

Broken Spirits, Broken Bodies

BROKEN: Good News for Tough Times

Romans 8:1-11, Proper 10

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Rev. Melissa Hatfield, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO

WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/broken-spirits-broken-bodies/

As we gather this morning, 47 youth and adults are on the last day of an 18-hour return trip from Washington, D.C., where they've served on their annual mission trip this past week. They've lived, worked, ate, and played together for the past seven days. And as one who led these trips for the past twenty-three years, let me tell you about what we adult sponsors call the Thursday Meltdown.

Without fail on these one-week mission trips, Thursday night was the night of the full moon, whether there was a full moon or not. People are excited at the beginning of the week, ready to leave their families, make memories, change the world, stay up late with their friends, and taste new freedoms. But by Thursday, we're done. We're tired of people, tired of the bus, tired of sandwiches, tired of the heat, tired of not doing what we want when we want to, and tired of people breathing too loud or breathing at all. As a result, Thursday night was usually the night we had major meltdowns – hurt feelings, unkind words, tears, you name it. And that wasn't just the adults.

I've often said we should require engaged couples to serve on a mission trip as part of the premarital counseling process. I've seen some marriages put to the test on the mission field and in the TSA security lines at the airport.

Lest you think otherwise, I'm no saint on these trips either. I know, it's hard to imagine. In the parking lot, before we left for Kenya, I told the team I hoped they could still call me their pastor when we returned. When you live by yourself most of the year, there are many "opportunities for growth" on mission trips. At home, I'm not forced to face my selfishness much. No fighting over the remote or thermostat. If the trash isn't taken out, there is only one person to blame. When someone eats the last chocolate ice cream in the freezer, I know someone was me.

On mission trips, my self-orientation becomes painfully evident in ways it doesn't at home. I become frustrated when I don't have control of my schedule. I become impatient as this introvert's energy is drained from constant togetherness. I rage a little inside when I'm trapped for ten hours in an airplane seat made for a small child with a neighbor's elbow on MY armrest and the seatback tray inches from my chest as the person in front of me sleeps soundly while I

do not. Deep breaths. Whether at home or away, I'm faced multiple times each day with a decision of who I will serve – flesh or Spirit. And often, I miss the mark, which is what Sin means.

The Apostle Paul knew what it was like to miss the mark, to be torn between flesh and spirit. He spent much of chapter 7 of the letter to the Romans on this tension between spirit and flesh, good and evil, faithfulness and failings, and confessed his struggles with the tension, writing, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." (c7.15)

As singer and songwriter, Bob Dylan sang not long after his conversion to Christianity, "You Gotta Serve Somebody." Maybe it's the devil; maybe it's the Lord. Maybe it's yourself or the world. Maybe it's financial security or making a name. Maybe it's youthfulness or health. We are continually faced with choosing who or what we will serve and what our minds will be focused on – flesh or Spirit.

It is important to discuss what Paul means by "flesh." Paul is not anti-body, as some have taught, but he is speaking about the mind, heart, and attitude within us that is focused on the self. The flesh of our hand can be used to extend a helping hand or praise God, yet also to steal or strike a cheek. Is it the hand itself or the mind behind the hand, the brokenness within us that is Sin? Paul would say the latter. The Common English Bible translates Paul's use of flesh in this passage to mean "self-centeredness." Listen to the difference in verse 6 from two translations, starting with the NRSV from today's reading: "To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace." And from the CEB: "The attitude that comes from selfishness leads to death, but the attitude that comes from the Spirit leads to life and peace."

In Paul's writings, "flesh" often signifies a capacity, a mindset, attitudes, beliefs, habits, perspective, and worldview that misses the mark of loving God, others, and ourselves as God intends us to do. This way of living that resists the Spirit of God must be overcome if you and me - body and all (*gesturing to my physical body*) and we (*gesturing to everyone in the room*)—are to be free from what leads to brokenness and death.

A mindset on the flesh or self can lead to broken bodies. Our own through ulcers, headaches, fatigue, addictions, immunity issues, and heart damage. It can lead to the broken bodies of others as our Sin oozes out from within us in our treatment of others.

