

Pentecost 10, Proper 15
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

August 17, 2014
Rev. Paul Moore

Association of the Broken

The kind-hearted woman was eating her lunch by a little bridge. She spied a lost puppy down by the water. The dog was a mix, obviously some terrier, some lab and probably some pit-bull, mostly white and mostly hungry. She called the dog to her, and the puppy promptly came, wagging her little white tail. About that time a truck came by and stopped. There were cages on the back of the truck, where stray dogs are rounded up and taken to the pound. The agent got out of the truck. "That your dog, ma'am?" On the spur of the moment the woman replied, "Yes, sir," and "Snowball" came to live at our house.

I almost gave her away, but on the night before my trip to South Texas where I knew a loving home awaited her, the kind-hearted woman said to me, "You know, that puppy has a nose on her. Landon is about to get his falconry permit and will need a dog." And so Snowball became a permanent part of our family.

She proved to be extremely bull-headed. When she was a pup she was convinced she could eat a cow, if it would only let her get a bite. A command was more of a suggestion. She has separation anxiety that will make her eat your couch if she thinks you've left her! Now, at 13 years of age, she's showing her years. The scars over one eye from when she got hit by a car are becoming a little more obvious. She spends more time sleeping than before, and she's not so quick to run outside, but in spite of her shortcomings, in all her imperfections, she's been the perfect dog for Landon.

I have a book on my desk called, The Spirituality of Imperfection written by Earnest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham. It's the best book I've ever read on the spirituality of Alcoholics Anonymous. AA is an interesting organization, and we ought to feel honored that they grace our building with a meeting. If you go to an AA meeting you walk into a group who all know where they've been. If you're there because you're a drunk trying to get sober they all know where you've been, too. They tell their stories, and though the characters, times and places, area different, the plot is the same:

- This is what life was like when I was drinking...(awful!)
- This is what brought about a change—12 steps
- This is what life is like now.

It's a spiritual association of the imperfect. In AA they come to know that they are all a little like Snowball, a mixture of glory and pain, and they're just trying to come to terms

with that in order to get sober and stay that way—again, and again, and again. That is the journey, and it's alright.

But aren't all these stories also the story of every one of us? The God who loved us into being created us in, by, and for love. That self-giving love is what makes the world REALLY go around. But to be in loving relationship each party must be free. We are free to choose God, and we are equally free to turn away. We did turn away from that love; we've all gotten lost by the bridge. We've lost the vision that makes our world REALLY go around, and we've lived pushing one another away by hurting one another.

We decided, like the Pharisees in the Gospel today, that the problem really lies outside ourselves. For them it was ritual: I'm in trouble because I ate something I shouldn't have. For us it's other people: My brother, my sister, my one-time friend, the driver of the other car, my spouse, my child, my boss, my co-worker, these are the ones who are messing me up. But it's all still a lie, and it's directed at the easiest person to deceive: ourselves. Jesus nails us to the wall: The problem is not outside, it's inside. You may or may not have control over what someone else does to you, but you DO have control over how you respond. So what often comes out of you is worse than anything anyone is doing to you because you could respond with compassion and you don't.

Amazingly, in spite of all that, we've all been called back into reconciliation, forgiveness and harmony. Hey—it's no news to anyone here—we've all had our dark moments. But we've found a path back into the heart of God here in this community of the Broken Travelers. It's not easy, we need one another for support along the way, to refocus us when we lose sight of the path, and to share our joys and sorrows.

How should we then live? In the second half of the Gospel lesson Jesus ends up in the country to the north. Jesus' reply to the woman has been the subject of a gazillion commentaries. I don't pretend to know exactly why, but for the sake of today's lesson consider this: This woman has three strikes against her:

- She is a gentile,
- She is a woman,
- And she has a demon-possessed daughter, obviously in the day evidence of God's disfavor.

She is us: She's broken, and yet she loves. Jesus brings all of that onto the table, “Yep, you're messed up!” And she, a true AA-style broken soldier, responds with a request for mercy anyway. Of course Jesus acts with mercy. He is true to the heart of his Father. He knew he would do no less. Can we do less? We're all in this mess together. None of us really can claim the high moral ground, not even Jesus' disciples.

So here is what I believe this means for us.

Hold one another tenderly. Eyes are powerful. To whom do you look? Away from whom do you look? All are children of God. God looks on them all in loving compassion and infinite wisdom, we should do no less. Words are powerful. Sometimes words do not sound as the speaker intends. Sometimes words fall on ears ill-prepared to hear them. God's words are always life-giving to the hearer. We should do no less. Touch is powerful. To shake a hand sincerely is a way of connecting, a pat on the back, a respectful hug; to connect with someone because they are lonely—or you are lonely, to touch in every way that is life-giving is to show the love of God.

Act in mercy. If you're concerned with justice, stop for a moment and think: Who's justice? Justice for whom? Self-giving love sees Justice as "what the other guy needs to thrive and do well." Mercy sees the other just as they are, and chooses action that builds the other person up in the context of their community. The Cross is God's idea of Justice.

Let one another go lightly. You do not know the next turn in another's path. It may seem to turn toward you, and it may seem to turn away from you. That need not concern you. They are walking their own path. You do not really know another's intention. Whether they intended good or ill is really of little consequence. What they do is of utmost consequence, and I challenge you to find a good light in which to see it. I'm sure you can. There is only one person in the end that you have control of, and that's yourself. Leave the others to God. It's the best place for them anyway.

The Church is an Association of the Broken. The truth is that we are all damaged, And we are all on the journey back home again. And that's OK with God!