

Living for Others, Pt. 1: Beginning Within  
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church  
October 23, 2011  
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: Leviticus 19:1-2; 15-18 and Matthew 22:34-46

For the last couple of weeks, I've been enjoying a running dialogue via email with someone about the word "broken." We've been thinking together about what that word means to us as children of God and as people of faith.

I've confessed to my conversation partner, my stepmother, Cheree, that my personal hearing of that word comes from my lifelong walk in the Reformed tradition of faith. I've always worshipped in fairly traditional Presbyterian churches, at least up until this one. So, I've heard countless references in sermons and prayers to the great reformers of the church, Martin Luther, John Calvin and others.

Their theological tradition emphasizes the inevitability of our sinfulness. Our imperfection exists as a hard-wired part of the human condition. We may be able to avoid some sins (with an "s"). But we cannot avoid our sin (without an "s"). We all are fallen and imperfect and, thus, we stand in need of God's grace. That is the context I've always brought to that word, "broken."

Cheree, my conversation partner has sensitized me to the fact, however, that the word "broken" strikes some people like a sledge hammer between the eyes. Many hear it, she says, and think "worthless" and "useless," "unappreciated" by the world and "unloved" and unlovable by others, maybe even God.

"The word 'broken' is damning, damaging and discouraging," she says.

"It is a drive-them-out-of-the-sanctuary word," she says. "I should know."

She adds that last bit as a gentle reminder that she has been let down and turned off over the years by more than a few judgmental churches and more than a few hypocritical preachers.

I have no doubt that our conversation about our "brokenness", or should I say our *imperfection*, is not over. I hope not. I have grown from it already.

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Today we formally begin another conversation right here at Caldwell church. As I said on my blog last week, I propose we keep what's known as the Golden Rule in mind from now until the beginning of Advent.

Last week, many of you committed your pledges of time and talent and treasure to God's use here and across our city and our world. In the next two weeks during worship, we will welcome, first, our Latino neighbors in worship and then, next, our friends from the Bread of Life Christian Ministry, our neighbors and sister congregation here on campus.

What better time than this to think intentionally and deeply about what it means to "love our neighbor as ourselves?" What better time than now for us to think about who "our neighbor" really is? What better verse to shape our thoughts about what our discipleship really requires?

What Christians have labeled the "Golden Rule" is, in fact, the world's most widely shared ethic for those who seek to live justly in community. Variations of the Golden Rule appear in virtually every major world religion: the Baha'i Faith, Brahmanism, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Native American, Sikhism, Taoism, Unitarian Universalist, Wicca, Zoroastrian and others.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, it appears in both the Old and New Testaments. In today's reading from Leviticus, God tells Moses to speak it to "all the congregations."<sup>1</sup> Judging from the universal embrace of the wisdom behind the Golden Rule, Moses succeeded mightily. Again, we see evidence of the inclusivity of God's love.

Some scholars say that its appearance in Leviticus reflects its priestly writers' hope that the holiness they experienced in the temple would extend to the entire community. Other scholars point out that God's command to Israel to love neighbor as self was a radical breakthrough in faith-based ethics up to that point. Other religions of the day had come nowhere near its kind of equality, equity and even-handed justice. Listen to it again:

You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial – to the poor or defer to the great; with justice you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not

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<sup>1</sup> Lev. 19:2

slander. You shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor. You shall not hate any of your kin or take vengeance or bear a grudge.<sup>2</sup>

In all of these ways, God told Moses, the God's people then – and us today – were and are to model a community unlike any other.

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But, first, we must look within.

The command to love neighbor as self directs our focus, our energy, our purpose and our sense of responsibility on others. It says, in essence, to *live for others*. But it also recognizes that we cannot love others unless we first are at peace with ourselves. To live for others, to even love others, we first must be reasonably healthy in our hearts and souls and psyches. As with the oxygen masks for use in the case of an emergency on an airplane, the instructions say we must put our own on first. Then we can help others with theirs.

We may not want to admit it, but many, many of us have a great deal of trouble loving ourselves. And, for many, that brings us full circle to how we consider ourselves as children of God, as those who bear the scars of our lives and the inevitable scars of our sinfulness, what some might call our brokenness.

Just last week in the Observer, a columnist cited a recent study by Glamour magazine. The study found that 97 percent of women had at least one negative thought about their body each day. Other recent studies show that male self-esteem has plummeted in this Great Recession of ours, when so many men at all rungs of the economy have lost a job and been unable to find another.

So many other factors affect our self-image, of course – relative achievement, relationships and one's sense of one's abilities. Self-image lies behind our nation's widespread diagnosis of depression and fuels equally widespread use of prescription drugs. Our society's history of systemic prejudice and bigotry over issues of race and sexual orientation add to the epidemic.

So, we might ask, how can we live for others if so many people can hardly live with themselves?

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<sup>2</sup> Lev. 19:15-17

In his Christian classic Life of the Beloved, Catholic Priest and prolific writer Henri Nouwen provides a different kind of prescription for living peacefully as children of God. As those who are beloved by our God, we can learn from the words that we say in our service of communion. As Jesus said about the bread that he served his disciples, we might think about ourselves, Nouwen says, as “Taken, Blessed, Broken and Given.”