A mindset on the flesh or self can lead to broken spirits. Defeated, continually unsatisfied, demoralized, dehumanizing, self-hating, envious, captive to that which only takes life rather than gives life.

A mindset on the flesh or self can lead to a broken community. Greed, fear, hatred, racism, sexism, classism. It can lead to the death of justice, the death of hope, the death of love. Sin is personal and systemic, and what is not surrendered and submitted to God's grace, authority, and love contributes to the brokenness within us and around us.

One of my faith heroes is Brennan Manning. Brennan was a Franciscan priest and an alcoholic. In his book, "The Ragamuffin Gospel," Manning wrote, *"When I get honest, I admit I am a bundle of paradoxes. I believe and I doubt, I hope and get discouraged, I love, and I hate, I feel bad about feeling good, I feel guilty about not feeling guilty. I am trusting and suspicious. I am honest and I still play games. Aristotle said I am a rational animal; I say I am an angel with an incredible capacity for beer. To live by grace means to acknowledge my whole life story, the light side and the dark. In admitting my shadow side, I learn who I am and what God's grace means."*

Beloved, I admit I, too, am a bundle of paradoxes and contradictions. I confess there are times I do not do what I want but do the very thing I hate. In some moments, I serve the flesh, others the Spirit. I often miss the mark of love for God, others, and myself. And even though I wish and want it to be otherwise like the Apostle Paul and Brennan wished, I have learned to give grace, and even gratitude, when faced with my shadow side. Because when I acknowledge and repent of my self-centeredness, it reminds me I am still a work in progress and in desperate need of the Lord. And I never want to forget, not only for my sake, so I might experience the joy of God's grace, but also because it is my source of humility, compassion, and grace for others who miss the mark.

Pastor Karen Chakoian compares this to the 12-step tradition of Alcoholics Anonymous.¹ For an alcoholic, there are two choices: the way of death and the way of life. The first step is to admit that we are powerless over alcohol and that our lives have become unmanageable. The second is to believe that a Power greater than us can restore us to sanity. The third is to turn our will and lives over to God's care.

So, it is for the Christian. Substitute the word "sin" for "alcohol," and you have the heart of this passage. We are powerless over Sin, which will inevitably lead us to death, but we can live in the Spirit. Sin is still a daily possibility; God has not eliminated it from this world once and for all – not yet. If our minds are on the flesh or self-centeredness, Sin will drive us; but if our minds are set on the Spirit then life is not only a possibility but a promise. This is the hope in which we

live: that God who raised Christ from the dead will give life to us through the power of the Spirit dwelling in us.

Nadia Bolz-Weber regularly preaches and ministers at New Beginnings, a Lutheran mission church that meets inside a Women's Correctional Facility in Denver, Colorado. Like Brennan Manning, Nadia is a priest and recovering alcoholic, 32 years sober.

Her parishioners are incarcerated for a variety of crimes. Nadia recently wrote, "Unlike many of us on the outside, the suffering these women have both caused and endured is not so easily hidden. Maybe this is why I feel so comfortable at New Beginnings; because, like in A.A., most folks don't end up there because everything has gone really well for them. There is a conspicuousness to the difficulties of life in both prison and in A.A., which I find very relaxing; because you just know what you're dealing with. And I think maybe this "no way to hide how hard life is" dynamic in prison allows for something else as well, and that is (perhaps counterintuitively): joy. A bursting out loud, celebration of life. More than I have experienced in most churches, if I'm honest. I just wonder if perhaps there is a relationship between a community's ability to hold suffering with honesty and its ability to also experience joy with abandon At the point in life when our failings and shortcomings are so unfiltered, when we are at the point in life when we have blown it completely, when we are so undeniably aware our need for God's grace — it is then that God comes to us just as we are, bringing us peace and forgiveness." ⁱⁱ

Maybe there is a relationship between our ability to hold suffering with honesty and our ability to also experience joy. Maybe if we could be as honest about our failings and shortcomings as these imprisoned women who gather as beggars for God's mercy or the alcoholics who show up meeting after meeting as beggars for God's grace, just maybe we, too, could experience the life and peace Paul says is ours because Christ Jesus has set us free from the law of sin and of death. This is good news for those who think too lowly of themselves as well as those who think too highly. Christ sets us free from shame, and Christ sets us free from pride. God loves us because of who God is, not because of who we are. That is one of the most freeing truths I know.

