Faith Enough for the Broken Places, January 25

1.

The Apostle Paul, in one of his more wintry seasons of ministry—when he was questioning whether he could have any lasting impact on his former congregation at Corinth, writes: “But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us” (2 Cor. 4:7).

A year ago, this past December I ruined a perfectly good discernment retreat with my church leaders by hemorrhaging just 10 days after a minor surgery. This happened within months of my 105-year-old grandmother and my 85-year-old mother deaths. When I came out of surgery—2-1/2 liters low on blood—my children reported that I was as gray as Grandma Ina when she had gone to her eternal rest. My younger sister’s unfortunate comment, upon hearing that I had undergone emergency surgery, was, “You should have called me first.” I was in ICU for 3 days. Suffice it to say that 2018 was not a kind year.

I can’t say 2019 was significantly kinder. My congregation, which I began serving in 2001, was in 1998 a heavily staffed and programmatic congregation, averaging 320 in worship each week (big for Pacific Northwest Lutherans). But that year they experienced significant discord and loss: The pastor at that time dreamed of building a Lutheran Crystal Cathedral ascribing to Word Alone theological tenets, and the congregation was divided by a simple majority voting to remain put. (Let’s just say that the remnant congregation experienced significant growth in their youth group when I showed up with my two young daughters in 2001.) The congregation has continued to pursue vital ministry serving the homeless and working poor in the downtown core of our semi-urban city, but continues to age, with young adults (mostly raised in mainline traditions) coming and going with life’s changes. We are in our fifth year of Internship ministry, but next week’s Annual Meeting may result in the elimination of that important ministry. And our capacity to reimagine ministry is stretched by stress-filled financial constraints borne of aging.

Mix in with that my experience as a woman in ministry: In December I received a request from the ELCA to fill out a survey about women in ministry. (No better way to celebrate a 50th anniversary than with a survey, I always say!). The survey asked questions about the kind of biases that affect women’s ability to discharge their office: expectations of femininity, a desire for a pastor with vision—just not that kind of vision; the double work day; congregations regularly failing to meet compensation guidelines; women who are deemed too attractive—so members can’t concentrate; or not pretty enough, so that members are distracted. (In some ways, this survey confirmed my experience; in other ways, it helped me to see that I’d dodged a lot of bullets.)

I have to admit, my experience is pretty common—common like those little terra cotta oil lamps they dig up every few feet in the ancient soil of Greece; they pass those things out like candy, since they hardly have a place to display so much ordinary history. So, call me *Terra Cotta Incognita,* if you’d like: I’m just another common vessel wrapped in ordinary flesh, called to preach about God’s extraordinary power. Just more worn around the edges, scratched up and cracked after a quarter century in ministry, and the past few seasons of life and ministry.

I describe my common version of human brokenness knowing full well that as a fully-employed, middle-class American, homeowning, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, in a congregation that can still pay its bills, I may have just described a good year in someone else’s life. While I have certainly had opportunity to stiffen at the sound of leaves rustling in the night—as Luther once said, describing the work of the Law (I did once have a brush with a pastoral stalker that confirmed such anxiety). All the same, I have never lived (as many do) with the ever-present fear that my skin-tone or my religion could easily make me a victim.

We human beings groan in this life, and the whole creation groans with us. …

Currently, in Australia the charred earth waits, expectant, for evidence of re-birth to make itself known. Elsewhere, in Sweden and across the globe, a sixteen-year-old prophet named Greta Thunberg, is calling the earth’s inhabitants to account for the things we have done and left undone to our fragile planet. Earthquakes swarm in Puerto Rico, unsettling an already devastated people. Volcanoes threaten Indonesia. And permafrost thaws the Arctic.

The nations rage, but the kingdoms have not yet tottered. In fact, they only seem to grow more authoritarian: In Hong Kong and Iraq citizens demonstrate in the streets, threatened by regimes pressing to maintain power. Iranians, fiercely loyal to their culture, find themselves distressed and aggrieved at the duplicity of their own government. The longing for freedom and self-governance percolates around the globe, while dictators clamp down.

Meanwhile, some US citizens declare victory for the common man, while others—incredulous at the folly of their progressive dreams—watch as their conceit for democracy trips and falters. Presided over by our own reality-TV star, we sit dumbfounded while a known hustler *and* Commander in Chief, initiates Executive Orders via Twitter (followed by 67 million followers, by the way). His bloviations merely pull the veil back on a nation with a similar penchant to exercise self-will and self-promotion.

