eternal presence and God's unconditional love. Fred pieced back together the broken pieces of so many clay jars, and the love of God shone brightly through every crack.

As we stand in the rubble of the brokenness of our old world, I cannot help but believe we too, will be renewed by this unexpected transformation. We know that the treasure remains and lives around us, among us, and within us... but when we reconstruct the jars of clay, the containers in which we will hold this gift... will we work to get things just exactly how they used to be, hiding our scars, calloused over as marks of our inability to change and grow. Or will we allow the seams to shine as scars that bear witness to the beauty of struggle... to the promise of scarring... and to the eternal story that God is *still* making all things new?

I don't know, but I can't wait to find out.