

Blessings, Everyone!

September 6, 2020

### Keeping in Touch With Our Church Family

#### Celebrations and Concerns:

We hold in prayer:

- Carole Jolie – grieving the loss of Don
- Marlene Joe – grieving the loss of Gil
- Martha Hubley – grieving the loss of Bud
- Cheryl Holmes – grieving the loss of her mother, Shirley Webster
- Rae Kay's children – grieving the loss of their mother
- The family of John Cummings, Lee's son
- Our church – grieving the loss of all of them

We hold in prayer:

- Bob L'Heureux – painful arthritis
- Mattie Cummings – working as a home-health aide, and (unfortunately) will be moving to Maine in the not-too-distant future
- Dianne Simmons – working on the COVID-19 hospital front lines
- BTW, over 7,000 medics have perished already from COVID-19 around the world.
- We should remember to be grateful for those who literally put their lives on the line in their treatment of people who are sick or infected, and we should keep them in our prayers. (And we should be sure they are paid what they deserve.)
- Betty Tebbetts – who has recovered from COVID-19 and is doing fairly well

Thank you to:

- Jim Holmes – for faithfully ringing the church bell every Sunday morning and for sending us pictures of the church so we remember what it looks like
- Darlene Sanderson for regularly changing and refreshing the two wreaths on the front door of the church
- Those who faithfully support our church even though they live thousands of miles away
- All those who have been faithful in the yearly pledges to the General Fund of our church
- All the new members of our church family who are supporting us financially in ways that are helping us survive this difficult time.

To all who use or enter the church, please leave the dehumidifier on and leave all the doors in the vestry open, including the door to the Pastor's office. This will keep mold from forming in the carpet and on the Pastor's books. Thank you!

Several of you apparently found last week's walk down memory lane comparing the present Red Sox team with the 1932 Sox less than comforting. I know it's really tough to come face to face with reality, especially for Red Sox fans (although you have had ample opportunity to do so). BTW, after 40 games, our hometown team's record remains the second worst in its history, second only to the 1932 season. But that's not the point.

I have to confess that I have been trying to guide our grandson, Miles, into the elite company of New York Yankee fans. Miles is now 3 ½ months old. When I feed him, in addition to quoting two Robert Frost poems, a poem by the Zen master Ryokan, a quote from Albert Schweitzer, a couple of poems by Wallace Stevens, a quote from The Upanishads, and “Casey at the Bat” by memory, I gently whisper “Mickey Mantle” to him again and again. I know his father wants his first word to be “dada,” and his mother wants to hear “mama,” but wouldn’t it be amazing if Miles’s first spoken communication with the outside world was the name of my childhood hero! Right off the bat, this would make him my favorite grandchild!

Not long ago, after a feeding, and after I had clearly and distinctly whispered “Mickey Mantle” to him several times, there was a moment of silence. Then I heard what I believe to be the first word little Miles has ever spoken. It was not dada or mama or even PapaGram. Sadly, it was also not Mickey Mantle.

You may be surprised to learn that it was “Yastrzemski.” Yes, “Yastrzemski” was the first word little Miles has spoken. I don’t need to tell you how disappointed I was. I haven’t told his parents; they are still hoping for some kind of personal recognition for all the work they have done to bring a child into the world and raise him as well as they have. Now I am not sure about the next part, but when I reached for my notebook to write down his first word, I am quite sure little Miles looked over at me and said, “It is spelled just like it sounds.” I know this is hard to believe, but some kids just begin talking in full sentences. This kid must be wicked smart (even though he has apparently chosen the Sox over the Yankees)! BTW, his advice to me about the spelling wasn’t really helpful.

At least he picked one of my favorite Red Sox players. That is some consolation. I hope this “true confession” has brought you a fleeting moment of joy in the midst of a dismal season.

### The Pastor’s Reflections

One of the books that I have reread during this pandemic retreat, is Edwin Kurtz’s profound work, *A Spirituality of Imperfection*. Although primarily addressed to people in recovery from alcoholism, I find it applicable and potentially helpful to all of us. Although it was not the author’s intent, I believe that the affirmation of a spirituality of imperfection stands as an indictment of the Christian emphasis on perfection. The indictment is that this goal or ideal of perfection is not only impossible, it is psychologically unhealthy. And making our perfection dependent upon a super-natural force does not change the fact that this should not be the center of our religious faith and the determinative factor in our relationship with God. I will be saying more about this book later.