In 2018, 26 individuals on earth owned half the world’s wealth. (Some think the number is probably closer to 8, because we are undercounting the poorest of the poor in the world.) America’s wealthiest executives can control the marketplace with one hand, while doling out charitable donations with the other. And while the good that comes from some of these philanthropic efforts is incontrovertible, they allow a privileged few to leverage inordinate political influence in the lives of the rest of humanity.[[1]](#footnote-1) (The obvious example here is the Gates’ Foundation’s numerous health initiatives in Africa. But one from my neck of the woods points out the danger of such power: The Amazon corporation, under Jeff Bazos, used Citizens United [remember, “corporations are people too”?] to influence—that is, fund—the newest seats on the Seattle City Council.)

In the realm of social media, Mark Zuckerberg’s Facebook, has demonstrated itself indispensable to Russia, white supremacists, advertising agencies, and churches alike. But not Millennials. Millennials prefer Twitter—otherwise known as the President’s direct line to the Pentagon.

And Millennials haven’t just jumped ship on Facebook. They have bailed on the Church as well. Try as we might to hook this generation, they are not biting. A recent article from fivethirtyeight.com, reports that the noticeable absence of this generation in our pews may not just be temporary. Many Millennials, being the children of religiously-unaffiliated Boomers, never established strong ties to religion to begin with. This makes it less likely that they will develop habits or associations that would draw them back to religion. They are less likely to find partners who are religiously affiliated; and they no longer see an essential correlation between morality and religion.[[2]](#footnote-2) More lamentable for us (who are on the inside of the Church looking out) is the possibility that so many may miss a life-giving encounter with the Incarnate God we know in Jesus Christ. An encounter that, at the very least, could influence the world—to paraphrase Mother Teresa—with a few more “small acts [done] with great love.”

And let me just state the obvious: the acceleration of communication technology has not simplified the task of preaching Christ. While email, social media, and texting created, for a time, a false hope for the more effective communication of the faith, its ecclesiastical users are too often inadequately prepared to use it to our benefit. (Mockingbird, 1517, and Crossings, excluded, of course. Or maybe the jury’s still out on that.) On the flip side, our televangelist counterparts, unafraid of self-promotion, have mastered and remastered media. But let’s just admit that preaching Christ via mass media is regularly and ironically anti-incarnational.

Then, there’s the more existential crisis we face with frequent exposure to social media the world over: according to Psychology Today, frequent consumers of social media are 3 times more likely to experience perceived social isolation.[[3]](#footnote-3)  (One report I read recently suggested that some younger adults experience a kind of decision paralysis—fear that, if they go away from home for a wedding or other social event, they may miss an event at home that will later be broadcast on Facebook –without them tagged in the picture!) In my own setting, one of my high school juniors recently bragged quietly (she’s an introvert) that she had attracted 40,000 followers with her current TikTok video. She seemed to think at the time this meant she had arrived as a human being.

Social media has put us at odds with ourselves. On the one hand, social media teaches us to be uncomfortable to be alone with ourselves. On the other hand, it requires us to project an image that we may never be able to live up to, or live down. The “me” we create for others to view is either more polished than we can possibly live up to—making us duplicitous, or our profile indicts us (empty beer bottle in hand and vacant look for the world to see).

No wonder Millennials have no time for church. Between the relentless call of social media, efforts to rise above overwhelming college debt, persistent angst about the rapid decline of our planet, and their multiple part-time jobs in the digital economy, the state of Christianity hardly seems relevant.

Then again, maybe we don’t want them to look too closely. After all, the root rot is creeping to the surface: Roman Catholics battle their hierarchy’s reckless disregard for predatory clergy; Southern Baptists reluctantly sober to systemic sexual abuse of women; evangelicals trade their souls and conservative reputation to gain partisan federal court judges; and Mainliners—weighed down by too much property, denominational schism over hot-button issues, and too few baptisms, struggle for breath in the stormy waters of this anti-institutional era.

It seems that we humans have most certainly “proclaimed ourselves” loud and clear: This is us: Clay jars. Cracked and broken—on many sides.

2.

