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08/2017 | Monthly Topic

Dropping pretenses

by Collette Broady Grund

In the summer of 2011, everything in my life seemed to be coming together in just the way I'd always wanted. I was in love with my handsome professor husband. We'd been married for nearly ten years, and in that time, I'd finished my master's degree and he had finished his doctorate. I was ordained as a Lutheran pastor and served a number of congregations while he searched for a tenure-track teaching job. When he finally landed a job in Mankato, Minnesota, we rejoiced to be moving closer to his family and some of our friends, and I started looking for a settled call where we would baptize and raise our infant son.

In June of 2011, I started that call in the congregation where I still serve. We bought a beautiful century-old house and the furniture to go with it. We had everything we'd ever dreamed of: stable jobs in our chosen fields, a comfortable home, and most of all, a sweet chubby toddler with big brown eyes and a dimply smile. At night, while my husband was out socializing with his new colleagues, I read to our son until he fell asleep. Our life was perfect.

At least, that's how I made it look.

The reality is, I was miserable. No matter how hard I worked on my marriage, on my parenting, on my career, I constantly felt that I was a failure. Even though I had achieved everything I'd been working my whole adult life for, it didn't feel like enough.

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My instinct was to conceal my vulnerabilities and project serenity and strength, to cover my flaws and present only perfection to the world. As a result, I was exhausted, physically and emotionally, and my digestive system was in constant rebellion. The stress of holding my life together was taking its toll, though no one looking in from outside could have known.

Six months later, my husband announced he wanted a divorce. He'd been having an affair with one of the colleagues I'd heard so much about and I hadn't had a clue.

Grace among the mess

The unraveling of my well-constructed world was the scariest thing I've ever endured. I was desperately afraid that my ministry would be destroyed when my parishioners—God's people—found out what a mess my life was. Though I preached and taught God's power to work through imperfect people, I excluded myself from that grace. More is demanded of leaders, I told myself. Over time I came to take literally Jesus' words in Matthew 5: "Be perfect therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

As my marriage dissolved, my façade crumbled too. My mess was out in the great wide open for all to see. I expected judgment, but to my surprise, I was shown compassion, especially from other divorced people. People who appeared to have perfect marriages now shared with me that theirs were second marriages after disastrous first tries, or that they'd endured and healed great brokenness together. People I barely knew called and wrote, joining their anger and sadness and pain with mine, reminding me I wasn't alone.

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Holy brokenness

One of the holiest experiences I've ever had as a pastor was leading a grief and loss group in the year after my divorce. In it, people shared their experiences of loss, from the death of beloved spouses, to a diagnosis of early-onset Alzheimers, to the redefining of a career. We held our pain communally and offered it to God for healing and redemption. The Holy Spirit hovered over each meeting with palpable presence, and we all came out of those six weeks more whole and more convinced that God is active among us.

I felt at the time—and still do—that none of that would have been possible without my divorce. The members of that group might not have been able to trust me with their heartbreak if they'd thought I'd never felt it myself. We discovered together that the redemption of our brokenness is rarely the vindication we hope for. Instead, our losses become the place where we see God more clearly than ever before. In this way, our brokenness becomes holy.

When I was called to the community I serve, I was sure that God wanted me here because I had gifts to share that this church needed. I was not prepared for the way the community would minister to me. Their acceptance of my imperfection and their gentleness in my grief was the very presence of Christ to me. With their help, I learned that real is better than perfect, and that God works best when I am at my worst.

In Lutheranism, we call this a paradox. It's something that doesn't make sense at first glance, but is proved true by our experience. As Martin Luther discovered in his own deep struggle, our imperfections are not an embarrassment to cover up or something for which we should continually punish ourselves. They are, instead, an opportunity for God to show up and do what God does best: love and accept us as we are, inviting us to rest in grace.

Discussion questions:

1. What in your life are you tempted to cover up, fearing that God or others won't love you if they know your imperfections?
2. When have you made yourself vulnerable in sharing something with others and experienced acceptance and grace?

