

“Carrying the Mantel of Brokenness” – John 5: 1-9 (MAY 1 2016)  
Ned Allyn Parker

*Jesus loves me, this I know,  
for the Bible tells me so.  
Little ones to him belong –  
They are weak, but he is strong.  
Yes, Jesus loves me!  
Yes, Jesus loves me!  
Yes, Jesus loves me!  
The Bible tells me so.*

I remember the first time someone told me they didn't like this song. That's probably because they'd never heard Michelle's arrangement of it. Or, I thought, maybe it was because it's a children's song... or maybe it was because once you sing it a single time out loud, then you'll sing it a thousand more times in your head. Perhaps it's that final line, "The Bible tells me so," – it's phrases like that that have led our faith into some unfortunate circumstances. So, I asked "Why? Why don't you like it?" As it turned out, it was because they didn't like being reminded of their "littleness" in such a great big world – that they didn't like being reminded of their weaknesses.

Which, of course, makes sense. Sometimes we gaze into the mirror, and are plagued by insecurities about being insignificant – weak. It's pretty terrifying, and sometimes a little overwhelming. In those moments it's hard to love ourselves, to recognize the loveableness of the person looking back in the mirror.

Do you have those moments?

Maybe you look in the mirror and feel the haunting recollection of a broken relationship – or of a breaking relationship. Maybe you gaze in the mirror and feel society's constant push to look a certain way.

Sometimes I look in the mirror and remember that – for me – addiction means I will always be recovering, never recovered. That sense of weakness – of helplessness – is risky business. But then I remember that no matter what tomorrow brings, I'm living today just fine, and there's someone out there who isn't... that there's someone out there who needs to be reminded that they, too, are loveable and capable of love.

In these moments I realize it is this injured self that gives me the capacity to empathize, that my empathy comes from my own worn and weakened edges.

So this morning I wonder: Is there power in weakness?

When we've hiked to the mountaintop, only to trip and stumble back down the trail... When we stand up and dust ourselves off and ascend yet again, this time to hold the hand of a friend, and to allow our own hand to be held... Is there power in weakness?

When we move through the process of healing and look in the mirror and finally see a loveable and loving and lovely individual looking back... Is there power in weakness?

I think the nature of compassion tells us yes.

I hear the song as a reminder that despite – and sometimes even because of our own brokenness – we're always loved, always loveable, always capable of giving love.

*Yes, Jesus Loves me!*  
*Yes, Jesus Loves me!*  
*Yes, Jesus Loves me!*  
*The Bible tells me so!*

So, what *does* the Bible tell us this morning? What *does* this story tell us? Here is a person who for 38 years waited to be noticed. Here is a person who for 38 years watched as others climbed into the pool – watched others come and go. What do you think that does to a person's psyche? What does that do to a person's self-image – how does it corrupt their self-worth?

Traditionally we've come to say that the man was "paralyzed," but John doesn't use the same word for "paralyzed" that other gospels use in different stories. John is all about symbols and signs. Literally, John says, "The man was completely dried up." He was lying on this mat, all dried up, within a few feet of water – life-giving because it could rehydrate his whole being... and yet he could only look at it – never enter into it.

And in comes Jesus – Jesus who had just recently said to the woman at the well that the water he offered was "living water." Jesus asks, "Do you want to get well?" The beginning of the man's response tells the whole story of his existence: "Rabbi, I have no one..." I have no one to love – no one to love me... "Rabbi," answers the man, "*I have no one...*"

This is one of the few stories where Jesus doesn't require faith or action in order to heal. The story doesn't have that constant refrain we hear throughout the gospels: "Your faith has made you well."

It seems like Jesus gives the man everything he needs by simply acknowledging him. It's like my favorite story in the Bible: the story of the bent over woman. Jesus simply notices her in a crowd, and he tells her she can stand upright and she does. Whatever had prevented her from standing up straight, Jesus alleviates by acknowledging her. Sometimes this is the one of the greatest forms of love: to acknowledge someone who has been invisible.

But after Jesus tells the man to stand up, he doesn't stop there. Jesus says stand up and pick up your mat and carry it away. And the man does. He tucks the symbol of his past brokenness under his arm – like wearing your heart on your sleeve – he picks up this mantle of what was, and he carries it with him.

He carried that which had carried him when he couldn't carry himself. He carried that symbol of his weakness. It became a mantle of brokenness. Power in weakness.

When we have the power to bend down and pick up the thing that held us captive, it becomes an indicator of the magnitude of our own healing – especially when we use that mantle to be, to each other, living acts of kindness and love. It is through the simple and generous act of acknowledgment that we offer even more of this living water, that we spread even more of Jesus’ own love. The choir sang of Jesus’ own mandate: “A new commandment I give unto you, saith the Lord, that ye love together as I have loved you, that even so, ye love one another...” And in affirmation of Christ’s love, we lift our own voices:

*Yes, Jesus Loves me!*  
*Yes, Jesus Loves me!*  
*Yes, Jesus Loves me!*  
*The Bible tells me so!*

You may have seen the story recently on King 5 about the student at the University of Washington School of Nursing. Twelve years ago Eric Seitz had been experiencing homelessness, and he was addicted to heroin. The broadcast of the story began with a shot of him sitting in a classroom at UW, but as he started describing his addiction the scene shifted and he was being interviewed outdoors beneath an overhang. As he told his story, he said, “I very clearly remember the feeling of waking up at two in the morning under a church stoop in the rain, shivering and withdrawing from opiates. Your bones and your muscles hurt.”