But pull back the curtain a little farther, and what you will see may be more disheartening—for us and for God: We are losing heart. The world that progressive Christians like me thought was growing better and better day by day, is the same old world—but supersized. We can no longer pinch our noses and dutifully swallow the pain cocktail of religious and secular news that disappoints us; instead in 2020 we are waterboarded with it. … How are we ordinary Christians supposed to bear the weight of such a broken world and institutions? Let alone battle the misguided witness of the evangelical right with whom we are mistakenly associated?

This past December, in a movement dubbed #WakeUpOlive, Christian artist Kalley Heiligenthal called on her hundreds of thousands of Instagram followers to join her to pray for the real-time resurrection of her 2-year-old daughter, Olive, who had died in her sleep. Her effort was magnified at her home church Bethel in Redding, California, a giant in the Christian music industry, by multiple worship services dedicated to Olive’s rising. This congregation does not subscribe to the “not-my-will-but-yours-be-done” prayer; these Christians celebrated “the God of the Impossible” as they prayed—Olive’s name conspicuously scrawled on their hands. By the time the Redding church and Heiligenthal finally resigned themselves to Olive’s existential fate, a Christian opinion writer for the Washington Post remarked that they had confused hope for power, and transformed tragedy into failure.[[4]](#footnote-4) (The title of that article, by the way, was “We are not divine. But we are loved. That is enough.)

Meanwhile, we lose sleep as Latin American children are unconscionably ripped from their parents at our southern borders, while our oft-dubbed “Christian nation” ignores the enjoinder of Moses and the prophets to “treat the foreigner as a citizen in your country” and to “love the alien as yourselves” (Leviticus‬

It’s not the news itself, so much as what it does to us, heart and soul. Try as we might to conjure up a gospel of optimism, or to respond to the call for cultural-sensitivity and Spirit-driven justice, our small faith is no match for the bombardment of a broken world’s needs—seen on a global, daily, hourly, meme-by-meme basis. Our outer nature is wasting away (2 Cor. 4:16), and we’re kind of afraid that this slight momentary affliction is going to last way too long.

We dimly burning wicks (Isaiah 42:3) are hardly able to see beyond our own shadows to remember the One who breathed life into our human clay at creation; who set the stars in their courses; who raised up a people called to be a light to the nations. Instead, we observe the embodiment of Isaiah’s prophecy: “the earth lies polluted, under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. It is utterly broken…” (24:5-13).

Perhaps our existential paralysis is what the popular Belgian psychotherapist Esther Perel has in mind when she says that there is a world of difference between “not being dead” and “being alive.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Perel, whose parents both survived the Holocaust, says they “came out of that experience wanting to charge at life with a vengeance and make the most of each day. They didn’t just want to survive, … they wanted to embrace vibrancy and vitality.” (In case you’re interested, Perel has an amazing podcast on Gimlet Media entitled, “Where Should We Begin,” in which, in a single session, she encourages couples—who seem to have chosen a “not dead” relationship—to practice hope by rekindling desire in their broken relationships, despite their deep fear of risking being vulnerable with each other in order to experience it.) I wonder if the acceptance of living a “not dead” life is what inspired our recent fascination with zombies on TV and in literature, shows like “The Walking Dead” and pop fiction like *Pride, Prejudice, and Zombies.* Who knows.

Overwhelmed by the enormity of the need around us, and our inadequacy to address it, we forget the One who has made us alive. The One who called us by name. Or, perhaps worse, we call on God as if we are in charge. Either way, that is our shame. A shame that we hardly recognize well enough to even consider renouncing (2 Cor. 4:2).

3.

It is unsatisfactory in these broken times to reassure ourselves—coining popular social science, even the likes of such popular sociologists as Brené Brown—by saying that we are “enough.” And before God it is less than convincing to declare ourselves “enough.” *(Last spring, at an Internship Cluster Retreat, during worship, we pastors and our interns were invited by one intern and her supervisor to come forward to receive anointing. Now I’m all for anointing: “Mark me with that cross, remind me to whom I belong, cross out what I have been,” I thought. But as the Intern addressed me in a genuinely gracious and gentle tone, disappointment washed over me: “You are enough,” she declared— motionlessly laying a thumb on my forehead. “No. I’m not enough,” I thought; “the cross says otherwise.” The task of redeeming this world is too monumental, and such vain promises are too small.)* The god of this world would love to blind our minds (2 Cor. 4:4) with such false hope.

In her recent book *Shameless*, Nadia Bolz-Weber defines “holiness” as “God making what is fractured whole.”[[6]](#footnote-6) But *is it possible* that the converse might also be true—that what is fractured, is not holy? Ungodly even?

