

On Buying Junk & Selling Antiques

Rev. Eugene N. Nelson, Jr.
The Community Church of Sebastopol
June 9, 2013

Galatians 1:11-24

My mentor in ministry, Bill Nelson – no relation - shares this story: “Years ago, my wife and I were vacationing in Maine. We stumbled onto a quaint old Revolutionary period home and barn. A small placard announced, ‘Grandma’s Antiques.’ We were fascinated by this barn full of relics which, to me, looked mostly like the discards of every attic in Maine. When I made some such observation to ‘Grandma’, as she insisted on being called, she said, ‘You’re right! I buy junk, but I sell antiques!’”

Her comment makes me think of our own local artist, Patrick Amiot. As you know, during the construction of Pilgrim Center, Tom Dilley, Keith Blackstone and I took our Noah’s Ark sculpture, a Patrick original, over to his studio south of town to be refurbished – sanded, repaired and completely repainted. It looks great if you haven’t yet seen it. As I have told you before, during the construction of Pilgrim Center, the question I was asked most often was...what did you do with the ark and when is it coming back? Finally, we are no longer the church just past Taco Bell. Now we are the church with the ark! It was amazing to wander around Patrick’s work area. At first glance it looks like an area piled with junk – broken appliances, car parts, yard tools...you name it, he has it. But in his skilled hands, trash is turned into treasure. I see a rusted car frame, he sees a hippo. I see cast off pipe, he sees the neck of a giraffe. I see a broken clock, he sees a human face. Junk becomes art that, by the way, is sold for thousands of dollars. His slogan could be, “I buy junk, I sell expensive art.”

It occurs to me that Grandma’s slogan and the art of Patrick, provide us with a very good reminder of what Jesus was about most of the time. He took men and women, many of whom some would call life’s discards, and restored them to a new and hopeful humanity. You might say he was a recycler of people. And it was this – this ability to take a broken life and restore it to wholeness, the ability to see and uncover the hidden treasure in every life – that gave such force to the word, “Gospel”, good news.

And exhibit A of this human recycling process would be none other than the Apostle Paul. We heard the dramatic story of his personal transformation in our text this morning, a story told in his own words. We learned how he was transformed from a dedicated Pharisee, consumed with rage at the new teachings about Jesus Christ, a persecutor of the church, into one of the gospel’s most forceful evangelists – a founder of churches. According to Paul, his life stands as a testimony to the free and freeing good news of Christ, good news that can touch and restore the life of anyone – the last, the least, the lost – you and me.

A story told by UCC pastor, Lillian Daniel. “My parents collected beautiful, delicate pottery from Southeast Asia. Since these pieces were arranged around the house just out of reach of running children and frisky dogs, it was not until I was a teenager that I noticed a vase that did not fit with the rest of the collection. It had once been a fine antique with a cream glaze and blue Japanese design, but now it was damaged. It stood amid the finer pieces, a mass of cracks crudely glued together with what was obviously the wrong type of adhesive – glue that had bubbled out yellow as it dried, creating the effect of scabrous scars.

“‘Why don’t you get rid of that one?’ I asked my mother.

“‘Never’ she replied. ‘It’s the most valuable piece of pottery we have in this house.’ Then she told me the story behind the cracked vase.

“When I was a toddler, my journalist father was covering the Vietnam War, moving in and out of the war zone for weeks at a time. When he returned home, he brought a piece of Asian pottery to add to my mother’s collection. The vase was one of the finest he’d found, and he’d wrapped it in string and brown paper, then carried it carefully on several airplanes and buses before finally walking up the driveway with the very special present in his hands.

"But at that very moment, I, his two-year-old daughter, rushed forward, my arms outstretched for an embrace. Surprised and elated, my father could not push me aside to put down the vase. Instead he simply opened his arms. As I fell into them, the vase fell and broke into pieces. That night, my mother pulled out the glue, clumsily repaired the vase, and pronounced it precious – cracks and all."

Could there be a word here for the church? It can be exhausting moving about in a society, a job, a family or a church that seems to have no room for flaws or mistakes. I think of all those Christmas cards from friends over the years showing absolutely perfect families. Why can't my family look like that? Of course, a photo doesn't tell the whole story, but they sure looked good. Not a cracked vase in sight. Order and flawlessness can be so seductive in the midst of a chaotic world or personal life.