As the children of God, we are taken, chosen by a God who knit us together uniquely in our mother’s womb and who counts the hairs on our head. That is what it means to be the “beloved” of God. And because we are taken, chosen individually by God to be the beloved, we are blessed. That much makes sense, we might say to ourselves.

But then Nouwen brings us back to that word that conflicts us, “broken.” Yes, the bread in the last supper was broken. But are we? Is that how we are to think of ourselves?

Well, to begin with, Nouwen says just look at those whom God chose to lead God’s people and work out God’s purposes in scripture. Abram and Sarai were old and withered. Moses doubted himself and stuttered. David murdered and fooled around. The prophets were considered crazy, the disciples clueless. Peter had no self-control and Paul looked about like Danny Devito and suffered quite a problem with insecurity. And that’s just the men.

Our brokenness, those pieces of ourselves that fall short of wholeness, are just that – part of who we are, part of what makes us unique. To be whole, we must not reject that which is wounded within us. Rather, says Nouwen, we should befriend it. We should claim, name it and, where needed, with God’s help, tame it. We should take it out of the shadow of shame and put it under the bright and cleansing light of our blessedness.

The great American composer Leonard Bernstein wrote a mass in honor of President John F. Kennedy, a man who was both brilliant and broken himself. As the mass draws to it close, a priest, beautifully adorned in his vestments, is held aloft by his adoring people. He holds up a glass chalice just when the people lose their balance and the priest comes crashing to the ground, shattering the glass chalice.

In the fall, the priest’s fancy vestments are ruined. In blue jeans and a t-shirt, he walks through the shards of glass in wonder as a children’s choir sings, “Praise, Praise, Praise.” The priest smiles with unexpected recognition and says, “I never realized that broken glass could shine so brightly.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> As recounted by Nouwen, p. 102

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The unexpected brilliance of our individuality – with all of our particular blessings and imperfections – is one of the things that makes Caldwell church such a special place and the Caldwell community so endearing.

I thought about that last week when I attended an awards breakfast held by Mecklenburg Ministries, our city’s leading ecumenical and interfaith organization. Meck Min, as it is known, honored two long-time servants of this city as bridge builders and community heroes. One was Sara Haymond, whom our own Andy Baxter called “the mother of the interfaith movement in Charlotte.” The other was Willie Ratchford, who leads the Community Relations Council of Mecklenburg County and is a tireless worker and strong voice for understanding and reconciliation across differences.

I want to share some of what Mr. Ratchford said that morning. Listen closely – especially in relation to our command to love our neighbors as ourselves, which is that much more complex in today’s swiftly changing pluralistic society. One of this church’s greatest opportunities is to welcome all kinds of neighbors in order to grow into a more multi-cultural church. So listen to these words, which Mr. Ratchford took from William Chance’s book, Language of Action:

“Diversity, generally understood and embraced, is not casual liberal tolerance of anything and everything not yourself. It is not polite accommodation. Instead, diversity is, in action, the sometimes-painful awareness that other people, other races, other voices, other habits of mind, have as much integrity of being, as much claim upon the world, as you do. No one has an obligation greater than your own to change, or yield, or to assimilate into the mass. The irreconcilable is as much a part of social life as the congenial. Being strong in life is being strong amid differences while accepting the fact that your own self can be a considerable imposition upon everyone you meet. I urge you to consider your own oddity before you are troubled or offended by that of others. And I urge you, amid all the differences present to the eye and mind, to reach out and create the bonds that will sustain the commonwealth that will protect us all. We are meant to be together.”

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People of Caldwell, each of us has much to give. Each of us has unique contributions to make. None of us is whole or perfect but together we can make our city, our nation and world more whole.

As with the bread of communion, we are broken, yes. But of vastly more significance, we are blessed. As with the bread of communion, we are given to be a blessing to

others, to live for others, as we are, flaws and all, but, above all, as God's beloved, wonderfully and marvelously made. As with the broken shards of glass from the chalice of Bernstein's *Mass*, our unique angles and shapes refract the light and send it out in wondrous rainbows only we can make.

In that way, we are called to live out of who we are, however we are made, for others. Thus we are made whole. The command to love our neighbors as we love ourselves is one command with two parts – love neighbor and love self. The two instructions go hand in hand, inseparable and interdependent.

If we do not love neighbor, we can't love ourselves, not really. Too much of our society has lost sight of that truth, which explains the epidemics of narcissism and self-focused consumerism. We cover up our low self-esteem by buying and acquiring and keeping stuff.

But when we love our neighbor, we are reminded of what we have to love about ourselves, those gifts that God gave us to give to others: a smile, an embrace, simple companionship, quiet presence, a commitment to justice, a belief in the basic good in humanity, abiding faith and abounding hope ... all rooted in the truth that our blessedness will always, always, always consume our brokenness.

So, as disciples, go, and love your neighbor as yourself.

Amen.