This morning, I would like to talk with you about Kintsugi. I recently discovered Kintsugi thanks to Cathy Ambler, one of our new church friends, who sent me a link to an amazing video. Unfortunately, I have no idea how to send you the link. So today I will have to describe what I saw/heard and what I hope you will also experience. Maybe by next week I will be able to put you in touch with the source of this reflection.

Kintsugi is Japan's ancient art of repairing broken pottery. It is a means of restoring broken pottery, but it is also a philosophy. It is not only a process by which a potter can repair a broken plate, bowl, or vase, it is actually a celebration of broken pottery, of that which is broken. It finds beauty in imperfection. When I reflected on the deeper teaching of Kintsugi, I immediately thought of Kurtz's book and several works by the Roman Catholic spiritual guide, Henri Nouwen.

When the Japanese mend broken objects through the process of Kintsugi, they do not try to hide the damage; they accentuate it. They restore broken pottery by filling the cracks or reuniting the broken pieces with a special lacquer, and then they cover the repaired crack with powdered or liquid gold. They do this because they believe that when something that has a special history, a special meaning to us suffers damage, it becomes even more beautiful. Kintsugi, then, is the art of beautiful repair.

The narrator of the video is Hiroki Kiyokawa. Hiroki, whose workshop is in Kyoto, describes himself as a restorer. He has been employing the techniques of Kintsugi on broken pottery for over 45 years. Instead of throwing the broken bowl away or repairing it with Gorilla Glue in an attempt to cover up the flaws, Kintsugi beautifies the breakage. The powdered gold highlights the fracture, making it an important part of the object's history. Through Kintsugi, Hiroki says, the broken piece of pottery "is transformed into a special object, one which will be used and preserved for a long time."

There is no way that I can do justice to the video. First, it was moving to see the artist at work and listen to him describe what I would call the spiritual dimension of his art. He seems like an exceptional person, a sensitive artist who exudes a feeling of inner peace. Second, the videos, the photographs of pieces of pottery breaking as they hit the table, are a work of art in themselves. The color is magnificent! Finally, and this is what touched me deeply, the restored pieces of pottery with wavy gold cracks are really more beautiful than they were before they were broken.

Hiroki explains that the process of Kintsugi is mainly used to repair pottery that has been inherited or has some kind of special meaning or sentimental value to the owner. The process is a lengthy one. It takes a long time to complete, usually about three months for each object, and it must cost the owner a lot of money. I guess this shows that a process of healing like this does not come without a price. The end result, as Hiroki says, is that the restored piece "becomes a new landscape in itself."

The substance that is used to repair the breaks is a special kind of lacquer that is obtained from the sap of a tree that is indigenous to Japan. Hiroki says that the process of Kintsugi has been used in Japanese art since the prehistoric Jomon period. The Japanese people have a special relationship with lacquer. The lacquer used in Kintsugi is extremely rare and precious, partially because the tree will be cut down after even a cup of sap is extracted. Hiroki says that "the sap is like the tree's blood, and extracting it ends the tree's life." So, he tells us, "we are always grateful to nature."

When the lacquer that holds the broken pieces together becomes dry and hard, it is then dusted with gold. The gold seams against the colorful background of a bowl are difficult to describe. The gold seam is not filed or ground down; it is allowed to stand up from the surface of the bowl. It reminded me of some of the work I did in metal shop when I was in high school, welding or soldering two pieces of metal together, though

with Kintsugi one does not grind down the seam and paint over it, making it look as if it really weren't there.

One of Hiroki Kiyokawa's students talks in the video about what it has been like for her to study and learn this ancient art. She shows us some of the pieces of pottery that were precious to her, some with small chips that were repaired and some with larger breaks. As she puts it, "We live in a 'use and dispose era.'" She says, "We need to learn to repair broken things and make them last for a long time."

I think you can see why this video touched me so deeply. Hiroki says quite simply that all things are created and destined to be broken someday. He says, "I think being broken or damaged is never a bad thing. All of us develop scars throughout our lives. These scars should never be hidden. Our imperfection can be the birth of something new."

Kintsugi is a metaphor for life. It is a metaphor for each and every one of us. It is a metaphor for our country, and it is a metaphor for the world. It is a metaphor of healing, a metaphor for psychotherapy. It tells us that often something beautiful and meaningful and precious may somehow become broken. It may be broken in two. It may be broken in pieces. It may be fractured. It may be shattered.

Because something beautiful, meaningful, and precious has been accidentally or intentionally broken, is it no longer any good? Has it really lost its value? Or can it be repaired, restored? It is no longer perfect, but it can become whole; it can have its original wholeness restored. Should we throw it away, or should we try to mend it, to heal its brokenness?

