

The Chipped Cup
Psalm 51:17
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
March 15, 2020
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

I suspect many of you did not notice, but I made what I would call a significant mistake in the newsletter this week. In my article I shared a prayer titled “Help Me Unbury Wonder” from a book by Ted Loder. My mistake was in the title of the book. Instead of typing *Guerrillas of Grace* – spelled G-U-E-R-R-I-L-L-A-S, I typed *Gorillas of Grace* – spelled G-O-R-I-L-L-A-S.

Now some of you may think this doesn’t matter. But, I suspect Ted Loder, while he might laugh and say I am not the only one who has done that, would see a significant difference between his book being titled *Gorillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle*, as in large apes leading us in acts of grace, vs. *Guerrillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle*. Because after all, a guerrilla – spelled with “ue”, according to the dictionary, is “a person who engages in irregular warfare.”¹ And Ted Loder’s call in the prayers he has written is certainly for us to engage *irregularly* in this life’s battles, with grace as our primary tool.

So, why does any of this matter today? Why did I just waste your time talking about my mistake? Did I forget that it’s really not all about me, but that we gather here because of the divine? Indeed, I did not.

But I do suspect that I am not the only one known to beat myself up over some small and forgivable mistake or misstep. I suspect I am not the only one who has walked away from a conversation wondering why I said what I did or walked away from a mistake that others forgot long ago, only to keep remembering. And I suspect I am not the only one who has not only

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/guerrilla>

made innocent mistakes, but who has sinned in ways that have sometimes left a mark or changed the course of a day or a lifetime.

So today, as we continue to let the image of the cup be our guide, we look at the chipped cup. And what a wonderful image for us as we journey through Lent. For the reality is that we all have chips and cracks, some visible, some hidden, but chips and cracks that shape who we are. And sometimes we allow ourselves to be so overwhelmed by our blemishes that we don't even see the possibility that is still left in us.

And yet the challenge of this season and the challenge of our faith is to discover our potential in spite of the chips and cracks. And even more than that, the challenge is not to despise the chips and cracks, but to come to understand them as teachers, to learn and grow because of them.

In another of Ted Loder's prayers from that same book, this one titled, "Pry Me off Dead Center", we hear these words. Listen carefully because there is a lot packed in this prayer: O persistent God, deliver me from assuming your mercy is gentle. Pressure me that I may grow more human, not through the lessening of my struggles, but through an expansion of them that will undamn me and unbury my gifts. Deepen my hurt until I share it and myself openly, and my needs honestly. Sharpen my fears until I name them and release the power I have locked in them and they in me. Accentuate my confusion until I shed those grandiose expectations that divert me from the small, glad gifts of the now and the here and the me. Expose my shame where it shivers, crouched behind the curtains of propriety, until I can laugh at last through my common frailties and failures, laugh my way toward becoming whole. Deliver me from just going through the motions and wasting everything I have which is today, a chance, a choice, my creativity, your call. O persistent God, let how much it all matters pry me off dead center so if I

am moved inside to tears or sighs or screams or smiles or dreams, they will be real and I will be in touch with who I am and who you are and who my sisters and brothers are.”²

If you listened closely to his words, you were likely shocked by them. After all, who prays, “pressure me...not through the lessening of my struggles, but through an expansion of them”? Who prays, “deepen my hurt” or “sharpen my fears” or “accentuate my confusion” or “expose my shame”? Especially in these confusing days with new news of COVID-19 daily, who prays for confusion or fear or struggles?

And yet, perhaps those are exactly the words we should pray. For did you hear what he was asking for? “Deepen my hurt until I share it and myself openly, and my needs honestly.” “Sharpen my fears until I name them and release the power I have locked in them and they in me.” “Accentuate my confusion until I shed those grandiose expectations that divert me...” “Expose my shame where it shivers...until I can laugh at last through my common frailties and failures.”

Friends, too often we not only hesitate but just downright refuse to share with each other the parts of ourselves of which we are not proud. We try to hide the aspects of ourselves that we consider weak or less than. We try to look better than we are. We try to pretend we are more capable, more perfect than our reality. And, for sure, when we sin, we work hard to hide it.

But today, as we consider the chipped cup, we are reminded that our flaws, our chips, our blemishes, our weaknesses can be not only our teachers, but opportunities to be part of something more. They can be places where we are reminded that we are not in this alone, but that we are better in relationship with God and each other.

² Ted Loder, *Guerrillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle* (Philadelphia: Innisfree Press, Inc., 1984), 96-7.

And our sins, even those we want so bad to hide, can be places that remind us of the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation, and in their aftermath we can rewrite our stories and those of the communities around us to make them better.

Today we heard a familiar psalm.

Psalm 51 is a psalm which is noted as being a psalm of David after the prophet Nathan confronted him about his encounter with Bathsheba. In the New Revised Standard Version, it reads, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me....Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.”³

Here is a psalm of David – David who took another man’s wife, not only without his consent but likely without hers. David, who when realizing she was pregnant, had that man killed. David whose sin was real, but who was invited not to remain in the shadow of it, but to live a life where he was not defined by his worst mistakes.

We, too, are invited to not be defined by the least of who we are or the worst of what we do. We are not reduced to our greatest fears, to our poorest skills, or to our biggest sins. We are not defined by the chips and flaws that are part of our story, but instead defined by the love of God that fills us and that helps us see our purpose beyond our disappointment and sin.

And we are invited to create communities for and with each other where it is safe to say, “I am imperfect,” where it is safe to confess our sin, where it is safe to ask for help to live beyond these realities and to live as God’s beloved children. We are invited to create communities where we can name our fears but not be controlled by them. We are invited to create communities where we can ask for help and not feel ashamed. We are invited to create

³ Psalm 51:1-3, 10, NRSV.

communities where we envision together how we live beyond the hurt of our sin. We are invited to create communities where the love and claim of God on each of us doesn't make us hide our flaws, but helps us to live beyond them.

Friends, we are all chipped cups...we all have parts of ourselves we struggle to love...but we are invited to remember that they do not write our whole story, rather God is writing a better one.