

BROKEN OPEN

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2 Samuel 11:26-12:10, 13-15 - Bathsheba's child dies

Luke 7:36-8:3 - A forgiven woman loves Jesus

This story of David is part of many stories from David's life, and David's life is such a saga, such an epic, and so rich with symbolism about the way of spiritual life. This particular story is in some way one of sin and forgiveness in the extreme. King David has risen to power during the golden moment or the high point of Israel's history. He is powerful and he's honoured as the king of this young nation, and as so often happens he gets carried away with his power and uses it corruptly. He lusts after Uriah's wife Bathsheba, and decides that in his position he should be able to have whomever he wants. So he talks to the generals about the war and tells them to assign Uriah to the front line -- the most dangerous position--where he will most likely be killed. They do, and he is killed. David waits out the ritual period of mourning and then takes Bathsheba to be his own wife.

Prophets in those days were the ones whose job it was to hear what God had to say and to convey the message. And so Nathan, the prophet who had anointed David to be king, comes and tells David this story about someone else, a hypothetical story of one who had cheated another, had wronged another. David is a good man, so he responds in his own righteousness and says "This man should die." And Nathan looks at him and says "You're the man. You are the one who has done this." David has the heart to recognize this and, even though his heart had become hardened in some ways by the corruption in his position of power, he doesn't just turn away and say "Get me a new prophet; I don't like what this one is saying." Rather, he says "You are right, I have sinned." He recognizes it. Now Nathan and David must have been close. It's only someone who is really close who can say something that cuts so deep, and to say it in a firm but loving way that enables the person actually to hear it. What a dramatic moment that must have been; I'd love to see that portrayed well. David says "Yes, you're right. I have sinned." Then Nathan says "Because you are willing to admit that, you won't die. In other words you have opened yourself to God's forgiveness by simply admitting your wrongdoing."

I want to talk about two mysteries in life, and this is where we come to the first one. The first mystery of life is that life goes wrong, and then it turns. If I were God I would have designed life so that we get it right from the start, and I expect you would have, too. I'm not sure anyone would have designed life so that it goes wrong and then has to turn, would have designed the heart so that it hardens and closes like it does, and then has to be broken open in order for us to receive life. Despite all the theology and philosophy of the centuries I don't think anybody has come up with an adequate explanation of why that would be the way life should be and what the connection is. But that is the first mystery of life--that it doesn't just go right, but it goes wrong and then it turns.

However, it doesn't necessarily turn. There is a point of freedom, another mysterious point, of what it is in the human soul that enables us to take the opportunity when it comes to turn, to acknowledge our wrongdoing, to turn away from the condemnation that would be there without forgiveness. It's the tragedy of life. As I have been contemplating this during the past week or so, an old song came to mind--"The Green, Green, Grass of Home." Do you remember that beautiful old song? It's a touching song of someone who dreams of going back home, to step off the train, "my Momma and my Poppa" greet me, and I look up the road, and there is Mary running up the road, "hair of gold and lips like cherries. It's so good to touch the green, green, grass of home." It really becomes an image of salvation, an image of heaven. It touches something very deep at the centre of our lives, at the centre of our hearts, that sense of life having gone wrong, having lost our way and then finding our way back home to the sweetness and the fellowship and the love of the place where we belong. And then he wakes up and realizes it is only a dream. There are the four grey walls. And the guard, the sad old padre, and he together will walk at daybreak, and then people will gather by the old oak tree as he is laid beneath the green, green, grass of home. It's the story of a life that didn't turn, a life that went all the way to the condemnation, the story of one condemned. And his condemnation is worse because he hasn't forgotten what might have been possible. And the sorrow of that tragedy is expressed so powerfully in the song. Life hangs between that going wrong and that turning, between that beautiful picture of the green, green, grass of home that is remembered from the past, and also imagined for the future as the promise of life. And life is, in a way, going away from that and then finding a way to turn and recover it and come back without the forgiveness, to turn without the repentance and without the grace. Life just goes on to the condemnation. The mystery is that even when the heart has hardened and closed, it can still be broken.

David's heart was broken. Nathan did say "Because you have acknowledged your sin, you will live and not die," but David's first child died. And because of the place he was at in his life, realizing the terrible thing he had done, he associated that death of his first child with his own sin. We have an enlightened kind of theology that says God doesn't do that. We know God doesn't take some innocent child and kill him to punish somebody else for his or her sins. But we're not talking about theology here. We're talking about what goes on in the heart, and that happens to all of us. We make connections like that in our lives. When our guilt or our sorrow or our remorse comes along with tragedy, we can't help but make the connections. And so David works out his remorse, works out the breaking of his heart, as he watches his first son lie dying. Some time after the son dies, Bathsheba conceives again and his second son is born--King Solomon who carries the dynasty into the future and builds the temple. And as David's life turned, we see reflected in his life the way life turns for each of us in our hearts and souls.

Now the lectionary in its wisdom chooses that passage as a background or a complement to Luke's story of Jesus coming to the house of the Pharisee. There is a dramatic contrast between the Pharisee who was probably formalistic, distant and cold, and the woman who comes into the house and is loving, affectionate and so expressive of her love for Jesus. The others are offended by this: "Why is Jesus letting this woman--my God, you know who she is--be affectionate with him, kiss his feet, cry all over him? How can he do that?"

And then there is opportunity for a lesson to be taught that brings us to the second mystery of life that nobody has ever explained. Jesus says to this Pharisee, a righteous man (I'm not talking about bad people here) but lost in his self-righteousness: "You're so good you've never had to be forgiven for anything, and so you don't know how to love. This woman has been forgiven, and oh my God has she ever had a lot for which to be forgiven, but because of that look at how she can love, look at how the love can flow from the heart that has been truly broken open." Now which one of us would ever design life so that the heart had to be broken in order for us to love? It never would have occurred to me, but that's how God has set up life.

The first mystery is that life goes wrong and then has to turn, and the second mystery is that the heart has to be broken in order to be opened so that love can flow. And so we gather at the table today and break the bread and pour out the wine as a symbol of the opening of our hearts of all that breaks us open and makes it possible for God's love to enter into our lives and our hearts, and makes it possible for us to love one another.

Transcribed by Sue and By Reesor