

“The Dry Bones of Our Souls”

a sermon by

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Text: Ezekiel 37: 1-14; Romans 8:18-27

It was my third time on call as a chaplain at Baptist Hospital in Winston-Salem. I was doing a unit on Clinical Pastoral Education there in the spring of '91. It involved being on call some days, dealing with the intense crisis situations that happen at a hospital known for its trauma unit. All the other chaplains had gone; I had dinner with my husband and he had left; I was left alone – the only chaplain to the 800 bed hospital for the night.

The first on-call had been terrifying for me – in between calls during the night, I slept fitfully, as rigid as could be. I dreamed that I got lost on the way to the emergency room, going round and round in circles and finally finding it on the other side of a basketball court that for some reason had found its way into the hospital floor plans. I peered into the emergency room windows to find two doctors sawing off the legs of some poor patient; at this point I woke up in a cold sweat.

I had mixed feeling about my role that first night on call. I felt to some extent that I failed each one of the people I was called to minister to; I couldn't give them the ultimate comfort that they needed; I couldn't ease their pain. Oh, I had had all the classes, the theological insight and conviction, and even of the experiences that I needed, to know – on an intellectual level – that I was not called to be a savior, hero, or rescuer. Yet my heart and my emotions – my ego – wanted “success.” I wanted to be a successful chaplain. Ah, but I had set myself up to fail. Thank God.

By my third time on call, I was more familiar with my limitations through recent experiences, than I ever wanted to be. I did not want to spend another sleepless night, rolling in my bed with the anxiety of how to deal with what might be lurking in this huge hospital, waiting to startle me from the covers with the piercing noise of the beeper. So as I got ready for bed, I took a quiet moment just to sit down, and breathe, and acknowledge to myself and God that absolutely, I just might fail to help someone that night. *And, thank God, people's experience of ultimate redemption and hope does not depend on my own efforts – that there is a Spirit even greater, which brings redemption even out of failure.* At that moment I let go, slept pretty well, and felt like I was able to be a grace-full presence with some people in need when I was called.

Do you not imagine that the Jesus in his full humanity as he suffered on the cross, as he admitted feeling forsaken by his God, struggled with his own feelings of profound failure? Can you imagine as the disciples took in the reality of Jesus' horrible death, how devastating their feelings of failure and hopelessness must have been?

It is part of our human experience to be terrified of failure. Failure is like a death – a death of a hope, a dream, even a part of ourselves. And so in our religious lives, since unlike the disciples, we know of the resurrection, we often forget to ponder the fact that the resurrection came out of the seeming failure of the crucifixion – a failure that for the followers of Jesus, absolutely crushed their hopes and broke their hearts. Do you not know they felt empty and completely dried up inside, during this in between time – between the cross and the resurrection, between the fragmentation of all they had come to know and the knitting together of a new life.

The people of Israel had gone through many in between times – 40 years of wandering in the desert between leaving the oppression of slavery in Egypt and the new freedom of finding a home in the Promised Land. Ezekiel in the passage we read today was writing of a hopeful vision to the people of Israel during another in between time in their lives. He was shown by the spirit of the Lord the dry bones of the people. They had had their promised land and had then lost it. The exiles had seen Jerusalem as the ultimate guarantee of their survival as a nation – its fall was devastating to them. They were once again a people without a home, without their sacred shrines, uprooted and displaced, with seemingly no future. They were a “failure.” We have seen the despair, the hopelessness that they must have felt in the eyes of the Palestinians, the Kurds, the people of Kosovo and other displaced people of our generation. Their limitations lie starkly before them. Their failure as nations is a wound that cuts deep into the soul. The people of Israel cried out, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off

completely.” “Our bones are dried up and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” The bones lie in the wasteland – unconnected, fragmented, in pieces. It will take a power greater than their own to knit them back together.

Madeleine L’Engle, a 20th century novelist and spiritual writer, would probably call these in between times, the night side which is just as necessary as the sun side. She calls her theology, a “theology of failure,” because she has a deep awareness of in her own life and relationships of the constant big and little failures that she must acknowledge. Lest you think this is a negative view of life, please understand she is a very hopeful, positive person. And a person who does not run away from the reality of her flaws and limitations. She borrows from John of Kronstadt, a Russian priest of the nineteenth century, the image of hanging her sins on the cross and writes, “Sometimes when I hang on the cross something which is too heavy for me, I think of it as being rather like the laundry lines under our apple trees, when I have changed all the sheets in the house. The wind blows through them, the sun shines on them, and when I fold them and bring them in in the evening they smell clean and pure. If I could not hang my sins on the cross, I might tend to withdraw, to refuse responsibility because I might fail. If I could not hang my sins on the cross, Hugh and I probably wouldn’t still be married...” In other words, for Madeleine, acknowledging her failure, hanging that sin on the cross, enables her to be in relationship with others – *enables her to live*.

