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The scars under our ashes

by Elizabeth Hunter

Something happened at church—probably three Ash Wednesdays ago—that got me thinking about scars. After the imposition of ashes, our family began trooping back to the pew. But my youngest child stopped me in the middle of the aisle, gesturing for me to bend down.

“People are staring at my face,” he whispered into my ear. Leaning away slightly, I took inventory: dark, curly hair; a black, smudged cross; golden-brown forehead; dark brown eyes with curly lashes; stubborn chin. Totally normal. I started to say so, but then he spoke.

“Are people looking at my scar?” he asked with a worried frown. “Can everyone see it?”

Huh? I wondered. What was he talking about? That scar from his early childhood, softened by years of cocoa butter, didn’t even draw my attention anymore. Next to the ashes, the scar was barely noticeable.


What do we see?

Rough-edged and sharp-sounding, the English word, “scar,” has roots in several languages: Latin (eschara), Old French (escharre), Greek or eskhara), Middle English (skar) and Old Norse (skarð).

Our scars are the result of wounds being healed. These are the marks that remain after collagen rushes in—much like a team of first responders charged with healing and strengthening broken tissue. The layers of new collagen fibers fill in the gaps, but they are markedly different than the pre-existing tissue around them. When in their zest to repair the damage, these little body warriors

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overdo the collagen, the marks last a lifetime.
I have plenty of scars.

Did you know that after a heart attack, the muscle of the heart is scarred? Or that our bellybuttons are scars—formed when the umbilical cord is cut, just after birth? In other words, almost immediately upon our entry into this world, you, I and everyone are of necessity scarred—for life.

Or perhaps you, like me, have healed from some emotional wounds, yet certain things make those scars so itchy you have to go outside, breathe deeply and walk it off.

Our scars have stories

For me, scars are not just something to be self-conscious about. They are also proof that we heal. They fade after a while. But they never completely disappear. Scars have stories; but so do ashes.

This cross is not about death or making us all feel guilty and ashamed. This cross is about hope. It's about looking for and rejoicing in the promise of new life and the everlasting love of God in Christ.

Today I went to work and attended a long meeting. I debugged a computer, set up a new modem/router, chauffeured kids from school to home to activities, kept my patience while talking to a cranky teen, made a homemade dinner, typed a term paper for one son, took another call from a vice-principal, returned books to the library, hung wet laundry to dry throughout the house (dryer just broke) and tried to finish an assignment I should've turned in yesterday. At one point, I felt like I couldn't catch my breath. I felt so overwhelmed that for about 20 minutes, I collapsed on the couch and just couldn't move. It felt as though a friendly, but very large animal was sitting on my chest, refusing to move until I rested. I want to do it all, but I constantly feel like I'm failing, one or two steps behind where I want to be. These feelings, too, leave scars.

Like my youngest son, I also worry about others focusing on the broken parts of me. At times, I, too, have focused on my brokenness—unable to see the grace. Yet we are continually reminded that in baptism, we are made new. That means something! Instead of obsessing over past wounds, instead of focusing on ourselves, we're actually called to live focused on the cross and loving our neighbors.

Tonight I will sit again in Ash Wednesday services, beginning Lent by admitting to my brokenness, and bearing something more important than brokenness. These smudged ashes on the foreheads of everyone gathered here—beautiful, sooty reminders of loss and love that we did absolutely nothing to earn—these bodily, impermanent crosses—are evidence of Jesus' scars and our own healing. I am oh so ready to receive this healing...as pure gift. This cross is not about death or making us all feel guilty and ashamed. This cross is about hope. It's about looking for and rejoicing in the promise of new life and the everlasting love of God in Christ.

So beginning with our communal confession of sin (based on 1 John 1:8-10), we will come together. We will keep it real, as folks say. We'll be honest about our failure to love our neighbors. Here, in Christian community, we'll let go of feelings of entitlement and feelings of self-deprecation—all of those false ideas that somehow we are more... or less... deserving of God's love than other people (see Romans 3:23).

One day, the pastor says, we will all be dust (Genesis 3:19). Then she traces a sign of God's love in the very ash that represents my inability to overcome the weight of the world. Suddenly I feel all the weight—of my mistakes, my mortality, my inability to be perfect—lift. God—not me—is in control. It feels so freeing.

Interestingly one word for the recognition of our brokenness is humility, derived from the Latin word humus, meaning dirt. As in ash. As in dust. As in we will return to it. Don't fool yourselves. In other words, it's about more than just this world, more than now.

Everyone is broken. Everyone has wounds. But when we come together, when we connect, when we are healers and advocates for each other, God's love becomes our love, too. All our brokenness can receive healing through God's love and our togetherness—in the body of Christ, in the body of this world and in our own individual physical bodies.

We are the new skin and the collagen building blocks of our communities, criss-crossing to provide support for all. Every time I hear of the latest act of violence, the latest shooting, I am struck by the realization that here a disconnected human being, in despair and anger, took life from other humans who happened to have gathered and connected that day in community—at a church or a school or a theater or a gym or a mall or pretty much anywhere people go to be together as one body. The perpetrator of the violence is always one angered by their own inability or failure to connect with the world in ways they feel would be meaningful. The violence is always a literal rending of the body, a taking apart of the community, an attack on what they feel they cannot have: a caring community.