But then we step out of a perfection-driven world and come to worship. And what do we hear? "This is my body, broken for you." Broken? Flawed? Not perfect? Here, on Sunday morning? Imperfection? How can this be? Says Daniel, "The church presents a different understanding of brokenness. When we gather around the communion table....it is in the breaking of the bread, tearing it out of the perfection of a formed loaf and leaving the edges jagged, that we remember Jesus. His words render absurd our human preoccupation with perfection. True beauty comes not from the flawless piece, nor from the piece that pretends to have no crack. On Sunday morning we acknowledge that our salvation lies in God's broken body." But in the frantic pace of efforts to create more programs and attract more people, to sell ourselves to the wider world, a congregation, a pastor, can forget the beauty of being broken, and instead make the effort to appear to be a congregation without flaw or fault. And so, happily married, a couple attended church. But after their painful divorce, they wondered if they were still welcomed, still belonged. Everyone else seemed so happy. Was there room in the church for their pain, their brokenness? A family with a troubled child wonders if this church of seemingly perfect family has room for them and their struggle, their pain.

Could it be – could it be - that it is only when we acknowledge the beauty of the broken vase, let go of our obsession with perfection and acknowledge our shared brokenness, only then are the hungry fed, the homeless sheltered, the wounded cared for, the grieving comforted; only then can we share God's grace and our faith, our hope, that all of our cracks, our brokenness, our imperfection find a home in the open arms of Jesus.

I read our text and it seems to me that at times Paul seems completely amazed at what has happened to him. How could he, the persecutor, have been transformed into the proclaimer? He knows it is not because of how clean and superior and perfect he was. No, it was only through the love and acceptance of God's amazing grace. And his point is plain. He wants us to know that what God in Christ has done for him, God can do for each of us. Because God simply cannot tolerate even a one percent loss, not where persons are concerned. Everyone, absolutely everyone, is precious to God - not tossed aside, not forgotten, not given up on – but accepted and able to be recycled and restored.

This is the attitude, the faith, I hope we can communicate week after week in this place" namely, that you don't have to run away from yourself into drugs or alcohol, or a violently busy social life, or to some tempting affair, or into working every hour of every day just to get yourself off your hands. And neither do you have to hide from yourself as though you were unimportant, worthless, too hopelessly lost ever to be found. No, not when you are grabbed by the awareness – as was Paul – of just how precious you are to God and likely to a great many other persons as well. It can be a life-transforming discovery, providing new reasons to come alive and stay alive as a broken life becomes a priceless work of art. And hopefully this church, as broken and bent and imperfect as we often are, can still be a place where we witness to the power and promise of this amazing grace of God.

As a person from the Quaker tradition once wrote, "I reaffirm my birth each and every morning and say to God: 'I thank you that you choose to give me life, that my parents made the decision for me then. But I make the decision now! I am glad I was born and I am glad for this new day!' By God's grace may we choose to be born again into every new moment as something special, as God's gift and promise. I looked around the room and thought, church should be like this."

I guess you just never know when or where you might encounter the image of God, even in seemingly the unlikeliest of people, in some of the strangest places: "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor."

What an amazing thing to say. It's hard for me to believe that the Psalmist is talking about one such as me with such lofty words. And it is really hard for me to believe that the Psalmist is talking about some other people I have encountered from time to time. Him? A little lower than God? You can't be serious! But that is exactly what our text says. Of course, we don't often act like it, often seeming to do everything we can to deny it. . As one colleague says, "You take the expression, 'You have made us but little lower than God.' And then hold it up beside the daily newspaper and it doesn't seem to fit. Left a baby in a trash bin? Hit a pedestrian and didn't even stop? Took people's money that was supposed to go for Medicare? It doesn't seem to fit." But I don't have to read the newspaper. I only need look in the mirror. This is made a little less than God? This, with all my shortcomings, missteps, anxieties, and so many failed efforts to be the person God has called me to be? The Psalmist cannot be talking about me. And yet, once in a while... "Gene, when Mom called and told me Dad had died I was just lost...scrambling for something to hold onto. Then I remembered something you once said in a sermon, and I found a way to get through." Really...something I said? You just never know. Just never when and in whom the image of God might suddenly appear; when we might actually encounter each other as beings created just a little lower than God. In church? Even at a biker wedding? In you...in me? You just never know.