Our deadly testimony to our brokenness is when we treat the holiness of God—in Christ himself, and inthe holiness he gives—as if it were an add-on, an extra app on the smart phone of humanity, rather than the thing we need most. God will not have it. So, with the virtue of “Enough” stripped away, we have to wonder, like Job did before us, if all we have to look forward to is “Sheol as our house” (17:13).

4.

*Unless.* Unless, and to our amazement, it is in this broken place that God does God’s best work.

Listen to the words of Isaiah: In that oft-heard prophecy for Christmas Eve, he whispers a clue of what God is up to: breaking the yoke of our burden; destroying the bar across our shoulders. But how. How will God accomplish this? Much to our bewilderment, through a Child born for us. A Child, we might say, who is born to be broken (Isaiah 9:4)—wearing a bar across his shoulders, carrying the weight of a world that is bound to be broken. So say the Servant Songs we’ve hear in this Season after Epiphany: He is the One whose dimly burning wick will not be quenched. On his same shoulders, God rests all authority—an authority that grows continually.

This Servant is the One about whom the psalmists sang: “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit.” “The Lord heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds” (Psalm 34:18, and 147:3).

This Mighty God stoops down to earth, accepting the vulnerability of human flesh, from the cradle to the grave; and from grave to upper room, where he bears evidence of his crucifixion still, in his scarred hands and side. With a bar across his shoulders and, later, graveclothes left behind, he breaks the religious mold. No more quid pro quo. No more tit for tat. Just gift. Alive. Not merely “not dead.”

Granted, this gospel truth is not intuitive. Ever since the Garden we have wanted to believe otherwise. That we are up to this task on our own, or perhaps we just need a little prompting from the Guy upstairs. But we are not up to it—without Christ we remain broken. In the light of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4) though, we are filled with an extraordinary power that does not belong to us. This Word is not meant to be spoken, heard, and delivered once or twice a year—on Christmas Eve or Easter Day. It’s not a say-it-one-time-and-you’re good kind of deal. No. The everlasting truth is, we can’t believe unless we’ve heard. And we need to hear it over and over again.

Theologian and Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor, amplifies the necessity of hearing the crucified and risen Christ preached consistently when she comments, “Christianity is the only world religion that confesses a God who suffers. It is not that popular an idea, even among Christians. We prefer a God who prevents suffering, only that is not the God we have got. What the cross teaches us is that God’s power is not the power to force human choices and end human pain. It is, instead, the power to pick up the shattered pieces and make something holy out of them—not from a distance, but right close up.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

But, Mary Hinkle Shore, the new rector and dean at Lutheran Theological and Southern Seminary, provides a warning: It is not Jesus’ righteous suffering alone that we need. We need a way out of the grave. “Humanity did not and does not need only a model of the godly life.” It does no good to “show or tell us the shape of righteousness because we make even of righteousness an idol.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Quoting Ed Schroeder, Shore continues, “Unless a disciple, especially a righteous one, acknowledges himself in solidarity with [the thief on the cross beside Jesus in Luke], he will never comprehend a Messiah who is willingly in solidarity with criminals, receiving in his own body criminal justice. Only after that does the door open a crack for us to see that such messiahship is ‘necessary’ for him to get us into his kingdom, for us to be with him in paradise.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

In other words, if we do not see God in the Crucified Messiah, a broken vessel with the light of the gospel spilling from himself *for* *us*, then we have not seen the whole Messiah.

A highly-regarded Japanese art form, *kintsukuroi,* may illustrate this. When a piece of valuable pottery is broken and might, in another culture. be rendered useless, that broken object is repaired with gold. The flaw in the piece is understood to be a unique witness to the object’s history, adding to its beauty. The break is not something to hide; it does not mean that the work is ruined or without value. Instead, while it is different than we imagined it would be, it is now more highly prized for its increased strength and beauty.

American novelist, poet, and environmental-conscience of our country, Wendell Berry, gives us another way of seeing it: “[Love,” he says, is what carries you, for it is always there, even in the dark, *or most in the dark,* but shining out at times like gold stitches in a piece of embroidery.](https://www.azquotes.com/quote/380342)”[[10]](#footnote-10)

This is the treasure we have in clay jars: the crucified, risen Christ, without whose scars our broken lives would be mere fragments. But by whose wounds we are healed. By whose breaking we are made whole.

