

Not Leaving Our Brokenness Behind

Numbers 12:1-16

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May 17, 2020

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In the current historical period of the COVID-19 virus and economic crises, I'm wondering – when and how we move beyond the challenges and losses which are a part of this, if we might do well not to leave behind three elements of who we are. Last Sunday, we explored how in the faith tradition, we are encouraged never to leave integrity behind. Next Sunday, Memorial Day weekend, we'll explore not leaving behind our well-being. Today, we explore the importance of not leaving behind our brokenness.

The story from Numbers, chapter 12, seems plain enough at one level. Miriam and Aaron talk negatively about their brother Moses. Miriam contracts leprosy, which the culture generally believes is God's punishment for some sin. Miriam is quarantined outside the main camp until she would be cleared to return to the larger non-quarantined community. So, when Miriam was free from quarantine, they all went forward together.

This story is not intended to isolate Miriam as the sole source and cause of community-relationship-brokenness. The story is re-told to help us explore how brokenness exists, indicating that race and ethnicity lie at the beginning of the problem. Miriam and Aaron initially are irritated that Moses' new wife is a Cushite. She's from outside of their tribal boundaries – from the region of Ethiopia. So they begin to complain about Moses' choice and the difference in his wife's background. It almost seems routine to complain about “race-mixing” until Miriam's leprosy breaks out. Suddenly her brokenness is identified. Get her to quarantine. Yet what about the brokenness of their own not-currently-surfacing racial and ethnic resentments?

Quarantine protocols are crucial when a disease is contagious. This incident develops with Miriam and Aaron resenting how their brother became involved in an inter-ethnic/inter-tribal/inter-racial marriage. Resentment of folks of other races, ethnic groups, genders, gender identification, education levels, economic levels, etc. resentment based on any of that represents brokenness, and such brokenness is not overcome simply through an infectious-disease quarantine. Why? Because actually we are all carriers of the brokenness virus, although some of us seem a-symptomatic. Can't we say we all carry the virus/ the sin of resentment whether we acknowledge or prefer to ignore this fact?

Back in 2018, David told the choir about his experience of singing “We Shall Overcome” here at First Presbyterian. You may know that many choral directors in faith communities are theologians, evangelists, and pastors. They share faith, and they help choir members interpret music so that choir members grow in faith. David and I had a conversation about “We Shall Overcome,” and how we had both grown up thinking this was a song of the Civil Rights movement rightly for the oppressed group – primarily African-Americans; and that “We Shall Overcome” was mostly unrelated to White folks who tended to be the cultural resisters and the proponents of push-back based on racist resentment. Yet David and I agreed that this is a song which cannot be dismissed or isolated

to any group, or rejected by any group. And this story from Numbers, chapter 12, absolutely substantiates our conclusion two years ago.

In the wilderness, the Hebrew former slaves – now liberated from slavery in Egypt – were yet slaves to brokenness. And the worst move they could make was to go off with Miriam now out of quarantine thinking that they had left their brokenness behind – that they now were “well” and healthy “for keeps.” We should never think this, though, about any experience of brokenness. If we do, the personal and community experience of brokenness will mostly be for naught. It’ll come back again, just as, we are told, COVID-19 can come back again. Historically, think about white folks who thought the Brown vs Board of Education verdict could be mostly disregarded after it was issued in the mid-1950s. Then when de-segregation orders were issued all over the States backing up the U.S. Supreme Court, people realized our brokenness due to racial resentment could not be left behind. The processes of healing require remembering, acknowledging, evaluating, and changing. So beyond Brown versus Board of Education come the Civil Rights Acts of 1957, 1960, 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965; and every time in the years since, when these are reviewed and debated for updating, there are both citizens and public officials who are tempted to say, “Oh, we don’t have that kind of brokenness anymore.” Remember: we are all carriers of the brokenness virus, but some/many/all of us, at times, seem a-symptomatic – and we prefer to consider ourselves cured!

How shall we overcome our resentments and prejudices, our judgmental attitudes and our desire to leave behind our brokenness? By being honest with ourselves in the clear light of God’s diagnosis: That we are and always will be carriers of brokenness which can break out any day or night with serious, deeply troubling, relationship-damaging consequences.

As a prayer and a reminder of our brokenness spiritually, societally, and interpersonally, David will lead us in singing “We Shall Overcome.” Let us sing, mindful of how we are all carriers of the virus of brokenness. Only God’s love, passion, sacrifice, engagement, and sense of equity will help us overcome day to day to day. “We shall overcome. We shall walk hand in hand. We are not afraid. God will see us through.”

When the day comes that we sense we are somewhat “moving on,” let us travel together continually remembering that our brokenness has not gone forever; we are simply a-symptomatic for a time; because brokenness can break out again with the same or worse consequences. We are carriers of brokenness, who are self-deceived if we think we can be rid of human brokenness. We are also, however, on the road toward healing, toward overcoming by way of God’s grace, but only to the degree that we remember, acknowledge, and confess how our brokenness is ever with us. You know, though, what else is ever with us: God’s help to overcome once more, and once more, and once more again. – All honor and praise be to God.