

The Broken Whole

¹⁵The Son is the image of the invisible God, the one who is first over all creation,^[a]

¹⁶Because all things were created by him: both in the heavens and on the earth, the things that are visible and the things that are invisible. Whether they are thrones or powers, or rulers or authorities, all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷He existed before all things, and all things are held together in him. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the one who is firstborn from among the dead^[b] so that he might occupy the first place in everything. ¹⁹Because all the fullness of God was pleased to live in him,²⁰ and he reconciled all things to himself through him—whether things on earth or in the heavens. He brought peace through the blood of his cross. ²¹Once you were alienated from God and you were enemies with him in your minds, which was shown by your evil actions. ²²But now he has reconciled you by his physical body through death, to present you before God as a people who are holy, faultless, and without blame. ²³But you need to remain well established and rooted in faith and not shift away from the hope given in the good news that you heard. This message has been preached throughout all creation under heaven. And I, Paul, became a servant of this good news.

Colossians 1:15-23

The Broken Whole

There are some experiences in life that leave such an indelible mark in your memory that they stay with you for years. About a decade ago, I was serving as a church camp counselor in the mountains of central Pennsylvania. On one particular week in July, a small group of high school students and four adult leaders took up residence in the camp's main lodge. They were an especially close group. The four adult leaders had been organizing the excursion for eight consecutive years. Many of the youth were attending for their third or fourth year in a row. One young man named Dylan, the camper I'll always remember, was back for his eighth and final year of camp.

Dylan was a special needs student. The camp organizers knew Dylan from church, knew it was hard for Dylan to make friends, knew it was hard for Dylan's parents to keep up with him. So they invited Dylan to their very first week of camp. It was an immediate fit. For the first four summers Dylan was just like his peers, a gangly teenager, random hairs sprouting from his chin, quirky but eager to fit in. As summers passed students graduated, moved on to college, and took summer jobs, but Dylan remained. At twenty-two and a few patches shy of a full beard, Dylan had aged out of church camp but was still technically a high school student, so the camp coordinators invited him back for his last year of camp with one stipulation. Dylan would be a junior-counselor. It was a title and a responsibility Dylan accepted with great pride. He still played in the lake, went on hikes, and spent time in the craft lodge with the other students, but as a junior counselor and a camp veteran Dylan knew the schedule by heart. "All right guys," he'd pronounce, "We have fifteen minutes before lunch. Let's get cleaned up." He exercised his leadership with great seriousness and enthusiasm; he was much loved and welcomed by everyone as a friend.

But like I said, the time came for Dylan to graduate from high school and to attend his final year of camp. On the last night of the last day, we gathered in the great room of the lodge in front of a roaring fire and a candle lit altar table just like Dylan had done every year for eight years. There was a sermon, there was prayer, and then the pastor invited anyone who wanted to accept Jesus into their heart to come up to the altar table. Dylan, always the leader, was the first to make the journey. He got saved every year at church camp, and he knew how to invest his entire body in the ritual. He

would fold his hands in a solemn plea, bow his head and hunch his shoulders as if yoked by the burden of his guilt, and step slowly and deliberately to the place where he had discovered grace years before. On this last night, Dylan added one more movement. As he stood, he leaned into the ear of the first year camper in front of him and whisper just loudly enough to be heard by all, "It's alright, follow me." Dylan led us all to the table. We gathered there, about 16 of us, and prayed for one another. We cried and hugged until the pastor took the bread and the cup in his hands. We circled around the table and served one another.

Slowly, campers retired to bed and the fire burned to a dull crackle. Steve, one of the adult leaders and I sat on a sofa, alone in the dimly lit room.

"What's Dylan going to do when he graduates?" I asked.

"He's going to work a line at the Purdue chicken facility."

"Seriously?" I was shocked! "Cutting up chickens? They're going to let him do that? Isn't there something else he can do?"

"Not really. It's a small town and there aren't a lot of jobs for people like him."

"But surely the government or an agency..."

Steve just shook his head as if he knew every possibility had been exhausted.

We sat there in silence, struggling to picture Dylan in the antiseptic confines of a USDA processing center, wielding a razor sharp cleaver with metal mesh gloves, dismembering 70 birds a minute as they floated past on a hook anchored to an endlessly rotating chain. Nothing but death and dismemberment for 60 dollars a day.

"Once you were alienated from God," the scripture lesson tells us, "and you were enemies with him in your minds, which was shown by your evil actions." The human plight is dislocation, fueled by ignorance and evidenced by our exploitation of God's good world. We live in a processed and disjointed society where even God's gift of food can be manufactured like a model-T, disconnected from the farm, the farmer, and the butcher, and sold in cellophane sterility as if it did not depend on death and dismemberment.

This is the greatest lie, that we can have life without the blood and the broken body.

Around the table on Wednesday night during the Supper Sermon Dialogue, the group expressed discomfort with the idea that Jesus "brought peace through the blood of his cross" and he "reconciled you by his physical body through death". I understand. We are uncomfortable with a theology that views Jesus' violent death as a necessary payment that frees us from Satan, or a necessary sacrifice that satisfies God's justice and balances the Divine ledger. We want to insist that God's salvation does not cause or require violence and death.

But I am afraid that if we ignore the flowing blood of Christ and look away from broken body of our Lord, we will forget that we live in a disjointed and alienated world; or worse, forget that we are culpable in its brokenness. I'm afraid that if we circle around the banquet table and refuse to witness the broken body and blood of Christ in our world, we will end up with a shrink-wrapped cross; cheap grace, pre-packaged and ready for consumption...a meal that cannot speak to the injustice, alienation, and exploitation of our world.

That is not the Gospel.

The Good News is that God knew the world was full of dismemberment and death; Yet God entered into our society in flesh and blood. The very fullness of God did not flee from our cruelty, did not leave us alienated and alone, but was born into our world to lead us in love and life. When we remember love crucified, when we are washed in the blood of the lamb, we remember our costly

call to discipleship. To confront violence with peace, to shine light upon ignorance, to connect with our neighbors, and to extend compassion to our enemies. We do not walk alone, Church, but we are nourished all along the way by the hope of Resurrection and Life. Fed by the promise that nothing in this world can overwhelm the love of God, not violence, not death, nothing.

Caroline and I were on our way back from Pennsylvania last weekend and we stopped to have dinner at a Cracker Barrel. We were seated next to two couples who had each ordered the Sunday special, two fried chicken breasts, with veggies and a side. I watched the waiter as he served four people 8 large chicken breasts, and I remembered Dylan. And in that moment, I wanted a fuller meal, a meal that could take all the brokenness in the world and somehow make it whole.

The table is ready, come and eat.