In the words of one pastor, "What we have most in common is not religion but humanity...I have learned that encountering another human being is as close to God as I may ever get – in the eye-to-eye thing, the person-to-person thing – which is where God's beloved has promised to show up. Paradoxically, the point is not to see him. The point is to see the person standing right in front of me, who has no substitute, who can never be replaced, whose heart holds things for which there is no language, whose life is an unsolved mystery." "A little lower than God..." "The lace of the wedding dress covered her massive arms but couldn't hide the tattoos that stretched from her wrists up to her shoulders." "A little lower than God."

Again, I am well aware that such a description of us does not always seem to fit. But again, once in a while...A Fred Craddock story: "When I was a minister in the mountains of east Tennessee, the church had vacation Bible school in the summer. It lasted two weeks. I had a class of third and fourth graders, about twelve kids, all day. I was ready at the end of one day to call it quits. The lesson that year was on nature. I used up all the prepared material in one day. Now what was I going to do the rest of the time? I decided to send them out into the woods. Find something in nature that reminded them of God and bring it back. Told them to return when they heard the bell. I dismissed them and they scattered. I thought about never ringing the bell, but I did. I rang it and here they came. I said to a young girl, 'And what do you have?'

" 'A flower,' she said.

" 'And what does that tell you about God?'

" 'That God is beautiful.'

"I asked another child, 'And what do you have?'

" 'A rock.'

" 'What does that tell you about God?'

" 'God is stout and strong like a rock.'

" 'And what do you have?'

" 'Huckleberries.'

" 'What do they tell you?'

" 'That God is good and feed us and feeds the animals.' Another very good answer."

And then here came Jim East, the meanest kid I ever saw. He was always there. You didn't always want him there, but there he was, so I said, 'Well Jimmy, what do you have that reminds you of God?' He was holding the hand of his sister from the kindergarten class. I said again, 'What did you bring, Jim?'

"He said, 'My sister.'

"And I realized, that's it...that's it! This mean little kid recognized there wasn't a thing in the forest that told him as much about God as his sister. That's it."

The Psalmist wonders why God bothers to pay any attention to us. After all, as we read in a later Psalm, we are like grass in the field – here one day and gone the next. Our time here is so brief. It is true of everything we do. And yet, as Fred Craddock reminds us, when God made the duck, God said, 'That's good!' And when God made the elephant, God chuckled and said, 'That's good!' When God made the redwood tree, God said, 'That's good.' When God made the rainbow trout, God said, "That's very good." And so on with all of creation. But it wasn't enough. So finally God said, 'I'm going to make something more like me, something in my image. I'm going to make something so that when others look at it they will say, 'That looks a lot like God.'" And so God made me and God made you. If only we could see that image in every encounter, if only we could see the holiness in our daily encounters, I think we would be forever changed.

I have always loved one scene in Graham Greene's classic novel, *The Power and the Glory*. The whiskey priest, having been pursued and finally captured by a hostile government finds himself in a filthy Mexican prison cell, surrounded by the sad dregs of humanity – drunks, cheats, thieving scoundrels and vicious killers. But in that moment he sees none of this. All he sees around him is the broken and battered body of Jesus. And Greene writes, "At the center of his own faith there always stood the convincing mystery...that we were made in God's image; and something resembling God dangles from every cross..." And we might add, is found in every prison, lurks under every grimy face, attends every biker wedding or even Sunday worship at The Community Church of Sebastopol.

I read the Psalm, I work my way through the Gospels, and I begin to think I understand where lay much of Christ's transforming power. Confused men, bewildered women, those with no hope or good reason for living, all said about him, "This man likes us; he sees something worthwhile in us; he does not treat us like the refuse of life. He sees immensely hopeful things about us and seems to think we can be better than we've been." And people – indeed a world – were changed. Do you suppose we could possibly do that for each other? See each other as Christ sees us?

Mary Luti, a worship and preaching professor, shares this reflection: "In some parts of the Orthodox church, it's the custom to crown the newly-baptized. In my class on the sacraments I show a video of a baptism of adults in a Russian Cathedral. Invariably some of my students start to cry when the priest reverently places a circle of lilies on each new Christian's head. I think it may be because that gesture awakens something we know is true, even if some families, religious doctrines, schools, relationships, advertising, and life's many blows have tried to kill it. That baptismal gesture unmasks the lie too many of us believe that we are not worthy. It declares instead that we are glorious, that the flowered crown God weaved for us in the beginning is a perfect fit, that our dignity is immense, and that our glory astonishes the angels."

A little lower than God...imagine that!