Perhaps it is this assurance that inspired the poet and novelist John Updike to write “Seven Stanzas at Easter”:

Make no mistake: if He rose at all

it was as His body;

if the cells dissolution did not reverse, the molecules

reknit, the amino acids rekindle

the Church will fall.

It was not as the flowers,

each soft Spring recurrent;

it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled

eyes of the eleven apostles;

it was as His flesh: ours.  
  
The same hinged thumbs and toes,  
the same valved heart  
that–pierced–died, withered, paused, and then  
regathered out of enduring Might  
new strength to enclose.  
  
Let us not mock God with metaphor,  
analogy, sidestepping, transcendence;  
making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the  
faded credulity of earlier ages:

let us walk through the door.

The stone is rolled back, not papier-mâché,  
not a stone in a story,  
but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow  
grinding of time will eclipse for each of us  
the wide light of day.

And if we will have an angel at the tomb,  
make it a real angel,  
weighty with Max Planck’s quanta, vivid with hair,  
opaque in the dawn light, robed in real linen  
spun on a definite loom.

Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,  
for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,  
lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are  
embarrassed by the miracle,  
and crushed by remonstrance.[[11]](#footnote-11)

5.

The Jesus we meet at Easter is no ghost. And he certainly does NOT show up outside the tomb to be God of the “not dead”—or, for that matter, God of the “not broken.” He is the God of the living. By his death and resurrection alone we are redeemed of God. Because he showed up for Peter, *and for us,* on this side of the grave, all who are ministers of the gospel are able not only to hear and receive—but each Sunday to speak—this promise from our once-parched-and-now-quenched lips. Because he is Lord of the living and the dead, and entrusts us to go and tell, we can “commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone” (2 Cor. 4:2).

And *how* do we commend ourselves? The abrupt answer is ***we*** do not. Instead, joined to the crucified and risen One in the waters of baptism, and reclaimed for God’s purposes, we are commended. Reclaimed, like pottery mended with gold. Without Christ we are simply fragmented, broken. In Christ we become again the work of God’s fingers; the fractured made whole. And holy.

But what does it look like to be holy yet broken?

The poet and performer Leonard Cohen, in his gravelly, laissez-faire style, attests to what this new-old creation looks like. In his iconic 1990s song “Anthem” he declares: “Ring the bells that still can ring / Forget your perfect offering / There is a crack, a crack in everything / That’s how the light gets in.” Don’t be stopped by your limitations, Cohen scolds us who are inclined to examine our flaws, consider them fatal, and call it quits—we who might wonder whether our brokenness disqualifies us for a life of faith and ministry. Or if you won’t take Cohen’s word for it, listen to the self-conscious, brash author of Second Corinthians—remember, that purportedly less-than-super-apostle Paul (2 Cor. 11:5); he reminds us: these earthen vessels are the very means by which Christ shines through.

God reclaims us sinners, not expecting us to be or to produce a perfect product. Rather, joined to Christ in Baptism, that daily dying and rising, the only confidence we feel the need to boast in is that we are beloved, redeemed, and therefore whole. Whole enough to hear the divine voice call us back into relationship with God and with each other. This is a reclamation project. (You might be amused to know that when I checked my syntax, the definition I found for “reclamation” clinched my decision: “the process of deriving usable material from waste.” *Use that metaphor in a sermon!)* But this is not just any reclamation project.

This reclamation in Christ involves repentance and reorientation. Not just repentance in the pious, moralistic “do the right thing” sense. But repentance as in “giving up”—surrendering—everything (bad or good) that gets in the way of trusting that God will do what God is equipped to do, and leave us to do the appropriately human stuff: to trust God and serve our neighbor.

Flannery O’Connor, the mid-20th-century, deeply Roman Catholic, short-story writer, gives us a unique picture of this reclamation: In her short story, “Revelation,” she introduces us to Ruby Turpin, who sets herself apart from others with her Bible-believing, middle-class, southern white existence—sure that it will advance her to the front of the line in heaven. Ruby is not like “those people.” (And, if you are wondering who “those people” are, fill in the blank with anyone you might be inclined to look down on with contempt.) Certain of her destiny, Ruby finds herself swept up in a vision, in which she sees a throng of people crossing into heaven ahead of her—including red necks and poor black people (that’s not what she calls them!). It’s only after these (in her mind) inferior human beings enter heaven, that she sees the likes of her own brand of pious Christians fall in line: O’Connor tells us, “**They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.”**[[12]](#footnote-12)