Facing and acknowledging my shadow-self in Kenya and each day of my life reminds me of the beautiful, jaw-dropping promise of Romans 8 for me, you, and the women of the Denver Women's Correctional Facility. They exist in a broken system for broken people who have done broken things. So do we. But that is not the end of the story for them, us, or our world. We join our voices with theirs, admitting our poverty and brokenness, our dependence on others, and our absolute need for the limitless and all-sufficient grace that comes only from Jesus Christ.

Author Stephen Haynes asked the question, “Why Can’t the Church Be More Like an AA Meeting?” in his book by the same title. Haynes highlights the hallmarks of programs like AA—vulnerability, acceptance, and healing—and casts a new vision for the church, one that sees brokenness as the first step in a miraculous healing journey. Haynes encourages Christians to reclaim these distinctive hallmarks for recovery of the church and argues that this process must begin with what he calls “Step 0,” which, as he knows from personal experience, can be the hardest step: the admission that, despite appearances, we are not fine. This is the beginning of the healing.

I think this is what Nadia finds beautiful about her worship community with the women in the Denver Correctional Facility. There is no pretending. They can’t, and don’t, hide the ways they’ve been in bondage to self and what it has cost them and others. There are broken spirits and broken bodies because of the pain they’ve caused and the pain they’ve endured. This acknowledgment is the beginning of their healing. The same is true for those who show up for their AA meetings. Maybe this is true for us as well.

Maybe we need to acknowledge the broken spirits and broken bodies because of the pain we’ve caused and the pain we’ve endured. Maybe our honesty about our brokenness is not only our beginning but the beginning for someone who enters our doors looking for vulnerability, acceptance, and healing for their brokenness, too. Maybe this church can be more like an AA meeting.

Paul begins chapter 8 with these victorious words that should drive us to our knees in breathtaking gratitude, “There is **now** no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the Law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the Law of Sin and of death.” While we are powerless to sin, Christ in us is not. We need more than willpower when the grip of Sin is great; we need a liberator who can break the chains of personal and systemic Sin that bind us and our communities. We need the One who gives life to free us from the things that take life. We need the Light to drive out darkness. We need Love to drive out hate. We need Jesus Christ.

The women in the Denver correctional facility who have chosen Jesus may be detained in that Colorado facility, some for the rest of their earthly life, but they live in Christ, and their freedom is found in him as they set their minds on the Spirit. The beloved alcoholics may abide in a world where temptation is a constant companion, yet they live in Christ and their freedom is found in him as they set their minds on the Spirit. As Christ-followers, we may struggle with our own brokenness, addictions, and self-centeredness, but we, too, live in Christ and our freedom is found in him as we set our minds on the Spirit. Brokenness may be our beginning and our present, but it will not be our end. Sin does not have the final word. Let us set our minds on the

Spirit and not the flesh, so we can experience the life and peace of God. And if you want, we've got a mission trip to South Dakota this September full of "opportunities for growth." Sign up, and I promise God will teach you a thing or two about dying to self, so you can live in the Spirit.

Beloved of God, the world belongs to God, Christ holds it firmly in nail-scarred hands, the Spirit is alive and at work in us, and because Easter is true, we proclaim with confidence that sin and death have been defeated by Christ. The world is God's, even though it doesn't always look like it. We are God's, even though we don't always look like it. The Triune God is alive and at work in us and through us to redeem what is lost and restore what is broken. There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. May this be good news for our troubled times.

ⁱ Karen Chakoian, *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 3*, p. 235.

ⁱⁱ Nadia Bolz-Weber, "Joy and the excavation of suffering," *The Corners Substack* by Nadia Bolz-Weber, July 13, 2023, <https://thecorners.substack.com/p/joy-and-the-excavation-of-suffering>