

June 4, 2006  
Ezekiel 37:1-14, Acts 2:1-13  
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**"The Sign Out Front"**

Several years ago in *The Atlantic Monthly*, correspondent David Brooks described some of his impressions of community life in the Soviet Union in the 1990's. It was a time when that country was on the edge of political and social collapse:

"The inside of every apartment I visited was tidy and clean. But every building's vestibule, hallways and stairs were filthy and rancid. The floors looked as if they'd never been mopped; lights were burned out; the air reeked of urine. I started asking people why they didn't get together to clean up the hallways... They'd give various reasons: the neighbor on this side is an alcoholic. The neighbor on that side we never see. But the real reason was that after seven decades of living under totalitarianism, they didn't know whom they could trust; they didn't know if their neighbors belonged to the secret police... the bonds of normal society had been destroyed. People's souls had been damaged by decades of terror and mass murder." (p. 28, June 2003).

Brooks' observation of a seemingly insignificant detail of apartment living in the Soviet Union leads to a profound insight into the brokenness of human life and the fragmentation of human society.

Damaged souls...although we may not have known decades of "terror and mass murder," we do know what it is to be wounded without and broken within. I know what it is to have grown up in a racist society that suffered from generations of oppression and violence against African-Americans, Native Americans and migrants. If we think that the wounds of this painful heritage are something we can "just get over" with the snap of the fingers or with some new laws, then we are sadly mistaken. The experience of oppression wounds the human soul. It wounds the victims and it wounds the oppressor. The victims are not free to express their full humanity. The delusions of those who oppress others make their own human souls cruel, hard and dead.

Damaged souls...the struggles of our individual lives can leave us wounded and scarred. The pain of growing up in a dysfunctional, abusive or alcoholic family can follow us all of our lives. A broken marriage, a debilitating disease, a ruined career or failure in school can so diminish our lives that we feel emotionally and spiritually dead. We are stunned by the brutal murder this week of seven members of one Indianapolis household. Armed men broke into the home with the supposed intent of robbing the family and slaughtering everyone inside, even the children in their beds. Such inexplicable violence and viciousness hurts us all. We are a community with a damaged soul.

The prophet Ezekiel is speaking to damaged souls. The word of the prophet was spoken when God's people were in exile in Babylon. Jerusalem is a heap of ruins. The temple is destroyed. All hope of return is gone. Some people have been born in exile and have lived

and died in exile without ever seeing their homeland. The people have been in exile so long, they not only feel like they are dead but that their bodies have decayed and their bones have dried up. The valley of the dry bones is a symbol of their damaged and hopeless souls. They do not have the power within themselves to create a new future or to keep hope alive.

So, the Lord God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones. The Lord will cause flesh to come upon the bones and knit the bones together with sinew and skin. The Lord will cause the breath of life to enter the bones so that they may live. Ezekiel does as the Lord commands. The dry bones rattle and come together. Sinew and flesh and skin come upon them.

Yet, there is no life in them until the Lord God calls upon the four winds to send the Spirit to breathe life into them. The bones become living beings! There is a vast multitude of them standing together. The Lord God explains to the prophet what this vision means. God will give hope to the people in exile. God will put the Spirit within them. God will restore their lives and bring them home to the land of Israel. God will restore these damaged souls. They will become a new people in a new land.

In this vision of the prophet Ezekiel, the Hebrew word "ruah" is used ten times. The word "ruah" means wind, breath or Spirit. The only way to restore damaged souls is by the power of the Spirit of God. In this vision of Ezekiel we hear an echo of the original creative act of God when the Spirit of God moved over the unformed chaos and God separated the waters from the dry land and light from dark. In the creation, God formed us from the dust of the earth and breathed into us the breath of life. We became living beings. Ezekiel is describing a rebirth or recreation of God's people by the power of the Spirit. Every wind that blows upon our faces can remind us of the Spirit of God moving purposefully through creation. Every breath we take can remind us of the inbreathed Spirit of God. God's Spirit has become our breath. The only way to be made whole is through the power of God's Spirit.

Ezekiel's words also give us a foretaste of the great miracle of Pentecost, when frightened disciples gather in a room after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Holy Spirit comes upon them like flaming tongues of fire. Jerusalem is filled with pilgrims from all over the Mediterranean world. The people hear the gospel proclaimed in their own languages. Apart from God's Spirit, they are frightened, wounded souls. In the power of God's Spirit, they become fearless, bold disciples. The Spirit of God unites them in a new community built not of human greed, pride, or fear, but of faith, hope and love.

I am not easily discouraged. Yet, there are times when the struggles that young people face, the wounds of human life, the problems of families, the dangers of illness and disease, the callous indifference of people toward their neighbors, the spiritual and physical hunger of people seem overwhelming. When I get discouraged, troubled, fearful, sometimes all life looks to me like a valley of dry bones. When I try to respond to these needs out of my own human resources, I find myself even more discouraged, empty and dry. When I turn to the word of God, when I open my life to the promises of Christ and when I allow God's Spirit to breathe new life into me, I am alive and strong. I am not made alive alone, but together

with you in the body of Christ. We are damaged souls made whole, healed, restored by the Spirit of God.

What we in the church have to offer a broken world filled with damaged souls is the possibility of new community centered in Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit. This past year, the Task Force on Strategic Planning has been hard at work listening to the Spirit of God speak in our congregation through conversations, study, research, surveys and spiritual discernment. As the faithful members of this Task Force have worked, one word - one concept - keeps rising to the top of all the conversations. That word is transformation. We are a community of faith where Christ transforms lives in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Today, as we ordain and install a new class of elders, I pray that they will lead us in this ministry of transformation as we seek to heal wounded souls, restore creation, build just and peaceful communities.

Several years ago, the church I served had been helping a young man who was struggling to put his life back together. He had been sober for nine months. He had a place to live. He had a job where he was getting additional training to advance in his career. Just before things began to look up, he was in a desperate financial situation. He took out a loan for \$600 against his car at a business that arranged title loans. When he made the loan he did not realize what it would mean to pay 300% interest per year on the loan. (When you make the loan, they only tell you the monthly amount. The annual amount is in the fine print.) Each month when he made the payment, he was only paying a few dollars on the principal. In one year, he would pay \$1800 dollars in interest and still owe almost the whole amount he had borrowed. I went to the title loan company and saw the place for what it is: a deadly parasite with no conscience that feeds off of the desperate poor. I talked with the manager. I talked with the owner in Alabama. He told me that what they were doing is perfectly legal. Being legal and being moral is not the same thing. I watched another person come in who was trying to pay what she could on her loan. They refused her payment because it wasn't enough. She had borrowed \$800, paid back \$600 and now owed \$1200. This young woman would die of old age having never paid off the loan. When I raised questions about the injustice of what they were doing, they told me to leave and closed the shop. I thought I was back in the poverty and injustice of Dickens' 19th century London. We are damaged souls.

Maybe we should open up our own shop and put a sign out front saying: "Broken Bones Mended Here;" "Wounded Hearts Repaired Here;" and "Dead Folks Find New Life Here." But, why do we need to have a special shop when there is already a church at this location, one down the street, another one around the block on 86th and many more all over town? We don't. Why do we need to have a special shop for repairing damaged souls when you and I are spread throughout this city in schools, businesses, hospitals and government offices? We don't. We don't need a sign out front when we have a sign in our hearts saying that God's healing, restoring, creative work happens in here, out there and everywhere. It is only in the power of God's Spirit that all these damaged souls will be healed.

