

## *Living with a Broken Heart*

Matthew 19.16-22

June 6, 2010

“I tell you this to break your heart,  
by which I mean only that it break open  
and never close again to the rest of the world.”

- Mary Oliver

### *The Reading*

Then someone came to him and said, ‘Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?’  
<sup>17</sup>And he said to him, ‘Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.’ <sup>18</sup>He said to him, ‘Which ones?’ And Jesus said, ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; <sup>19</sup>Honour your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ <sup>20</sup>The young man said to him, ‘I have kept all these; what do I still lack?’ <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to him, ‘If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ <sup>22</sup>When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Living with a broken heart is not an easy topic to address. If it has to be addressed, however, no one is more qualified to do so than I. Back in the day my heart was broken time and time again. I kept giving it away, and girl after girl kept stomping on it and rubbing it into the dirt. My heart was broken so many times; the first was my Susie Q, Susie Cruce was her name. I was in high school, head over heels in love, but she found an older man, a freshman in college, and left me in the dust. I clung to life with a broken heart until I found my next Susie; this time, Susie Wade, when I was in college. We were head over heels in love. We were both music majors, and at one point were scheduled to play the male and female leads in Finian’s Rainbow; everything was picture perfect until she found somebody she loved more and ...she broke my heart. Finally I met Peggy, and thought surely my luck had changed. But in truth her name was Peggy Sue, and as before the relationship went south and I found myself standing lost and alone, nursing another broken heart.

I’m sure there was a lesson to be learned through all this; if nothing else I should have realized that I wasn’t meant to be with a Susie of any stripe: Susie Q, Susie, or Peggy Sue. This

---

*James R. “Bo” Crowe  
Overland Park Christian Church*

being said I think you will agree that I am highly qualified to speak to the subject of living with a broken heart. The only problem is, that's not the kind of broken heart Mary Oliver is referring to in her beautiful little snippet of a poem. Living with a broken heart, she says in eloquence, is about living with your heart open to God, to the world, to your neighbor so that you can find a life that is full of love, goodness and beauty... you can live with a broken heart so long as it's broken open to breathe in all the beauty and goodness that God has in store for us in our lives.

I love this little piece of poetry and the first time I read it I knew I would preach on it, but I wasn't sure exactly what I wanted to say about it. In fact, I mentioned to Chris this weekend that I was anxious to hear my sermon today because I wanted to know what I would say about this poem. I had little if any idea about what I wanted to say until early this morning, sitting in my study. It was about 5:00 AM and I sat gazing out the windows of my study, watching the day slowly begin to unfold - to blossom forth like a flower - and listening to birds sing in the trees. When I saw and heard this beauty and goodness, I realized that I really didn't want to *say* anything about this poem. Rather, I want us all to experience its meaning; allowing our hearts to break open - to be with the world, to be with God, to be with our neighbors - rather than closing ourselves off, protecting who we are and what we have, insulating ourselves from a world that might very well be dangerous. What I really want is not to talk about living with a broken heart ...but for us all to share that experience.

I don't think we're going to learn much about such an experience from the rich young man that Jesus speaks with in today's gospel reading, because this young man doesn't know what it is like to live with a broken heart. His heart is sealed tight. It is totally closed off... insulated from anything outside of himself. Nevertheless, he asks Jesus what he needs to do to find God's favor. I suspect the question is rhetorical; he knows he has God's favor, and only wants others to recognize and celebrate that fact. Here is a young man any of us would be proud to claim as a son, a nephew, a grandson. And we would be particularly proud of his religious life. If they gave out stars for perfect attendance in synagogue, you can bet he had a chest full of them; and if they memorized passages of Torah in pious competition, you can bet he took first place. He doesn't need Jesus to quote the Ten Commandments to him; he has observed them all since childhood ...even loving his neighbor as himself. This seems a

significant challenge, but in his day one could offer a few alms to the poor, contribute to some social cause, and count that as fulfillment of the command. It paled nothing like the wallop it did in Jesus' vision of faith.

