

Body Building sermon series
Broken Hearts - James 2:1-8
Sept. 15, 2024
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Do you remember your first love? I do. First grade. Chenoweth Elementary School in Louisville, Ky. Her name was Phoebe and she sat in front of me in class. She had long blond hair that I thought looked like spaghetti. I loved spaghetti, so I would just stare at her hair and imagine marinara sauce and garlic bread. This was true love. One time, I went to the pencil sharpener, and she came up at the SAME TIME! I just knew that she was the one for me. Until one day, at recess, she said the two words that I would hear repeated by women over and over again for the rest of my life: “You’re strange!” Pheobe and I were just never the same after that. She stopped sharing her glue during craft time. We drifted apart.

My heart was first broken by Pheobe with the spaghetti hair. I wish that were the last time, but like each one of you, I’ve had my heart broken time and time again. And the pain doesn’t get any easier, does it? It hurts. It’s no fun. To give your heart away to someone, and then to have it given back to you in pieces, is a level of suffering that none of us wants to feel. Life would be easier if we could avoid that. It would be safer. But would it be more fulfilling? We continue our “Body Building” sermon series today as we seek to build our body in a way that reflects the love of Christ within us. Last week we talked about having big ears; today we’ll do some spiritual cardio as we explore the risks and rewards of broken hearts.

James writes, “If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right.” The Greek word for “neighbor” here is all-encompassing, it shows no favoritism, as James demonstrates earlier in the passage. We are called to love the poor the same way we love the rich. If you are willing to let yourself love someone as you would want to be loved, you are living the life God has called you to live. But to do so comes with such a risk. Any time we choose to truly love, like I truly loved Phoebe with the spaghetti hair, we know that our hearts may be broken.

Pet owners understand this very well. When I was in elementary school, my mom got me a dog for my birthday. His name was Rusty and he was a Weimaraner. I loved that dog...for all three days that we had him. What my mom didn’t know was that Weimaraners are very hyper dogs, and when we left Rusty alone for the first time, he tore up our living room. So Mom said Rusty had to go back to the animal shelter. As I walked Rusty back to his cage at the pound, I was devastated. My heart was broken.

Losing a pet can be hard enough, but the pain we feel when we share in another person’s suffering is even greater. Giving our hearts to someone means entering into their lives to such a point that we feel the pain that they feel. Another word for that is compassion, which literally means “to suffer with.” In the training to be a Stephen Minister, we spend a lot of time talking about the importance of compassion. We can only be helpful to someone if we do our best to understand what they are going through. And we know the importance of doing that because we all know the pain of having our hearts broken. Suffering – in whatever form it takes – is a universal human experience.

Which is a great reason for us NOT to treat others with compassion, for us NOT to enter into their suffering. We’ve had our share of broken hearts; why in the world would we want to take on someone else’s pain? We’ve done the hard work of mending and healing and taping back together our own hearts. Why then would we want to open ourselves up to that same hurt on

behalf of someone else? We've already been there, we know how much it hurts. Let them deal with it themselves. We can offer our thoughts and prayers, but that's as involved as we're gonna get.

I'm not downplaying the importance or power of prayer. In fact, we'll talk about that in a few weeks. But James is making another point here. On one level, he's talking about the dangers of favoritism, only treating with respect those who have something to give us in return. But at a deeper level, he's talking about not coming eye-to-eye with those who we know are suffering. He warns against giving the rich person a good seat but putting the poor person down – literally – by having them sit on the floor. But it's safer for me if they are down there, because then I don't have to look them in the eye, I don't have to treat them as an equal, I don't have to acknowledge they are a real human being. If we put them down, call them names, dehumanize them, then I don't have to have compassion for them.

I wonder who in our lives we keep "down there?" I'll guarantee it's not the people who are most like us. Those are the ones we want to connect with because it's more comfortable. It's much more dangerous to connect with those who don't think like us or look like us or believe like us, people who are easy to judge or stereotype or "put down there." And yet, their pain is as real as ours, and their need for compassion is as strong as ours, regardless of where they live or to whom they pray. If we are willing to see them as human beings, we're opening ourselves up to heartbreak.

But if we dare to connect with someone, to keep them on our level, then we are also opening ourselves up to sharing in their joy and easing their pain. In his book The Wounded Healer, Henri Nouwen says, "It seems necessary to re-establish the basic principle that no one can help anyone without becoming involved, without entering with their whole person into the painful situation, without taking the risk of becoming wounded in the process." The apostle Paul says it even more clearly in Romans 12: "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." In other words, love others as you would want to be loved, treat others as you would want to be treated, take the risk to fully enter into their suffering with them.

We can see what this looks like by watching Jesus. He wasn't afraid to eat with tax collectors and sinners, he didn't shy away from touching lepers and healing the sick. We see God's heart through Jesus' actions. In John's gospel, Jesus has heard about the death of his friend Lazarus and goes to Bethany to visit the tomb. Jesus knows this story is going to have a happy ending, but when he is confronted with the raw pain of Mary and Martha, he has moved to tears. Jesus weeps, not so much out of his own pain, but out of the pain he sees in those with whom he is connected. Jesus keeps everyone at eye level.

Jesus loved out of compassion, not out of pity. That's an important distinction. Connecting with someone out of pity implies looking down on them from where we are. Connecting with someone from our hearts means regarding them as brothers and sisters and helping them out of the compassion, the empathy, we feel for them. Instead of maintaining that buffer zone between us and someone we know is hurting in order to keep our own hearts safe, we open our hearts to the grief of others as though it were our own. The Tibetans call this quality "the inability to bear the sight of another's sorrow."

The challenge for us is to model Jesus' radical willingness to love, not only those we know, but those whom others had cast out. Our hearts broke for those we know who are suffering. They should also break when we read about children who've been abused, or unarmed people being mistreated by authorities, or people using violence to solve problems. Our hearts should break when we hear of immigrants being treated like animals. Our heart should break

when we read about people of color or members of marginalized community being discriminated against simply for being who they are. Our hearts should break when our leaders make decisions that favor the rich and put down the poor. Any time God's peace is broken, any time one of God's children is harmed, any time a person suffers because they don't have the basic necessities to survive, we should be unable to bear the sight of their sorrow. Our hearts should break and our compassion should spur, not just thoughts and prayers, but a response.

It's hard to live with a broken heart. It's painful. It's messy. But through the grace of Christ, our hearts are strong and resilient. The amazing thing about our heart is that when we give a piece of it away, it grows larger, not smaller. For each person we love, for each time we offer compassion to someone, the capacity of our heart grows and our ability to connect expands, not contracts.

It's so easy to look at a painful situation and say, "You know, I'm not going to get involved. I'm not going to put myself through that." But here's the thing. God's not standing over here with us, safe from the pain. God is with the suffering, right in the messy middle of it. God is in the hospital room, God is in the divorce court, God is in the rehab center, God is with our lonely neighbor or our troubled relative or our misbehaving student. God is there, on the floor with the person in rags. God is there.

What makes *your* heart break? In our world that is overflowing with heartbreaking stories, it's easy to grow numb to the need around us for compassion. The needs of our world community are so massive it's almost paralyzing. Where do we even begin? We begin here. There are also plenty of people right here in Lexington that need our compassion. If they walked into church today, would we show to them to a good seat or ignore them and hope they go away?

Mother Teresa said it this way: "When we ultimately go home to God, we are going to be judged on what we were to each other, what we did for each other, and, especially, how much love we put into that. It's not how much we give, but how much love we put into doing it." May we be blessed with the inability to bear the sight of another's sorrow, and may our hearts be broken again and again and again.