

**Sermon Preached by Rabbi Aaron Bisno, Rabbi-in-Residence
at Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, PA
on the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B
February 4, 2024**

Have you ever had your heart broken? I have. Do you remember how it felt? I do. Those painful memories of heartbreak are known surely to all. As I reflect on my own experiences, I draw comfort from the rabbinic teaching which says there is nothing so full. There is nothing so whole as a broken heart. This teaching came to mind this week as I reflected on the psalm that was so beautifully chanted just moments ago. In particular these verses, “Hallelujah, how good it is to sing praises to God, for God rebuilds Jerusalem, gathers the exiles, heals the brokenhearted, and binds up our wounds.” Anyone who has survived adolescence or has fallen in and out of love, anyone who has children or has been denied children, anyone who has lost a parent, a spouse, sibling or child, anyone who has been betrayed by false friends, or has had their ideals mocked, or has been left out of a group, a circle of friends, that is, I suspect at one time or another each and every one of us knows what it is to have held a broken heart in our hands.

And so it is. I invoke the teaching that there is nothing more whole than a broken heart. Brokenness, after all, is an inherent part of being human. For in the experience in both the breaking and the healing, do we discover personal growth, empathy for others, a sense of the divine and in time wisdom. Or in the words of the Tin Man from *The Wizard of Oz*, “Recall the Tin Man, who yearned to be human for want of a heart,” said he upon his wish being granted, “Now I know I have a heart, because it is breaking.” Indeed, this is what makes us human. Not our heart breaking per se, but our recognition that in our heartbreak, we are just like everyone else. In our broken state, we are human. And in need of healing.

The Hebrew word for brokenness is “mash-beir.” And within this word is also revealed another, which speaks of births and beginning. For “mash-beir,” which means brokenness, is also the word for birthing stool, or more specifically, the place of breaking in the context of childbirth. This connection between brokenness and birth, beginnings, teaches us that from a place of difficulty can emerge something altogether new and positive. It reminds us that from challenges come change, and from brokenness we may be led to realize blessings. Or in the words of the late Jewish singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen, “Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything.” That’s how the light gets in. In our cracks and fissures and faults, we may be enlightened, and therein may we come to grow in our humanity. May we be enriched in our empathy, and may we find true wisdom in our connection with others and therein with God. And in these ways do we discover that we may, though our hearts be broken, we may be made healed and whole.

Many years ago, a student asked the famed anthropologist Margaret Mead what she considered to be the first signs of civilization. One might have expected Mead to point to the discovery of basic tools, hooks and arrows perhaps, or maybe to earthenware pots that were suggestive of communal cooking and sharing a meal. Perhaps she might have cited rudimentary hieroglyphs for recording and conveying information. But the famed anthropologist Margaret Mead mentioned none of these things. Instead, she replied that the first sign of civilization in the ancient world was a femur, a thigh bone that had healed after a break. She explained, “In the animal kingdom, if you break a leg, you can no longer walk to the watering hole, you can no longer hunt for food, and you certainly cannot outrun a predator.” In the ancient world, injured animals, and humans for that matter, became a meal for predators, for no animal survives a broken leg long enough for the bone to heal.

But a broken thigh bone that has been repaired, she pointed out, that is evidence that one person cared for another. One person or perhaps a community of souls bound up the wounds of another.

With the recognition of our connectedness and indeed our interdependence, we show concern and care for one another, acting as God would have us do, healing broken bones and repairing broken hearts until we are restored to wholeness. Helping and caring for one another, repairing a broken heart no less than tending to a broken bone is where civilization begins. It is where humanity is found. It is where we discover the divine. Hallelujah how good it is to sing praises to God, for God rebuilds Jerusalem, gathers the exiles, heals the brokenhearted, and binds up our wounds.

Another Hebrew word, this the verb to pray. It is “lehit pale’el” which is a reflexive verb which is to say that the action takes place upon the actor, the prayer. It is their prayer that is answered. “Lehit pale’el” literally translates to self-examined, which is to say our prayers affect us if we are sincere in their offer. For it is through our private and our shared communal prayers that we discover both inner truths which connect us to God, but even more, do our prayers connect us to each other, to our shared experiences. The personal, it turns out, is universal. Further, because Judaism understands prayer to be a service of the heart, praying puts us in the mind of the services or sacrifices that were offered to the ancient temple in Jerusalem. Jewish conceptions of prayer, after all, are founded upon the idea that we are making an offering to God. Something of us is being given, specifically the fullness of our broken hearts.

Says the Talmud, “One's prayer is not heeded by God unless God is approached with one's heart in their hands.” And so it is that we say there is nothing so whole as a broken heart, for within this unavoidable universal life experience is our connection to self, to others, and therein to God. It is our innate understanding that we are in relation with everyone everywhere. In his book entitled *Prayer – Does It Make Any Difference*, Christian author Philip Yancey writes, “I have come to see prayer not as my way of establishing God’s presence, but rather as my way of establishing my own presence in relation to God.”

Or, if you will, in the words of late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Prayer cannot bring water to parched fields, nor can prayer mend a broken bridge, nor rebuild a ruined city. But prayer can water an arid soul.” Rebuild a weakened will and mend a broken heart. For when we pray and are inspired by our prayers, inspired to act in the benefit of others, we are nothing less than partners with God. And in this way, do we, in the parlance of Hasidic Jewish tradition, do we secure our attachment to the Holy One, the source of all? Do we elevate the most mundane and simple acts of goodness and caring to the realm of the divine? And do we build and strengthen bonds of connection with people everywhere, every day? Hallelujah! How good it is to sing praises to God most high, for with God's help, working through our hearts and our hands, does God rebuild Jerusalem, gather the exiles and heal the brokenhearted, as together we bind each other's wounds and heal when another is broken hearts. Amen.