A contemporary example may be in order. In late October 2019, former President Barack Obama spoke to a young audience at an Obama Foundation event about “call-out” culture. He urged his listeners to reevaluate their “purity” and “judgmentalism.” “This idea [that] you’re never compromised and your always politically ‘woke’ … You should get over that quickly,” he said. … “The world is messy; there are ambiguities. People who do really good stuff have flaws,” he said. Obama urged his audience not to “cancel” the voices of those with whom they disagree by shaming them. And instead to look for common ground that will allow them to work together for positive change.[[13]](#footnote-13)

This raises an interesting challenge for woke 21st-century progressive Christians: Are we willing to forsake our theological- and/or political-correctness—have it burned away—that we may do the work of Christ? Are we willing to use more 5-cent words—as Ed Schroeder used to call more accessible language, and listen to the mainstream church members who all too often feel scolded? Can we engage them at the same time that we urge the church forward—for the love of Christ, and the dignity of humanity?

Perhaps King David realized this need to repent of his virtues as well as vices, when he sang: “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Psalm 51:17).

In faith, we drop our baggage, and empty our pockets of all pretenses before our sinless-yet-scarred Messiah. We come to the wounded healer, Jesus, with both our vices and virtues, to lay them at the foot of his throne in one great big heap—so that he can take what is ours, and give us what belongs to him.

We can expect, as the Apostle Paul reminds us, that this reclamation will mean that “we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh” (2 Cor. 4:11). If our Baptism means we are truly being made alive in Christ, then it also means that we are also going to do some dying—to ourselves, the world, and evil.

6.

But trusting the broken One, who now lives, is clearly not just for our sake. It’s also about what our neighbor needs. Which means that this reclamation project is also about reorientation. In a sermon Dr. Roy Harrisville once delivered about the temptation of Jesus, Harrisville imagined that while the Devil was tempting Jesus in the wilderness with power and fame, Jesus looked longingly over his shoulder. Not because Jesus was wanting to escape this uncomfortable stand-off with evil. But because Jesus was looking past the Devil’s temptation, to keep his sights on us. Jesus knew we need him. And Jesus knows our neighbor needs us. So Jesus spins us *first* toward him (as in that ancient practice of turning to Christ in Baptism), then he spins us back out toward the world. He reorients us.

Speaking to this radical reorientation, in a comical, but lesser-known letter, written in 1516, Martin Luther concludes some unfinished business with a Friar George Spenlein, and waxes theological about Christian righteousness: “Cursed is the righteousness of the man who is unwilling to assist others on the ground that they are worse than he is, and who thinks of fleeing from and forsaking those whom he ought now to be helping with patience, prayer, and example. This would be burying the Lord’s talent and not paying what is due. If you are a lily and a rose of Christ, therefore, know that you will live among thorns. Only see to it that you will not become a thorn as a result of impatience, rash judgment, or secret pride. The rule of Christ is in the midst of his enemies, as the Psalm puts it. Why, then, do you imagine that you are among friends? Pray, therefore, for whatever you lack, kneeling before the face of the Lord Jesus. He will teach you all things. Only keep your eyes fixed on what he has done for you and for all men in order that you may learn what you should do for others. If he had desired to live only among good people and to die only for his friends, for whom, I ask you, would he have died or with whom would he ever have lived? Act accordingly, my dear Friar, and pray for me. The Lord be with you.” Friar Martin Luther, Wittenberg, April 8, 1516.

Even this early in Luther’s career, he identifies the ongoing temptation for Christians to turn away from the broken world, and guard their own virtues. So he calls the good friar (and himself, I might add) more than once, to love the broken world that Christ was broken for.

Nadia Bolz-Weber, takes a different tack on this theme of being reoriented, picking up on the reluctance of redeemed sinners (mere clay jars) to think themselves up to the demands of serving the world: “Never once did Jesus scan the room for the best example of holy living and send that person out to tell others about him. He always sent stumblers and sinners. I find that comforting.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Henri Nouwen is no less radical in his explanation of our call back into the world: “The main question is not, ‘How can we hide our wounds?’ so we don't have to be embarrassed, but ‘How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?’ When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

As D. T. Niles put it memorably: Our witness to the living Christ is like “one beggar telling another beggar where to find food.”

