

“What happens when your heart breaks open”

A sermon shared with the congregation of
St. Andrew's United Church on May 15, 2016. Pentecost.
Rev. Catherine Somerville

Everyone thought afterwards that it was rather unfortunate that no one had remembered to take better minutes of the meeting. It had all started out as usual, the weekly gathering of the JGSG - the Jerusalem Grief Support Group. The JGSG had been gathering, sometimes with a good new number of participants; at other times, with numbers down a bit, especially when the weather had turned nicer, but always with a consistent group over the last seven weeks. Perhaps it was coincidence, but this gathering fell on the Day of Pentecost, the Festival of Weeks, very much like what we would understand as Thanksgiving. It was a time of giving thanks to God for the first fruits of the harvest, and for the blessing of Torah, the five books of the Law given to the Jewish people.

The meeting had started as per usual. There was quite a lot of talk as the people tried to wrap their heads around the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was dead, and his body was mysteriously missing. Some in the group were claiming that they had seen Jesus since his death. He had appeared to the disciples, and even once had invited a couple of them to share a bit of supper.

But it's hard to keep the hope when your heart is broken. Over and over, they had repeated his message: “Don't let your hearts be troubled. Believe that I have been welcomed into God. I will come again. So, keep your promise to me, and live everything I have told you. Love God and others and yourself. That is the way to peace.”

Unfortunately, for this particular meeting, no one reported when it happened, or where exactly it had occurred. No one had thought to ask those in attendance to complete the sign in sheet. When asked later though, the details proved to be surprisingly similar. People reported fire and wind and wild talk in strange languages, dreams and visions of the most indescribable kind. Then, Peter had stood up and given a sermon, where he reminded them that they were the witnesses to all that Jesus had done in the world. So, it was time to be done with their mourning and sighing. It was time for them to get moving.

Now, it is interesting that the JGSG - the Jerusalem Grief Support Group never met again. Quite frankly, they didn't have time. They were too busy sharing good news and doing all the things he had told them to be about. They took their mission statement from his very words: "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I didn't have any clothes so you made sure I had something warm and comfortable to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you came and visited me."

They were so busy feeding, making coffee, providing welcome, sewing and distributing clothes, and visiting that they had no time for a meeting. They had better things to be about.

They discovered the truth that new life can blossom out of the bleakest of endings.

Martha Beck, a grief coach and writer, has offered similar wisdom. In an essay called "Leaping", Beck begins with a story. A man came to a rabbi, because he wanted to understand a particular verse of scripture: "Why does God write the law on our hearts? Why not in our hearts? It's the inside of my heart that needs God."

The rabbi answered, "God never forces anything into a human heart. He writes the word on our hearts so that when our hearts break, God falls in."

The rabbi concluded, "Whatever you hold to be sacred, you'll find that an unguarded broken heart is the ideal instrument for absorbing it."

In the essay, Martha Beck speaks of how to live with the aftermath of a broken heart. A bad idea is to guard your heart, much like the story of the giant who removes his own heart, locks it in a series of metal boxes, and buries the whole conglomeration. His enemies can stab him or shoot him, but never fatally. Of course, he also loses the benefits of having a heart, of being happy. The choice of locking his heart away means that the rest of his life is miserable and grey. When we are living through grief, we can lock our hearts away. We can say that we won't be hurt like that again. That is one way to live. It's the safest way.

But there is another way, the way of risking and willingness, of living into the situations we find ourselves in. It's about the need to say "Woohoo", and trying anyway, especially when we are scared.

Martha Beck has a son with Downs Syndrome, and she remembers that the last eighteen years have been a series of "Woohoo" moments. The only consequence for

her of having her heart broken on the day her son was born is deepening love. She has learned that openings allow her love to grow wider.

That is what happened that day when the disciples gathered together at the regular meeting of the Jerusalem Grief Support Group. They could have shut their eyes, covered their ears, and closed their minds. They could have kept their broken hearts intact, and remained as they were, safe and knowing. But instead they decided to throw open the windows, to unlock the doors, to step out as they began to embrace the life Jesus was inviting them to join.

I can't help but think that this Pentecost, we are being given a similar option. We can look around at the church as it is today, and lament and feel rather sorry for ourselves. Things aren't the way they used to be. We can mourn and we can sigh and stay locked in the past. Or we can live out of that place of the broken open heart, and begin to reframe our understanding. We can look around and see dedication and love and compassion and generosity, and such incredible faith.

A couple of weeks ago, our Manitou Conference President, The Rev. Stewart Walker, offered a sermon to the people at a regular meeting of Sudbury Presbytery. When you go to church meetings, you don't normally expect your heart to be pulled. It's often pretty dry and sometimes rather tedious. And yet, that day, Stewart offered hope for all of us sitting there with broken hearts.

"Sometimes we get wrapped up in asking the Messiah to restore our church, to build our memberships, to increase our attendance. Sometimes, without thinking, we can equate how we feel about church with how we talk about God. When we say that our church is shrinking, dying, getting smaller, becoming tired, a shell of what it once was, we are saying that God seems to be shrinking, dying, getting smaller, becoming tired, a shell of what God once was in our world... But this is not the true measure of the church. Jesus is telling us that the fullness of the church, the aliveness of the church, is about what God is doing here.

The church is full because the Word of God fills it with the Good News of God's love for the broken, for the forgotten and the marginalized. The church is full of God's love for us and for the world.

The church is full because the waters of baptism overflow here with grace and mercy. God's grace is overflowing here, filling this place. The church is full of God's hope for us and for the world.

The church is full because the bread and wine of new life are here in abundance. Because when the Body of Christ gathers, we become bread for the world and we are sent out with good news for the world. The church is full of God's gifts for us and for the world.

God's work fills this place, not with us, but with God. God fills this place with love and mercy and grace, God's work done here and done for us."

That's what Stewart told us. And that is what the Holy Spirit is giving us now. Each other. This gift of time for worship. Faith enough to trust and take the risks. Whenever we gather, that's what we are called to remember, both the hard realities and the comfortable places, and to discover what it all means in the constantly changing circumstances in which the church finds itself.

Our purpose is to be a community of believing, risk-taking, confident, joyous people who take the good news we hear out to a world that is hungry and seeking and thirsty for more. We are called to be the non-anxious presence in a very anxious and fearful world. Do not let your hearts be troubled, for we are carrying a peace the world can never give or take away.

So, no more meetings of the JGSG, no more lamenting over what once was. Instead, let's look for the new thing God is doing. We don't need to be the sort of church that wastes its energy looking backwards at what once was. That's not living. Instead, we can allow God to come into the broken places for it is there that we will find love and hope and mercy.

Resources used:

Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3, pages 15, 20-24

Finding Your Own North Star, Martha Beck, 2012, Hearst Communications, pages 43-52

Sermon preached to Sudbury Presbytery by The Rev. Stewart Walker on April 30, 2016