God's intention for us is abundant life. Yet we often fall into scarcity thinking about ourselves, about others, about our world. Our scars don't go away, but they do not define us. The cross defines us. God rebuilds us.

I told my kid that Ash Wednesday three years ago, "No one is even thinking about your scar," I said. "Everybody has scars. If anybody is looking at you right now, it's probably because of the big cross on your forehead! And they have that same mark, too!"





Back in the pew, I reached into my purse for a pocket-sized Women of the ELCA mirror. I handed it to him. He read the words on the sleeve: "This is what bold looks like." Pulling out the small piece of glass, he looked into it.

"Oh!" he said, astonished by the cross.

Elizabeth Hunter is the editor of Gather magazine, Women of the ELCA's print publication.

Closing prayer

Loving God, Thank you for looking beyond our faults to mark us with the cross forever. As we come together in your name, lead us to be healers and advocates for the world. Amen.

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Loving others as you love yourself

by Megan Torgerson

The command to “love your neighbor as yourself” turns up just one time in the Old Testament. We find it buried deep in an eclectic list of instructions to (among other things) not mix fabrics, not consume blood, and not round off the hair on your temples. This might seem a strange place to put a commandment to love yourself and love your neighbor. Consider, however, that the people of God will be set apart, living a different lifestyle than that of the people around them. They would be marked by their worship of one God. The mark that God’s people would bear would be physical in nature, evidenced by the clothes they wore, the food they ate, and the style of their hair.


However, the mark is not merely on the surface. You can recognize God’s people by how they treat others.

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord. Leviticus 19:18

In that same chapter, God tells Moses that the people must not harvest their entire crop. They should leave the edges unharvested so that those who are hungry, poor, or far from home can find something to eat. Lying, stealing, or not paying someone their wages on time is not permitted. You should not make a decision that favors the rich, but instead grants the greatest degree of justice. The actions of God’s people reflect a deep concern for the others, lived out in daily life.

Some of the stranger laws, like interbreeding herds or sowing multiple grains in one field, are harder to understand in our modern culture. But there is clearly a respect for integrity and singularity. God’s people will be set apart, in the purity of their garments and the purity of their actions.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus refers to these words from Leviticus when he is questioned by a lawyer who wants to put Jesus to the test. When the lawyer asks who exactly the neighbor that he must love is, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan.



Samaritans were considered impure, second-class citizens by the Jews, so a Samaritan wouldn't be expected to do anything good. However, he shows up the more upstanding folks like a priest and a Levite—the pastor and politician of their day. The message here is: Don't think for a second that God wouldn't call you to love someone you don't like—or that someone who shouldn't like you would give everything for you.

In order to give so fully of yourself, there needs to be enough of you. You need the appropriate balance of love and respect for yourself. When Paul recalls the command to love others as yourself in Romans chapter 13, he reminds us that all the commandments are summed up by loving others as you love yourself. When we steal, we love ourselves more than we love others by taking what we don't deserve. When we covet, we love the things and lifestyles of others more than we love our own selves. When we murder, we love and value our own lives more than another's. But when we take care of ourselves, making ourselves no more or less important than our neighbors, we are living out God's command.

It is perhaps harder to see love of self as part of our call as Christians, especially since sacrificial love for others is the very foundation of our faith. It is Jesus' full giving of himself in total self-sacrifice that forms and shapes our beliefs. Contemporary slogans like "What would Jesus do?" frame our personal theological reflections. While we must remember this and keep the great gift Christ gave us at the center of our faith, it can be taken too far.

Biblically, we have more examples of believers living out love for neighbor over love of self. Paul writes about becoming "all things to all people" (1 Corinthians 9:22), which is a pretty self-denying way to live. Because of these references, a faithful Christian might think it's more important to recognize and live out the love of neighbor. But the scriptural command remains: As people who love God and follow Jesus, we must love ourselves as much as we love our neighbor.

Returning to the command to love in Leviticus, we cannot ignore that vengeance or bearing grudges are strictly prohibited. You may have heard the saying that the one who seeks revenge digs two graves. In other words, by immersing yourself in the destruction of another, you destroy yourself. Perhaps you have known this feeling. When we focus our energy on following our own purposes and desires, when we decide someone else's life is less valuable than our own, or when we choose to hate, we are not who God made us to be.

Just as God called the people to be set apart from others by their actions and appearance, so we are called. We are to be marked as God's people by our actions toward others: By being kind and gracious, our self-care reflects respect and gratitude for the lives God gave us. Our trust in the God who made us shows in every decision we make.

It may not look exactly the same as a partially sown field, but it still shows. Don't be afraid to claim love of self alongside love of neighbor as the way you live in God's kingdom here and now.

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Discussion questions:

1. Can you think of a person or situation where you observed an imbalance between love of neighbor and love of self? What happened?
2. Does our culture appear to prefer self-love or other-love? In your experience of other cultures (whether in other countries, families, social circles, etc.) have you observed a different preference? Why do you think that is?
3. How might our devotion to God change if we overload our love for neighbor or our self?
4. Is your life over-balanced towards self-love or other-love? How do you recognize that? Why do you think that happens?
5. Many of people give something up for Lent as a way to remember the sacrifice Christ made for them. What if you were to take on something for Lent? What practice, behavior, or belief would you add to help you balance self-love and other-love?

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