While he was saying this in the interview, the camera was panning back and eventually showed him standing right there in our entryway.

Eric’s story was, in a sense, a reflection of the story of the man on the mat at the pool at Bethesda. When he finally stood up and began rehab, he carried his own mat with him in a way. He studies nursing in order to address the health concerns of other people currently in similar situations to the one he had been in. He offers them living water – abundant love – by

acknowledging them, by empathizing with their difficult circumstances, by offering them healing from their afflictions.

This is the present reality of our physical and social location in this sanctuary. We come in these doors and climb into the living waters of this community, as others remain at a distance watching us come and go, unable to get up on their own, unable to climb into the pool.

Last week, Judie, our wonderful administrative assistant, called me into the front office. She pointed out the window and said, “Ned, I think you need to go be with those people in front of the Poly Clinic.” Judie knew that just days before, a young man had overdosed and died in the bushes in front of the Poly Clinic offices, and she was certain that the small gathering across the street was made up of his friends or family.

I walked over and figured out pretty quickly she was right. About a half dozen of them were taking turns crawling in behind the bushes and laying down in the dirt in order to be where he had been when he breathed his final breath.

Their grief became my grief.

This is our reality. And in that moment, I had a dark vision of what could have been for *me* – in some *other* reality, I saw myself in those bushes.

I reached out and touched their arms as we spoke – physical representations of sacred acknowledgment. I pointed across the street and said, “That church over there is a place filled with more love than I could ever describe or express on my own. We are all praying for you, and we are holding your son, your brother, in the warm light of that love. If you ever need anything, please come find us. We won’t preach, we won’t push you in any way – we’ll let you tell his story, we’ll cry with you, we’ll offer you some of that love.”

Maybe someday, they'll come in, carrying their own mats of grief, and maybe they will experience a little healing in the living waters of this sanctuary, and we – who can comprehend the power present in our *own* weakness – will acknowledge them and welcome them with the deep love they need and deserve... because we, too, have experienced that love.

*Yes, Jesus Loves me!*  
*Yes, Jesus Loves me!*  
*Yes, Jesus Loves me!*  
*The Bible tells me so!*

As we enter this week when we join our Jewish sisters and brothers during Yom HaShoa on Holocaust Remembrance Day, I share this story from Karen Armstrong with you. She writes:

The late Rabbi Albert Friedlander impressed upon me the importance of the biblical commandment 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' I had always concentrated on the first part of that injunction, but Albert taught me that if you cannot love yourself, you cannot love other people either. He had grown up in Nazi Germany and as a child was bewildered and distressed by the vicious anti-Semitic propaganda that assailed him on all sides. One night, when he was about eight years old, he deliberately lay awake and made a list of all his good qualities. He told himself firmly that he was *not* what the Nazis said; that he had talents and special gifts of heart and mind, which he enumerated to himself one by one. Finally he vowed that if he survived, he would use those qualities to build a better world. This was an extraordinary insight for a child in such circumstances. Albert was one of the kindest people I have ever met [Armstrong writes]; he was almost pathologically gentle, and must have brought help and counsel to thousands. But he always said that he could have done no good at all unless he had learned, at that terrible moment of history, to love himself...

[Finally, Armstrong says] The Golden Rule requires self-knowledge; it asks that we use our own feelings as a guide to our behavior with others. If we treat ourselves harshly, this is the way we are likely to treat other people... We recognize flaws in our closest friends, but this does not diminish our affection for them. Nor should it affect the way we value ourselves.

At eight years old he made a list of his best qualities. Maybe we can make lists, too, scrawling them on our bathroom mirrors as reminders of who that person really is who's looking back from the glass.

With discernment and gentleness, can we, too, learn about ourselves in ways we grow out of brokenness? I think so.

Of course, Jesus himself, wasn't immune from brokenness. Henri Nouwen called Jesus "The Wounded Healer."

This Communion Sunday, as we take the bread and the cup, we use a familiar story to remember the time he and his friends came together for a last supper. We will recall that Jesus took bread and then he blessed it, and then he broke it...

The bread was blessed...

...And then it was broken.

Was it any less blessed once it was broken? No, there is power in that bread; there is power when we share it; there is power when we gather around a table and eat, and pray – because we become extensions of the blessing; we become worthy extensions of Christ's love.

*Jesus loves me, this I know,  
for the Bible tells me so.  
Little ones to him belong –  
They are weak, but he is strong.  
Yes, Jesus loves me!  
Yes, Jesus loves me!  
Yes, Jesus loves me!  
The Bible tells me so.*