

“Broken Hearts”

During this Lenten season, we are doing our sermon rotation using Dr. Joel Bierman’s series called “Restored in Christ.” Each week, we will focus on the brokenness of this sinful world and how Christ has restored us. Dr. Bierman tells of the early years as a husband, before becoming a father, as a young seminarian bought his bride a special, albeit not very expensive piece of jewelry. It was a gold chain from which dangled a small, gold heart. The heart was puffy and hollow.

His wife loved the gift, or perhaps her husband, enough to wear the heart all the time. And then babies began to arrive. They too loved the little puffy heart. Three different babies would discover the chain and the puffy heart hanging around Mamma’s neck. From the fist to the mouth, the puffy heart was the perfect, satisfying teething tool. And, of course, precious babies chewing on Mommy’s necklace was so adorable—but the heart did not fare so well. After three babies, it was dented, dinged and eventually crushed more or less flat. And so the token of their young marriage had become a smashed, somewhat mangled piece of gold jewelry. The puffy heart was now a broken heart.

Life does that to us. And the unfortunate truth is that the heart smashing is usually done by forces much more powerful and devastating than baby teeth. Hearts are tender things. They are easily bruised, and easily broken. I know you’ve experienced it. Everyone has. Relationships don’t work out the way we imagined. Death takes away the one you loved—the relationship seemingly severed for good. Hearts are sensitive things. A relationship can make your heart soar on the wings of joy—and a relationship can break a heart mercilessly.

But our hearts are not only vulnerable to the shifting realities of relationships, they can also be broken by the ravages of sin. Probably nothing brings more heartache to a parent than the

realization that his own bad choice brought suffering to his child. And it is genuinely heartbreaking to watch an individual with great talent and potential squander their gifts and fail to use them. It is crushing when people you love make foolish and devastating decisions—it breaks your heart.

But if you really want to understand your brokenness, you need to look within your own heart and find there the ugly, unwanted stain of sin. Sin breaks us. Sin breaks our hearts. We are crushed by our own failure—laid low—destroyed by our own wickedness and evil.

Which is, of course, a big part of what Ash Wednesday is all about. It's not an especially fun day. You are encouraged, even commanded, today, to turn your gaze inward—at least for as long as you can endure it—and see what actually resides in your own heart. And when you are forced to look, it is a cringe-worthy moment. No one else knows your heart like you do. Despite your best efforts to put a good face on things, you know the reality. Sin is functioning far too freely. Its reach extends far too deeply. You begrudge the good fortune of others. You resent the joys that are denied to you but enjoyed by others. You lust for what is not yours, and neglect what is yours. You reject what God gives you to do and insist that there must be something else to life. You try to do what's right, but you always fall short; you never quite measure up. You see it all, there, in your own heart, and your heart breaks. It breaks in shame, regret and sorrow. It breaks for what could have been and is not. It breaks at the staggering cost of sin. Ash Wednesday is all about breaking hearts. And broken hearts aren't fun.

No one wants a broken heart, except for God. Ps. 51 tells us, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." Did you hear that? A broken heart; God wants broken hearts. Our tendency is to try and fix it ourselves first. He doesn't want hearts that have been patched up. He doesn't want them "fixed" as if we ever fix them. He wants them broken.

In other words, he wants you to come before him with honesty and humility. He wants you to enter his presence as you really are—

broken heart and all. And, that's hard to do. It's hard to leave a broken heart alone. So, we try to piece it back together so that he will receive our hearts with gratitude and pride. Or, maybe, you try to patch your broken heart simply to ease the pain and to make life tolerable—but, again, God doesn't get your broken heart. He gets one that you've tried to fix. When your heart is broken you should not try to fix it. Don't go looking for a new relationship to ease the sting. Don't try to compensate for your sin by piling up an impressive stack of really good deeds. Don't try to salve a wounded heart by exacting revenge on the one who hurt you. Don't put on the show of a life in perfect harmony and order when at the center is a stained, torn and broken heart. Offering God a heart with a patch job is on the order of a husband giving his wife a broken vase that has been repaired with Elmer's glue and Scotch tape. It's repulsive. It's tragic. How futile and pathetic it is when we try to fix our broken hearts. It can't be done. You can't put back what sin destroys. Don't mend your broken heart. God will only receive hearts that are broken.

It was years ago that those teething children crushed and bent the little gold heart once given as a token of newlywed love. But, even though the children are grown, the wife still wears that heart. In fact, it is now probably the most precious piece of jewelry that she owns. It's still bent, smashed and badly misshapen. Now it hangs as a reminder of the three children who each left his or her mark on that heart. The very beauty and value of that heart is in its brokenness. Fix it? You've got to be kidding. That would be the absolute worst thing to do. Replace it? Of course not. You can't replace a broken heart like that. No, it is a broken heart and a broken heart it will always be. A broken heart is a precious and beautiful thing. God treasures your broken heart. He doesn't want it after you've tried patching it up and making it look right. He wants it broken. He wants it as it is—shattered by sin, trampled by the world's injustice, bruised and torn by the insensitivity and indifference of people. He wants your heart like that—broken. A broken heart is beautiful to God.

So, you're in good shape tonight after all. Ash Wednesday drives the truth home: you are dust, you are ashes, you are broken. And, God receives you just that way and in no other way. It is a blessing to be broken. A broken heart has infinite value simply because it is helpless and humble and ready to receive what God gives. People with nothing and with no hope are eager to get whatever someone offers. People who are whole and full and healthy think they don't need anything. And that's why God does not just snap his divine fingers and make your heart instantly whole. Which is probably not how you expected this sermon to end. The predictable ending, the ending we would write, is that you come to God with your broken heart and he makes it whole and perfect. Bam, just like that: every hurt—gone! Every sin—wiped out! Every broken relationship—restored! Every crack—fully repaired. No more brokenness.

And, to be honest, there are some people who will tell you that's the way that it is, and that if it's not that way, then something is wrong with you or your faith. That's a lie. God wants broken hearts, he wants your broken heart—and he takes the broken heart you bring and binds it up, and he blesses it with his forgiveness and grace, and he makes your heart his instrument: a heart that trusts him completely, and a heart that pours out love to all of those around. God takes broken hearts and comforts them with the promise that they will be healed and whole again. And it will happen.

When God makes all things new at Christ's return, sin will be finished, hurts will be wiped away, and all will be restored. He will "wipe away every tear from your eye." But not yet...now we still live in a broken world. Now, we still live with broken hearts, and that's as it should be. It's your broken heart that God wants. Don't worry about fixing it; only God can do that, and he will. In the meantime, rejoice in his grace and take comfort in his promise: A broken and contrite heart, he will not despise. Indeed, a broken heart he deems beautiful. A broken heart he will receive, he will redeem, and yes, one day, he will fully restore. Amen.