

**“You Asked for It: Surviving a Breakup – The Beloved”**

*Colossians 3:12-17*

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Seventeen years ago, my life came crashing in on me. Caring for an 8 week old child, having just returned from maternity leave, I found myself in the middle of a divorce. Life, as I knew it, seemed to have come to an end. One of the most poignant moments for me was the first time I stood before the congregation I served and announced the assurance of God’s pardon. Was I forgiven? Could I forgive? Where was God in the midst of the enormous pain I was experiencing?

So when an email sermon request came, saying something like, “I saw a sermon listed the other day entitled, ‘Surviving a Breakup’ – I would sure appreciate hearing that addressed right about now,” I quickly volunteered to be the one to preach on it. After all, I certainly understood something of the depth of emotion involved!

However, I quickly ran into two difficulties. The first was how to deal with this topic so that it had meaning for all of you here this morning – not just for those of you who are currently in the midst of the painful ending of a relationship. The second was to avoid playing arm-chair psychologist, and to offer instead a word based in the heart of the Christian faith – the faith which draws us together this morning.

There is no small irony that the text I have chosen for this morning is a text I commonly use at weddings. Yet the more I reflected upon what scripture says to us when we are at our most vulnerable and broken places, the more I believed that this text was the right one for this day. Listen, then, to God’s word to you, from Colossians, the third chapter, beginning with the 12<sup>th</sup> verse:

*As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

Let us pray: O God, in whatever situation we may find ourselves this day, may we hear your word to us and claim your love. In Christ’s name we pray, Amen.

Right about now, I would love a light-hearted joke to start things off. (And trust me, if I could have found an appropriate one to use, I would have!!!) But you know, it just hasn't been that kind of week. This has been a week when the angst of human suffering has been strongly felt here at Fairmount. In the past 5 days, we have had 3 funerals. Two of those who died were in their 60's – far younger than we have come to expect. To reflect upon the sadness and grief associated with the end of a relationship, whether through death, divorce, or even illness, is to enter “the depths” of human experience and emotion. Not exactly joking material!

I would venture to guess that all of us here this morning have been touched by pain of this kind. Sadly, many of us do know personally the reality of divorce. Almost all of us have experienced the death of a family member or friend. Others of us have experienced the loss unique to illness or disability, when one is still present, but in many ways, “gone.”

To be sure, we each experience our brokenness in a unique way – it's ours and no one else's. Yet to be human is to experience brokenness. The question then, for all of us, is how to deal with our woundedness. What does our faith have to say to us, when we feel fractured, indeed? Returning to our sermon topic request for today, how can we survive?

Our Hebrew lesson for this morning from Psalm 42, which we sang a few minutes ago, offers us an important first step. Notice what the psalmist does. He does not hide from his pain, but gives voice to it. Much to our proper Presbyterian dismay, the psalms are raw with emotion. Nothing is held back. We can taste the salt in our mouth, and feel the heart-wrenching agony, as the psalmist cries out, “My tears have been my food day and night....I say to God, my rock, ‘Why have you forgotten me?’....My soul is cast down within me.” The psalms make it clear that there is nothing we can't say to God, as the full range of human thoughts and emotions are poured out.

To give voice to the depths of our pain, to acknowledge the grief or rage or humiliation we feel, is to begin the path toward healing. It is tempting to try and ignore or go around those overwhelming and frightening emotions. Yet as Henri Nouwen, writes in Life of the Beloved, (a book I relied heavily upon in preparing for this morning), the first step to healing is not a step away from the pain, but a step toward it. Embracing painful feelings will not make them less painful, but it gives us the possibility of moving toward wholeness.

If we turn to the reading from Colossians, we find another critical piece in healing the broken places of our lives. Remember how the author addresses the followers of Christ to whom he is writing? God's chosen ones, holy and beloved. God's chosen...beloved. If we claim these scriptures as our own, we too must acknowledge that **we** are God's chosen, **we** are God's beloved. It is a primary statement of identity.

One of the most difficult elements when any relationship ends is the re-defining of identity. If I am no longer John's wife, or Ron's partner; if I am no longer Marge's daughter or Fred's son; if I am no longer Jane's good friend, who am I?