But we shouldn’t assume that this radical reorientation, just affects us individually. In an article from January 2019, as reports began to emerge that leaders in the Southern Baptist Convention had systematically squeezed women out of clerical leadership, perpetuated a culture of white, straight male privilege, and continually pressed for greater attendance over care of souls, Mark Wingfield, penned an opinion column: “3 Words for the church in 2019: ‘We were wrong.’” in BaptistNews.com.[[16]](#footnote-16) In it, he boldly apologizes on behalf of the church for its love of absolutes around race, gender, politics, and church size, and calls the church to reorient itself from being self-serving, to serving Christ by serving the neighbor.

His is not the only open letter of public confession that has kindled heat among evangelicals. In a surprising departure from his conservative evangelical readership, Mark Galli, Editor-in-Chief for *Christianity Today*, recently put himself at odds with the prevalent evangelical political ideology of the right, by calling for President Donald Trump’s removal because he had abused his office for political gain. (A statement that won the attention of the President himself, who slurred the conservative publication as a “far-left magazine.”)

My point here is not that it’s really fun to hear evangelicals say they’re sorry. It’s that *if* the church ever wants to find itself on firm ground with a world that questions its motives, and its legitimacy to speak on behalf of God, the way we publicly come to terms with our past and present matters profoundly. And apologizing to humanity for our failures is a good first step.

In the ELCA, our brother in ministry, Lenny Duncan, (soon to be a colleague in my Southwestern Washington Synod), has called our denomination to come to terms with its pervasive whiteness. (My first question when I heard that he was coming to southwest Washington was, “Does he know how white Vancouver is?!) In his book, *Dear Church: A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the US,* Duncan lovingly but firmly calls Lutheran Christians to tease apart the ways that our mind-blowing, heart-freeing theology about being made whole by a broken Christ, is distinct from our northern European roots and white American privilege. His words are a sobering call for us to publicly tell the truth, put our trust—not in our legacy, but in the God of the cross. He calls us to accept the enormous opportunity we have to engage in reconciliation that will make a difference in our and other people’s lives—even as it embodies the sacrificial love of Christ.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Whatever we do—whether it’s taking the advice of Greta Thunberg and Martin Luther, to plant a tree, or reimagining the church by listening for new perspectives on this old, old story—we do it in faith: clay vessels, bearing the extraordinary power that comes from our broken yet whole Savior.

And since no day is complete without the words of my favorite band, The Avett Brothers, I commend these to you to close: “When you learn you can’t earn / The love you’re waiting for is already yours. / There is no reason we should doubt / the broken hearts will rise again / the mending touch of something grand. / Isn’t that what it’s about / the blinded charging through the night / guided by the steady hand.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

May Christ, who broke the bonds of death, break your heart wide open so that the whole broken world may fall in. Amen.

1. Brian McLaren. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cox, Daniel and Amelia Thomson-DeVeaux, “Millennials Are Leaving Religion and Not Coming Back,” fivethirtyeight.com, December 12, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bergland, Psychology Today, March 7, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “We are not divine. But we are loved. That is enough,” by Kate Bowler. Washington Post Opinion, Dec. 23, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See [www.estherperel.com](http://www.estherperel.com) . [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation*, p. 19. Convergent Books, January 29, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. # *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering* (Teaching Sermons Series) by [Barbara Brown Taylor](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/71455.Barbara_Brown_Taylor); [Ronald J. Allen](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/109608.Ronald_J_Allen) (Editor).

   [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Mary Hinkle Shore, “‘Christ is risen!’ Proclaiming the Gospel in a Culture of Fear,” p. 11. A lecture at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary of Lenoir-Rhyne University offered on the occasion of her installation as rector and dean, September 10, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ditto. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Wendell Berry (2005). *Hannah Coulter: A Novel*, p. 51, Counterpoint Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
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13. “Obama on Call-Out Culture: ‘That’s Not Activism,’” by Emily S. Rueb and Derrick Bryson Taylor. *New York Times*, October 31, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Nadia Bolz-Weber, [*Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/45191230), 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society,* February 2, 1979. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Mark Wingfield, “3 Words for the Church in 2019: ‘We Were Wrong,” in BaptistNews.com, January 1, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Lenny Duncan, *Dear Church: A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Church in the US,* July 2, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Scott Yancey Avett and Timothy Seth Avett, “When You Learn,” *Closer Than Together,* 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)