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3. What might be a place of brokenness where God wants to work in your life today?

Closing prayer

God, we bring our brokenness to you, trusting that you will meet us with love and grace. Be present among your people as we share our imperfections that we may find holiness where we need it most. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

The Rev. Collette Broady Grund is nearly 40 and a new mom (again!) in Mankato, Minnesota where she shares a grace-filled life with her husband, five children and Bethlehem Lutheran Church.

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08/04/2017 | Faith Reflections, Monthly Topic

Faith reflections: Perfect weakness

by Collette Broady Grund

I used to wish that my divorce had never happened. Nothing good can come of this mess, I thought. If someone had suggested to me that I might someday be thankful for my wrecked marriage, I would have laughed a bitter laugh as my eyes filled with tears, and then I would have fantasized about punching that person in the throat. I spent months during the separation period pleading with God to bring my husband back to me.

It seems the apostle Paul must have felt the same way about the “thorn in [his] flesh” that he mentions to the Corinthians. It's not clear what exactly this thorn was. Interpreters have suggested everything from a physical ailment to a mental illness, and as I write this I find myself wondering if it could have even been a relationship with an unhealthy person he just couldn't escape.

Whatever it was, Paul clearly thought he'd be better off without it, and he told God so. “Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me,” he writes (2 Corinthians 12:8). I admire his self-control in keeping his pleading to single digits! I'm also envious that God's answer came to him after only three tries.

For me, God's answer came much more slowly, so slowly that I can't pinpoint a moment when I knew it had come. But over time, through lots of effort and therapy, I stopped wishing that the past would change. I started feeling grateful for my divorce, both because I saw how that relationship was not life-giving, and because of the person I've become through the healing process.

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As God said to Paul, God said also to me: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). God didn't say it in such succinct or audible words, but through the people around me, God convinced me that God's best work could be done with my worst experiences. Through the struggle of single parenthood, God brought me a tribe of compassionate and trustworthy mothers and fathers who surround my son and me with love and support. Through the pain of divorce, God connected me to mentors and guides who witnessed to the new life that was coming. Through the brokenness of two marriages, God brought about a new union for my current husband and me, in which we are learning every day about forgiveness and redemption. The birth of our baby girl in January was the moment when I really felt God's power had made everything perfect again.

Now please hear me clearly: Saying that God is able to work perfectly in my weakness is not the same thing as saying my divorce was part of God's perfect plan. I don't believe that. My divorce was the result of sin, both personal and systemic, and not God's will at all. Thankfully, God's specialty is working good out of situations that are not God's will. Case in point: Jesus' death on the cross.

As Frederick Buechner says, Christ's resurrection means that "The worst isn't the last thing about the world. It's the next to the last thing. The last thing is the best. It's the power from on high that comes down into the world, that wells up from the rock-bottom worst of the world like a hidden spring. Can you believe it? The last, best thing is the laughing deep in the hearts of the saints, sometimes our hearts even."

For me, this is the center of the gospel, the good news that is ours through Christ. God chooses to show up most clearly in our worst moments, making perfect what is weak, setting right what is broken. Through God's power, my life is now full of that heart-deep laughter, and I'm grateful for the gifts that have come through my divorce.

Most days, anyway. I'm still aspiring to the level of faith Paul attained, enabling him to be "content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities." Even on my worst days, however, I am solidly convinced of this truth: In Christ, "when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10).

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Discussion questions:

1. Is there anything in your life that feels like a thorn in your flesh? Have you pleaded with God to take it away? Have you gotten any response from God?
2. Looking back over your life, what are the things you wish never happened? Has God been able to bring any good out of them?
3. Who are the people around you that help you believe in God's goodness when life is a mess?

Closing prayer:

Jesus, your resurrection is proof that God's power is made perfect in weakness. As we plead with you to take away the things that hurt us, show us that power at work among us. Bring us hope that you are still able to do good when everything seems broken. Amen.

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