Isn't that one of the most critical questions to answer? We often think about issues of identity as being addressed in adolescence. Well, if that's the case, there are some fairly "mature" adolescents floating around! I believe that the question of primary identity is an ongoing question, particularly for people of faith. For we are indeed surrounded by a culture that will try and tell us many things about who we are, or at least about who we should be. The voices call out to us – "you're nothing special..." "you don't count for much..." "if you are rich and thin and famous and smart, *then* you'll matter..." These are powerful voices, which would have us believe that we are worth nothing to anyone.

For many of us, the answer to "who are you?" can only be answered by what we do. But notice the question isn't "what do you do?" but rather, "who are you?"

When 17 young people were confirmed in April, I asked them: Where do you find your primary identity? How do you decide who you are? Throughout the confirmation process we had used the "First Catechism," a question and answer educational tool, developed by the Presbyterian Church for teaching our basic beliefs. I repeated that evening the question with which we began the year: Who are you?

Thinking myself to be clever, I had asked Tom Allen and Julie Callsen, the other two confirmation teachers, to call out the answer after I asked the question. Since I was working rather last minute, I failed to clarify to Tom that I would ask the question several times and didn't indicate which time I wanted them to respond.

What occurred as a result, nearly took my breath away. I was anticipating that the second time I asked the question, "Who are you?" that Tom and Julie would merely call out the response from where they were sitting. Instead, catching me off guard, the first time I asked "Who are you?," Tom, with bold assurance, stood up and loud enough for all to hear, responded, "I am a child of God." I am a child of God. That, my friends, is the stance we must take, if we are to move through the brokenness to the wholeness of God's love. Henri Nouwen put it this way, "Long before you were born, the eyes of love had seen you as precious, as of infinite beauty, as of eternal value."

Who are you, my friends? Children of God – chosen and beloved. When the forces around you would tell you anything else – that you are rejected, or worthless, that you are invisible or valuable only for what you can do – you need to reclaim your primary identity: beloved of God. When the negative messages

assail us, Nouwen writes, “These feelings, strong as they may be, are not telling me the truth about myself. The truth, even though I cannot feel it right now, is that I am the chosen child of God, precious in God’s eyes, called the Beloved from all eternity and held safe in an everlasting embrace.”

In the small group materials for Companions in Christ, there is a session early on that uses the text from Jesus’ baptism, “you are my child, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” One by one, each member of the group receives that blessing. I remember what occurred in my first Companions group when we came to that session. Most of us had tears in our eyes, as we reclaimed our primary identity as the beloved of God. One of the women in our group spoke through her tears, giving voice to what many of us were thinking, “what a difference it would have made in my life to hear these words long ago...” You are my child, my beloved.

That small group experience highlights the next step along the path toward survival and healing. You and I need to find ways to affirm that primary identity. We need to surround ourselves with people who will bless, not curse us, who will remind us over and over again that we belong to God, that we are dearly loved. Hearing it once won’t do it. While a prayer life which allows us enough space to hear the voice of God’s affirming love is necessary, we can’t do it alone. We need the support and encouragement of the community of faith, if we are to claim our identity as God’s beloved daughters and sons.

While you may hear that message in worship, or receive that affirmation in coffee hour, my hunch is that you and I will more commonly need to place ourselves in a smaller setting, with people with whom we are willing to openly share those broken places, who will share our pain, as well as our joy, and still affirm us as beloved of God. Have you found such a place here at Fairmount? There are many options in place right now from Companions in Christ to the Wednesday morning men’s group – but no doubt, we need to create more. This fall, we will be expanding our small group opportunities, to allow many more of you to explore your faith and your lives together. If you are looking for such a place to belong, let me know!

How do we survive a breakup? How do we move from brokenness to wholeness? There are no quick fixes, no band-aids, to be sure. Yet some critical steps along the way will have to include giving voice to our pain, reclaiming our primary identity as a beloved child of God, and surrounding ourselves with a community which will help us live out that identity every day of our lives.

Within the community of faith, we then can hear God’s call that even our brokenness may be the avenue through which we can give ourselves to others. For ultimately, that is where we will find our deepest joy: in letting others know that they too, are beloved of God.

Marianne Williamson put it well, and she challenges each of us: "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. We were born to make manifest the Glory of God within us. It's not just in some of us, it's in everyone. And as we let our own Light shine, we ...give other people permission to do the same." May it be so!

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