One thing is clear. Whether we are talking about life, ourselves, our country, or the world, what is broken can never be restored to its original condition. The break can't be erased; in fact, we wouldn't want to do this. We can't go backwards, though this is what we often wish could happen. We have to go forward. But when we do this with patience, with loving care, we may find that the new object that we are creating is even better than what we had and lost.

I think of people who are grieving. When a loved one dies, something precious has been broken. Life is not the same. Family is not the same. The clock cannot be turned back, no matter how much we wish it could. Oscar Wilde once said, "The heart was made to be broken." Lord Byron has said, "The heart will break, but broken lives on." The wound, the scars from the final separation, the great loss, will never totally heal. However, when we cover them with gold and let them show, we may find that our relationship with life actually deepens.

I think of people who are married, especially those who have been married for many years. There is no way that two people can live together in a committed relationship, even a loving committed relationship, without hurting each other, without leaving emotional scars. This is because we are human beings; we are imperfect. Every time at a wedding when the best man toasts the bride and groom and wishes them "nothing but happiness all the rest of their lives," I smile (inwardly). I smile because I know this is not possible, and I don't even believe it is desirable. Is this really what marriage (or parenthood) is all about—constant and unending happiness? It is often the wounds, even more than the moments of joy, that shape our souls. We cannot

erase the scars of our relationships with those whom we love, but through Kintsugi they can become something beautiful.

I think of people who have been broken by life. There are many ways that people can be wounded or broken by life. The recent and ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is just one of many examples, though it staggers us because of the magnitude of the numbers that are involved. Many of our brothers and sisters in our country and around the world have lost their health; many have lost their lives, many unnecessarily. When, with an abundance of caution, we view every single person, even members of our own families, as possible carriers of a potentially deadly virus, it affects our experience of relationship. As with a death or a broken relationship with a family member or friend, we experience the loss of a sense of community, a sense of interconnectedness. We realize that we are not “all in this together.” However, if we can find that special lacquer (love?) that can repair the break, and if we can embrace the broken parts of ourselves (our shadow?) by repairing them with gold, we may discover a strange and different beauty.

We are all deeply troubled by the polarization that is taking place in our country—and also around the world. Of course, for some people, the polarization was always there. Think for a moment about income inequality and the oppressive and dehumanizing weight of poverty. Think about the caste system not only in India but also in our country. Think about the evil of slavery. As white people, our consciousness is beginning to be raised about how people of color have been the victims of prejudice and oppression, how their constitutional and human rights have been violated and trampled by the terribly destructive ideology of white supremacy. No, we are not all in this together. But if we could be, we would be able to rise above those forces that separate us, that drag us down, and build a better America.

Not long ago, the sign in front of our church read, “Torn—but not apart.” It expressed the hope that we are still in this together. However, the bonds that hold us together, the bonds of love, empathy, care, concern, and respect seem to be giving way to the paranoia, the fear that inevitably accompanies tribal thinking, tribal identities, tribal allegiances. Even though I find the metaphor of Kintsugi helpful and hopeful, especially with the people with whom I work in psychotherapy, I harbor the secret fear that some things and perhaps even some people may become broken beyond repair.

The challenge that lies before us as individuals, as a church, as a nation, and as a world is to repair the broken vessels of our lives. We can't throw what we have away; it is too precious, and we have worked too hard to get to where we are. We also can't turn the clock back to the 1950's, take away women's rights and LGBTQ rights, which are basically human rights, and marshal a resistance against change. When the times are fractured, as I believe they are, we need to become healers; we need to learn how to heal what has been broken.

The church, at its best, can help us with this. It can remind us of the extent to which Jesus broke down the barriers that separate us, the extent to which his message calls us to an egalitarian community. Time and time again, he told people, “Your faith has healed you; your faith has made you whole.” Note that he does not say perfect, but whole. This is how I understand the spirituality of imperfection.

Kintsugi is a metaphor for life. Sooner or later, life breaks all of us. Kintsugi is the art of beautiful repair. The challenge for us is to take what we have, the broken pieces of our lives, our nation, the world, and through the use of alchemical gold, make something even better, even stronger than it was before. Perhaps, as Henri Nouwen has said, we can all become what he called wounded healers.

Be well. Stay safe. Be patient. Be disciplined. Persevere. Don't give up. Think of others. Keep the faith. Focus on the broader, the bigger vision. See through the illusion, the delusion of the self-cherishing mind, the thief that takes away our sense of inner peace and that brings suffering to ourselves and others. Trust in God. Don't throw anything precious away. Repair the breaks in your life with gold. Don't let the light go out.

Pastor Paul