This young man is proud of who he is, of what he has accomplished, of the man that he has forged from the raw material his parents gave him. What do I need to do to curry God's favor, he asks Jesus; convinced that awed silence will be the response. But he is shocked, I am sure, by Jesus' reply; if you wish to be perfect... what do you mean *if*, he must think. What could be lacking in a man with such a strong heart, a firm will, a man admired in the community, admired in his synagogue, a man we would all be proud to call friend? Jesus tells him in so many words, your heart has not been broken. If you want to be perfect, Jesus says, then give away your possessions and follow me.

If we're going to understand what Jesus is saying, we have to pause a moment to explain his use of the word perfect. Jesus is not saying if you want to be *flawless*, if you want to be *without sin*. The Greek word that Jesus uses and that is translated as perfect in the New Revised Standard Version carries the sense of whole or complete. If you want to be whole, if you want to live with what John's Jesus calls fullness of life, then let your heart break open, give up all that you have, and follow me.

Even though this passage has been used to establish the notion of a hierarchy of Christians – average and above average, mediocre and perfect – this is not what Jesus means. He is not talking about different levels of Christians. He is not talking about different degrees of commitment and achievement... as a matter of fact he isn't talking about achievement at all, and that's the point. Jesus says, if you want fullness of life you have to stop reaching for it. You have to stop grasping for it. You have to stop trying to be a self-made man or woman. You simply have to let your heart be broken wide open and accept fullness of life as a gift; because only then - when the goodness and beauty of the world penetrate your heart and become a part of who you are – only then can you know fullness of life.

Should we allow our hearts to be broken, we will find three things. Firstly, we will find God, because God comes to us offering all of the blessings of life, including what we call salvation, as a gift. The problem with this young man is that he doesn't think he needs a gift

from anyone. He is proud of himself. He has defined himself by his own standards; but should he allow his heart to be broken, he will be defined by God's standards, and will know God as a central part of his life.

The same is true for us; if we allow our hearts to be broken wide open, we'll find God who comes as a gift – that's why we call it grace – and, secondly, we will find our true self as well. It's so easy to lose oneself in the world. Have you seen this? Have you seen people who simply react to whatever soars in on the wings of culture? They really have no identity, no sense of purpose in view for themselves; they simply *go with the flow*. They don't find themselves in the world; they lose themselves to the world.

It's possible, of course, to lose oneself in other ways, to lose oneself to the world's destructive realities - addiction, estrangement, anger, and greed to name a few- that can tear one apart and destroy one's soul. There is a word of caution here for us all. Such destructive realities are out there, stalking our lives. So when we open our heart to the world we become vulnerable. We may be hurt... there may be a Susie waiting for you somewhere. We may be hurt; but when we find our spirit and live in that abundance of life that is wholeness and peace, we will not be pulled apart, because we will have found our very soul.

If we allow our hearts to be broken wide open we will find God, we will find our own soul and, thirdly, we will find our neighbor. If we allow our hearts to be broken wide open we will not only let the beauty and goodness of nature be a part of our lives, not only let the presence of God be a part of our lives, but we will find our neighbor, and learn to see her or him as an intimate part of who we are. We will learn that we can't truly live without opening our heart to others. We can sacrifice ourselves, as today's vocal solo suggests (*The Gift of Love*, based on 1 Corinthians 13); we can be obedient ...in short, we can be the rich young man, but if we don't have love we won't find anything of significance; not God, not our soul, not our neighbor. There's a powerful saying that has been attributed to several Christian thinkers; I'd love to claim it myself because it says everything that needs to be said about allowing our hearts to be broken wide open to the gifts of life, "I sought my soul but my soul I could not see. I sought my God but my God eluded me, then I sought my neighbor and I found all three." This is true for you, for me, and yes, even for Susie.