

Vessels, Holy and Whole

[Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, February 21, 2021]

Beloved ones, it is hard to believe that it was during the season of Lent last year that our lives were so dramatically changed. So, we enter this Lenten season together but separate. The series that we will journey with is entitled "Holy Vessels," a Lenten season of recovery. The communion table scene provides a beautiful image of the theme, 'Holy Vessels' symbolizing that each of us is a Holy Vessel, Holy and Whole. The sea glass represents the brokenness that we have felt and continue to feel in this pandemic time.

We have lived through a harrowing year that has felt like one long Lent that has challenged us in body, mind, and spirit. We've all had to give up so much, whether we chose to or not. We have all found ourselves taking on new things and learning new skills. We have been navigating our way through isolation and disconnection, grieving all the loss and suffering, looking for ways to maintain the social connections vital to our well-being, and seeing just how fragile life can be. But through it all, we have also seen love and hope, determination and strength, joy, and laughter shine through.

But our minds are overwhelmed, and our souls are weary. We have felt discouraged and defeated. As our theme song suggests, we are all vessels, holy and whole, but broken in body, mind, and soul, needing healing. This Lent we commit to entering into a season of healing and recovery. Healing does not mean getting back to normal or what was; instead, healing is understood as a movement toward a new life beyond hopelessness.

The season of Lenten is always a journey of introspection. This Lent we are encouraged to be honest about our brokenness, hold it gently, sit with it, and know that no matter how broken we may be, in God's sight, we are still beloved vessels of embodied love.

On this first Sunday of Lent, we begin our process of recovering a sense of wholeness and treating our own "vessels" as precious by committing to a journey toward physical health. This pandemic has challenged people's physical health in many ways, from contracting the virus to not being physically active in the ways we wish to be.

Even without a pandemic, we have all at times experienced the brokenness of our physical selves. When immersed in such struggles, it can be difficult to know ourselves as holy vessels, holy and whole, because we simply do not feel very holy or very whole. Bodily trauma and the emotional turmoil of physical brokenness can result in our becoming

spiritually disconnected, losing sight of our sacredness, the beauty of our humanness.

Yet, when we face physical challenges, we can choose how we will respond. Walter Anderson wrote, “Bad things do happen; how I respond to them defines my character and the quality of my life. I can choose to sit in perpetual sadness, immobilized by the gravity of my [physical] loss, or I can choose to rise from the pain and treasure the most precious gift I have, life itself.” How we choose to respond will have a great deal of influence on how we manage our physical brokenness. This morning we will hear two stories, one modern and one ancient, of the movement from physical brokenness to recovery.

This past summer, my dearest friend of 40 years started to physically die. His nervous system shut down, affecting his ability to eat, talk, think and speak. What so inspired me as I witnessed Rick’s struggle was his ability to choose to rise above the pain and treasure life. I asked Rick if he might share a little of his story with us because being honest about our brokenness and sharing our stories enable us to see that healing was a transformative movement from hopelessness to new life.

Rick writes, “When Peggy asked if I might share a little about my experience into physical brokenness and the journey to recovery, I took up the challenge.

In late June of 2020 I was prescribed an anti-bacterial drug to address what my doctor had thought was a bacterial infection. Over the course of taking the drug my body transformed. I was in great pain, I could not eat, and visits to the emergency and test results showed no anomalies. My weight dropped from 168 to 128 very quickly and I was finally admitted into the hospital.

There was no end of frustration on my part as a multitude of specialists and a variety of tests showed that by all accounts I was too well to be in the hospital. My body was failing, and no one seemed to understand why. I was finally placed on a feeding machine to give me a fighting chance at life.

The turning point for me toward hopefulness was when a neurological nerve specialist valued me enough to listen to me and hear me as I named what I was physically experiencing. In doing so he discovered that the anti-bacterial drug was toxic to my system and that I had been poisoned.

The specialist was sincere with me and told me that people have died from this type of poisoning. He said that it would take a long time and sheer determination on my part to build up the immune system, help fight off infection, and begin my long recovery.

While I was emotionally and spiritually depleted, I experienced a moment of wakefulness, a revelation, I knew that I cherished life and that I did not want to die. I had a choice around how I would go forward. I took ownership of my healing process, body, mind, and spirit, and set my course on recovery. The doctors were surprised at how quickly I responded to the medication. I began to gain weight, my mind cleared, and I reconnected with my spiritual sense of wholeness.

I was physically broken but due to the incredible love, support, determination, and kindnesses of family, doctors, and friends, I experienced the transformative movement from hopelessness to new life. Taking the time to write my story, to put on paper my thoughts about a physical brokenness that rocked me to the centre of my being, that placed me on the edge of my mortality, enabled me to experience a kind of release, to come to peace with what happened. I am grateful for the opportunity to share my story.

As I listened to Rick's story, I was able to see some parallels between his story and the healing story from scripture we heard this morning. The healing of the leper is a story of a person whose physical brokenness or skin ailment resulted in his being systematically ostracized by the community.

In Jesus' day, it was believed that physical ailments and anomalies were a result of one's disobedience to God and to the religious law. Israelite society was deeply suspicious of skin disease, and their preoccupation with it resulted in stringent impurity laws. Some laws were "so severe that touching an afflicted person meant contracting the same sort of defilement as touching a corpse."

The Greek word "lepra" was a term used to designate various skin conditions that included leprosy. A person with any kind of skin condition made him or her a social outcast; the person was treated as socially dead, barred from social communities and from entering any temple or holy place. They were socially and spiritually isolated. I can imagine that one must feel utterly rejected and spiritually empty when one's humanity and human rights are so rigorously denied.

Despite this reality, the leper chose to treasure life and so he calls out to Jesus, the man of God, to heal him. That changed his life. In his book *Healing in the Gospel of Matthew*, Walter T Wilson writes, Jesus is portrayed as a passionate person who was willing to "confront and transcend social boundaries of various kinds." He chooses to touch the leper unconcerned about the impurity laws or that he might himself be

defiled. Jesus is a healer because his compassion and his love for the “least of these” grants new life to a socially dead person.

After the leper is healed, he encourages the man to go to the temple. Jesus’ ability to value the humanity of the leper and to have the tenacity to touch him, frees the leper to reconnect with his social community and his spiritual center, the temple. He enabled the leper to see himself as a holy vessel beautifully made and wonderfully loved by God.

I can imagine Jesus’ words to the leper quietly spoken, “Know this: God’s love and grace surround you.... No Matter What. You are a precious and holy vessel right now. Take a deep breath in to let this truth fill you... and the truth filled him and changed him.

The healing of the leper story contains many important teachings that we could explore but what I think we can take from it is that life throws at us many things, physical brokenness in many forms, a pandemic, that make us feel alienated, isolated, and fearful. Any kind of brokenness can inhibit us from seeing the value of who we are in God’s sight and the treasure that life is.

Rick’s story, the healing of the leper, and all our stories of brokenness, teach us that when we are broken physically but experience the love and care of others who value us, and we choose respond to the brokenness with hope, healing in different forms becomes a transformative process of moving from hopelessness to new life.

Just as the specialist listened to Rick and just as Jesus touched the leper, God, through others and through love, reaches out to touch us in our brokenness to remind us of the treasure that we are – worthy of new life in the midst of hopelessness. No matter how broken you may be, may you know that God's love and grace surround you. No Matter What. You are a precious and holy vessel right now. Take a deep breath in to let this truth fill you. We are all Holy Vessels, beautifully made and wonderfully love. Amen.