Are we not talking about the Spirit of Life at work in our deepest, most scariest parts, where we have to face up to our own limitations and really learn that what enables us to transcend ourselves is not ourselves, but a power far greater. Yet it is often only in confronting and taking responsibilities for our failures that we realize this. I don’t believe spiritual growth is possible without dealing with our limitations, our failures, or to use a heavily loaded word – our

sins. When we reach the dead end, hit the brick wall, meet our limitations head on, confront fully our failings, I believe at first that we encounter the dry bones of our own souls. And that dried up experience remains and remains until one faces up to it, until one faces up to the fact that we live by a spirit of grace, not by our successes – that this grace enables us to acknowledge our limitations and hang them on the cross. For when we hang them on the cross we are reminded of the redemptive power of God’s love. It is in our letting go and giving up that the Spirit enters in. It is through the room created by our very failings that the Spirit of God breathes anew into us, resurrecting us while we are yet alive. It was through the supposed failure of the cross, that the power of God was revealed at its utmost.

When the people of Israel cry out, “Our bones are dried up...,” God responds, “**I** am going to open your graves...**I** will bring you back to the land of Israel ... you shall know that **I** am Lord, when I open your graves and bring you from your graves...**I** will put **my** spirit within you and you shall live...**I** will lay sinews upon you and will cause flesh to come upon you and cover you with skin and put breath in you and you shall live and know that I am the LORD.” God will recreate us, renew us through our failings; God’s spirit will descend upon us in the moment between despair and hope when we realize that we cannot redeem ourselves.

Our passage this morning from Romans reads:

“For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”

Paul is making a very bold statement here in that he is saying that if we remain in bondage to this world, its ideas of success, of meaning, and of life, we will actually be slaves to a process of decay. *Decay!* I have been watching on Wednesday night a show called “Extreme

Makeover.” I must admit a fascination with the whole process and premise of this show. They start with a man or a woman who has applied to be on the show – someone who is generally unattractive by our societies standards and who is unhappy enough with their appearance that they are willing to go through 6 intensive weeks of cosmetic surgery, liposuction, hair transplants, cosmetic dentistry, wardrobe recreations and so forth all the while being filmed for national television. Now you must know that I was a frizzy haired teenager with glasses and braces. I felt terribly unattractive and self-conscious and when the braces came off and I began to wear contact lenses, my confidence and self-esteem rocketed up. I have empathy for those of us who have felt or do feel unattractive and understand the desire to look better. The question is, what are we enslaved to that we think will give us life? I like very much some of the articles in the local women’s magazines. I despise the fact that almost every page of some of these magazines has cosmetic surgery advertisements. So what is funding magazines about women? An industry that makes money out of convincing us our bodies are not good enough and can be reconstructed in a better way. This may be our society’s idea of success and beauty, but if it is what we worship, then ironically are we not remaining in the bondage to *decay* that Paul talks about? For we are spending our time, money and resources on a process to convince ourselves and others that we can look perfect, that we are not aging, we are not finite, limited people. But really – what is redemptive about that? Why cannot we not face and accept ourselves, as we are. We cannot experience grace until we do. We cannot embody God’s grace until we do.

I am not suggesting that we seek to fail or make excuses about our limitations or whitewash the agony and devastation often experienced in failure. I am not suggesting that we don’t try to live up to our full potential. But failure can often be a brutal encounter with the harsh realities of our limitations and our world. And so, if our hope is based only in ourselves or

what the world has to offer to try and cover for our limitations, then indeed we will experience despair. Martin Luther experienced deep despair as he obsessively tried to use the religious ritual of the medieval Catholic Church to atone for his feelings of unworthiness. And, yet, for him, no matter what he did, however scrupulously he followed the monastic rules, it was never enough, and his life was controlled by unending anxiety and fear. Until in what he describes in his Tower experience, the light of the words, “The just shall live by faith,” broke through the darkness of his torment. As one biographer writes: “Like Peter facing up to his own denials of Christ, Luther, having heard the word of Christ’s death and resurrection, began to see the emptiness and self-absorption, the pious pretense and unbelief, of all his prior striving. Looked at in the light of Christ, he knew himself a sinner.” And he was free.

I once knew a little girl – about 11 years old – who every night after the lights were turned out and she kissed her parents good night, took her flashlight, opened her bible, got out her notebook paper and obsessively copied scripture, because she felt so unworthy. When she finished for the night, she carefully folded the paper into quarters, and tucked it into a shoebox hidden in the back of her closet, and finally could go to sleep. One night she did not do it. She agonized and pleaded with the Lord to forgive her, crying at the end of her bed. Suddenly a feeling of warmth and complete serenity – passed over her. She knew at that moment, it was o.k. – no – she was o.k. She fell asleep in peace and no longer needed to obsessively copy scripture at night. Grace.

Where does our freedom lie if not in the Spirit, which enables us to hang our sins, our failures, our limitations on the cross – give them up to God – so that we may be transformed, renewed and breathed into again by the spirit of true life? This means letting go, and often it is

only in encountering our failures that our false dreams of success can be wrestled from our grasp, so that we can let go, and let a power that transcends us work in and through us.

Paul continues to write about how it is the Spirit that helps us in our weakness – in those periods when we do not even know how to pray for what we need. Like the Israelites when they threw up their hands and said, “Our bones are dried up; we are cut off completely.” Like Jesus when he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” These are intense prayers, prayers of letting go, giving it up to God. It is here in these moments Paul claims the spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words – too deep for our own words – and we acknowledge that our life does not belong to ourselves with our fragile understanding of success. *If it did, Jesus would have never died on the cross.*