

“Inseparable”
Broken — Good News for Tough Times: Part 3 of 6

a sermon based on
Romans 8:26-39

and delivered on-
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I don't watch the news on television. I usually read the news on-line. That's what I did this week when I came across an article on CBS News from Wednesday. Maybe you've seen it, I don't know if it aired on television or not. The story was about Odin and Jordan. The headline read "2 Friends Defy the Odds and Graduate Together."¹ When I glanced at the picture accompanying the headline, I notice side by side picture fifteen years apart with a white boy and a black boy sitting next to each other.

"Why were they defying the odds?" I wondered. Was it because they came from different ethnic backgrounds, but somehow managed to remain friends? Was it something about their neighborhood? Were they both poor? So, I read the article.

I found out that the odds they defied had nothing to do with wealth or race or where they lived. Instead it had to do with something else.

Odin's mother had a difficult pregnancy. When the doctor's induced pregnancy and Odin arrived, he wasn't breathing. They'd later learn that his brain had been deprived of oxygen. After some time in NICU, the parents were told that he was unlikely to live to two years old, and heard news like vegetative state.

Three years later (when he'd already beaten that two years), Odin's family enrolled him in a special school where he met and formed an instant bond with Jordan. As it turned out, Jordan had been in the same NICU only two weeks before Odin.

By the world's standards these two young men are broken. If a pandemic resulted in limited treatment, they wouldn't qualify. Many people would dismiss them.

The article didn't say so, but I've been around long enough to know that when Odin's parents heard "won't survive two years" and "vegetative state" that they were probably given the option to let him go. Even if he did survive, what was the point? Right?

Many of you know that in my previous career I worked with people like Odin and Jordan, helping them and encouraging them to claim the most out of life. One of my greatest achievements in life was teaching a forty-year-old woman with Down's syndrome how to tie her shoes. Thirty years later my face is still damp from her joyful kisses. Was she broken? Why hadn't anyone ever even tried to teach her to tie her shoes before she moved into that home after her parents had died?

Maybe that's why it troubles me when doctors recommend an abortion because amniocentesis results indicate that a child might have Down's syndrome. I know too many people in that category that I call friends.

I almost said, "with that disorder," rather than "in that category;" but I would have been wrong. There's nothing disordered or broken about people with Down's syndrome.

However, for those who fetishize the utility of people, "broken" people aren't worthy of love, they're not worth the time, or even air they breathe in.

Maybe that sounds extreme, but is it? For those of us who have ever felt our brokenness, that's what it feels like. Doesn't it? How many of us are broken? Broken by the pain or shame of divorce? Broken a reputation earned in our youth? Broken by a self-image that looks back from the mirror to a woman with anorexia and says, "You're fat, and unworthy, unless you take control," even though she may be dying of starvation?

¹ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/best-friends-2-percent-survival-rate-graduate-high-school-tyler-texas-2020-07-22/>
Accessed July 25, 2020.

Ultimately that's where our brokenness gets us. We start to believe that we're unworthy of the effort, of love, or the air we breathe. It may not always feel that extreme, but it's there. Isn't it? In some capacity, we know that our imperfections need to be hidden away or conquered in order to be worthy of affection or human dignity. Don't we?

We merely have to look at the photo shopped images on magazine covers telling beautiful young women that they're not; or to hear the news about a kid from a wealthy family receiving leniency for a crime in which someone dies because "he has such great potential," while the kid growing up in a slum will serve time for a less serious infraction. You're not worthy unless you're perfect.

This is where Christianity turns things upside down. Every other religion – every other philosophy – even if there's some sense of basic good or dignity in humanity requires people to overcome their brokenness. Maybe it's transactional such as presenting the right gifts before the deity, maybe it's getting the right score card with more good deeds than bad, maybe it's accumulating wealth to demonstrate how fit one is.

That's what drew people to the Good News that the apostles preached. Nowhere in the Gospel does it say that only the perfect need apply. How many times did Jesus scold the self-righteous while allowing "that sort of woman" to touch his feet, healing Jew and Gentile alike, eating in the home of a tax collector like Zacchaeus, and even inviting one to be one of his inner circle?

Jesus didn't wait for Peter and Andrew or John or James to get their act together before he invited them to follow him and to leave the fish behind as they went forward fishing for souls.

This was more pronounced in the pagan world where Paul preached. The Greek and Roman gods were capricious and needed to be appeased or bribed. If you didn't have the means to do that, you deserved whatever lot you had.

But instead of going on a rah-rah motivational speaking circuit trying to convince people that they had some sort of unleashed personal quality that they only had to work at and they too could be freemen like him, he told them about the Gospel. He told them about his own brokenness. He told them about how he too had engaged in the futility of becoming perfect or good enough.

Then he told them that hope was not futile. He told them about how God became human and how Jesus died on that cross not to honor the righteous and well-heeled but to give life and give hope to each one of us in our brokenness. We say it in one of our Communion rites in the words of absolution following the confession, "Christ died for us while we were yet sinners. That proves God's love for us." This is the good news of the Christian faith: no matter how bad or broken we are or have become God offers us life.

As Paul says, "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Ro 8:38-39)

If you paid attention you would have notice that he says this right after quoting Psalm 44:22, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

These Christians were feeling a bit put out. They were being persecuted. They didn't even feel competent to be Christians. Paul even reminds them that they don't need to be perfect even in prayer, that the Holy Spirit will make their words perfect before God. (Ro 8:26)

How often do we refrain from prayer because we just don't know what to say? How many people stay away from church not because they don't want to worship or be in relationship with God, but because they think that they're not good enough? Because... they're broken?

Neither Odin nor Jordan was ever expected to walk – let alone live into adulthood. But when he was four-years-old Odin surprised his parents by getting out of his bed without his braces and walking in on them. When he got to school he stayed close by his inseparable friend, Jordan, and pushed his wheel chair. And eventually, that graduated high school together. It is a special school and a special program, but they accomplished something that even the doctors said would be impossible for such broken people. Why was that?

Their parents didn't give up on them, and in each other they found an outlet for expressing that fraternal love that best unites us as human beings.

In Jesus Christ God offers us that same sort of devotion. In Jesus Christ, we have the promise that he will stick with us through every challenge and that even when we are struck dumb that the Holy Spirit will give us the words we need or at least to make them meaningful. The promise is that nothing and no one can stop him or keep him from loving us. We can reject that love, we can even try to prove how unlovable and irreparably broken that we are, but it can't stop God's love.

Maybe that's where we can learn something profound from two "broken" young men. Things start to come together better {glue next piece to vase} when instead of running from our own brokenness and imperfection we trust that the bond we have in our life with Jesus Christ can not only inspire and lift up others.

Odin's father, Tim, had the privilege of walking across a stage with Odin to receive a high school diploma, even though he himself had never graduated high school. It was the bond between Odin and Jordan that brought their families together and gave them encouragement.

Our bond with Jesus can do that for others. We may not see completion right away {point to vase} and it may not look or feel perfect, but Jesus sticks with us better than any superglue to refashion us and to make us vessels of hope. AMEN.