



**Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
22 September 2019
Sermon: "Is There a Doctor in the House?"
Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block**

**Jeremiah 8:18-9:1
Luke 16:1-13**

First a story. Touching broken glass can hurt.

It was 10:45pm and I was on the last page of my August sermon. I was excited to be nearing the finish line and inching ever-closer to much needed sleep. I went into the kitchen to fix myself a bowl of cereal – my go-to, late-night-snack.

I picked up a glass bowl that had been passed down to me from my “middle namesake” Grandma Ann. The bowl suddenly slipped through my hand and came crashing down into the sink – breaking into pieces that defied gravity and shot upward - swiping across my fingers. It happened so fast that I didn’t really feel the impact of these broken pieces of glass, until my new-spouse ran in and looked at me like I was the star of some “summer-horror blockbuster and said: “I think we have to go to the ER.”

“No,” I said. “I can’t go to the ER. I have to write a sermon.”

“It looks really bad,” he said. “Especially *that* one finger. We have to go.”

I continued to refuse, all the while he was carefully packing my laptop and Bible in a bag and nudging me towards the car.

Downtown Asheville was quiet that Saturday night. And I soon realized why. Everyone was at the ER!

There was the little boy coughing into his mother’s lap,
a tipsy twenty-something with the bandage on his head,
An older woman bent over with her arms hugging her stomach,
and there was of course my compadre, with his finger also wrapped in a paper towel.

Deep into the night, when they finally brought me to the back room to see the doctor, he took one look at my finger and said, “So tell me the story. There’s always a story.”

I was mortified (and exhausted). “Look I said, I am pastor in a church and I was working on my sermon, and I wanted some cereal, and then a bowl bit me.”

“Where are you a pastor?” He asked.

“Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church.” I mumbled, staring at my finger - still in disbelief for what I had done.

“Really?” He said, “That’s where my wife goes!”

I looked up, shocked, embarrassed and suddenly beaming. “Really? Well...you’ll have to tell her that you took care of her pastor tonight.”

His face turned serious. “That would be a HIPAA violation” he said. “I cannot reveal patient information.”

“Reveal away,” I finally said. “You saved me tonight and everyone’s going to hear about it.”

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Today our text invites us to explore brokenness: brokenness that has an impact far greater than broken bones or broken bowls. Brokenness that we might feel holds us back from this table. Brokenness that we can be too fearful to reveal to those around us, or even to God.

Each of us here carries stories of brokenness that we hold close. It can be hard to share the truth about all that we are and all that we need.

I wonder what it is about our society, about our families, about our human insecurities and pride, that compels us to do most anything to mask our bruises and cuts, our loneliness and pain?

What is it about the age we live in that pushes us to create social media personas: where we appear “strong” or “satisfied” or “successful,” where we rarely showcase life’s nuances: the day-to-day inner battles we face and the moments when we fall short?

What is it about our culture - so steeped in white supremacy and violence - that perpetuates this dualistic narrative where some of us are broken and some of us are well?

Why is it so hard for us (as individuals and as a community) to reveal *our* brokenness and even more, our hunger for healing?

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Today’s parable is as broken and mysterious as bread on the Communion table.

Luke was writing it down during a broken age. Those in power were clinging tightly to their material wealth (caring nothing for the poor or the marginalized around them), all the while this group of Jewish Jesus followers were living on the margins – doing all they could to survive and practice their faith in peace.

Truth be told, this parable has boggled the minds of theologians and believers for centuries, and still to this day, no solid conclusions have been reached about what exactly Jesus wants us to draw from this story, besides its moral: “*You cannot serve God and wealth.*”

Translators cannot even agree on a good title for the parable. And each attempt invites us to feel something different about its principle character. It's been called:

“The Dishonest Manager”,

“The Unrighteous Worker”

“The Shrewd Steward.”

Every title has different implications. Is he crooked or is he wise?

Now we know that the manager is going to be laid off by his boss, so he takes it upon himself to secure his future and pardon portions of people's debts (people who owe money to his boss, that is). *His actions are kind and also kind of shady!* Not only that, his reason for doing this doesn't come from a pure place. He *needs* to connect with people, so that they in turn might extend warmth and hospitality to him once he's out of a job. Shockingly, when his boss hears the news of what he is doing - he *praises* the manager. And even more shocking perhaps, Jesus does too. *Why?*

Maybe this text should be called the “Broken Disciple,” because here we have this manager who is both flawed and faithful, generous and selfish, human and a cherished child of God. He is an unexpected person for Jesus to lift up and celebrate. And so we ask ourselves: *what does Jesus see in him?*

Jesus says: "*Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much.*"

Friends, our manager is a nuanced, raw soul, truly someone still on a faith journey in need of maturing; but Jesus shines light on his value here and now (even in his brokenness and imperfection). Jesus sees beyond his strange and selfish approach, and instead chooses to focus on the greater good his actions cultivate:

Thanks to this *dishonest manager*, people are being freed from debt that is weighing heavy on their shoulders.

Thanks to this *unrighteous worker*, new relationships are budding between the powerful and powerless - and fresh community is being born.

Thanks to this *shrewd steward*, his boss's eyes now see what generosity and forgiveness look like, instead of a life centered on greed and abusive power.

Thanks to this *broken disciple*, Jesus' boundless compassion is shared with those in desperate need of connection and hope.

In this parable, perhaps more than any other, we catch a real glimpse of human brokenness, and of a God who truly meets people *exactly* where they are – and calls them beloved.

Indeed, here we catch a glimpse of *ourselves*: broken, seen, and loved by One who will not let us go. One who continues to call us to the table to be made whole, in order to be the sort of disciples Jesus knows us to be.

“*You cannot serve God and wealth.*” Jesus says.

The moral of this story is simple. Name the brokenness within you and then refocus your heart on what's *most* important.

This past Friday, young people across the world fearlessly named our brokenness and our urgent need for mending. In our world driven by capitalism and selfishness, our planet is dying and the youth are demanding change now.

Millions of people around the world participated in the climate strike: marching, speaking, and here in Asheville staging an 11 minute "Die-In," where people laid their bodies on the ground for 11 minutes to mark the 11 years some scientists say we have left to rescue this planet. Students left school early as a way to say that if the future of the earth does not matter to adults, then why should school be important to them. *These are difficult, critical times.*

16-year-old Greta Thunberg famously said: "Adults keep saying, we owe it to the young people to give them hope. But I don't want your hope. I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day and then I want you to act. I want you to act as if your house is on fire. Because it is."

Greta and the youth of our world are fearlessly exposing our broken systems and perspectives (still hungry for wealth and power above all). They are showing us our need to come to the table today, vulnerable and honest about where we have failed - and hungry to now serve God and God's creation above all else.

Friends, our parable today and the urgent times we are live in are crucial reminders that as people of faith, we are not free from brokenness, and we cannot hesitate to reveal the truth of who we are. We are flawed and faithful, human and cherished children of God, broken disciples on a journey, following Jesus, who sees us, and knows us, and boldly calls to the table again and again - not despite our brokenness, but because of it.

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Here at this table, we not only remember, but we are *re-membered*, restored, loved, forgiven, and put back together again to *finally* be in right relationship with God, with one another, and with all Creation.

Here amongst bread and cup, Jesus invites us into life-saving vulnerability and holy mystery, to remember that his body is broken for *us* – so they we can be re-membered and live anew as *one* people who fearlessly work to satisfy God's hunger for love, justice and *tikun olam* – the healing of our broken and aching world.

Friends, we come to this table to remember and name who we are. We are broken disciples, seated across the table from our God, whose radical love can and will make us whole.