

**May 6, 2001**

**“HOW TO MEND A BROKEN HEART...”**

“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because, He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted...” - Isaiah 61:1

A few years ago, noted novelist Saul Bellow, wrote a book entitled, “More Die of Heartbreak”. I love the title; but in some ways, it is a confusing book. The plot is more or less obvious; but while it is labeled with a sad and serious title, it takes on the genre of a classical French Farce. Molière could have written it. Or, if you prefer England, Evelyn Waugh could have published it a generation ago for his whimsical British audience.

The theme, plot if you prefer to be technical, is that some people who seem to have everything they need, still end up as failures, somehow managing to drive their overwhelming potential into an ignominious defeat, a true comical tragedy. It is laughable for the most part, but the laugh in the end is on them. They break their own hearts.

Benn Crader, the chief character and hero of the book, is a botanist of great renown. He is the kind of scholar who would come to the Royal Poinciana Chapel, not for sermons and song, but to study the famous Kapok tree at the southwest foot of our back Garden, or to revel in the beauty of the exquisite and rare Pigeon Plum tree in the southwest center of the Garden. Thanks to Walter Kiebach, our West Garden, re-designed in memory of Olivia, is one of the finest of its kind, not only on Palm Beach Island, but anywhere else around.

Anyway, Bellow’s Dr. Crader is a consummate botanist. However, in his preoccupation with his plants and flowers, he lives in exclusion of the reality of other things around him, especially other people. In the end, he weaves an inextricable web of his own self-destruction.

His nephew, the erratic narrator named Kenneth, is equally unrealistic and compulsive. His passion happens to be Russian literature, rather than things botanical. He, as his celebrated uncle, keeps searching for solutions in all the wrong places, and needless to say, neither of them ever succeeds in finding them.

Meanwhile, in the novel, which will bring us closer to the sermon topic, Benn Crader’s wife Della dies suddenly and unexpectedly. “She was suffocating in swollen longings”, Kenneth says. But in spite of the shock, Benn appears to remain calm and preoccupied with his plants, relatively undisturbed. I say “appears to be”. For, in the same sentence stating his regret that Della is gone, he speaks fervently about what Dioxin and other harmful wastes do to plant growth, surely a diversion from having to talk about his grief... Then, realizing what is going on, he says: “Plant disease is terribly serious I

know, but of course not many people die from it. More die of heartbreak than ever die of radiation. I think she died of a broken heart.”

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“More people die of heartbreak.” My intent in our sermon today is to focus on how serious is this matter of broken hearts, not literal heart disease but emotional heartbreak. Heartbreak kills a lot more people than we normally acknowledge, and where it does not literally “kill”, it can take the gift of life away.

I want you to think with me a while about what heartbreak can do to a person and what in turn, the rest of us can do to try to mend it. By heartbreak I mean a wide variety of emotions. The crushing grief of the loss of one you loved too much to lose; or in the land of broken dreams of young and old alike, or in the broken relationships of two people who are/were in love; or in the problems with a son which will not go away. I mean the worry over a partner of many years, who changes character. I mean the pain of misplaced longings, or of promises unfulfilled. I mean all of that and so much more that come to cause a broken heart. I mean enduring the anguish of an illness that will not go away.

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In the first year of my ministry, I knew a man, let’s call him Jim, who was fine and fit. He retired early; he had all the money in the world, or at least all that any man could easily spend in one lifetime, although you never know. He had run a major business for decades, with all the preoccupations and pressure that go along with that kind of corporate and financial success.

In the process, as often happens, he had not so much avoided his family, as he had put them in second place; not intentionally, but he had neglected his children and his wife. “There was always something to do for the darn company”, was the way she said it, “and we always got the leftovers, when there were some.”

It is almost too tender to talk about although she is gone now and so is he, but what happened next is important to this sermon. His wife, “a long time after I should have”, she said, decided to leave him, after thirty-seven years of marriage. She had found a younger man, not that she tried to, it just happened. It appeared that he cared more about her, although the husband said no one could have loved her, or cared for her any more than he, and I believed him. But, sometimes marriage grows tired and old. He just didn’t show his love anymore, or he didn’t know how to, or he didn’t think about it often enough.

Well, months, and then nearly a year passed; Jim became depressed. He was lower than a snake’s belly, as we used to say up home. I am not always sure what clinical depression means, but week by week, in church and on the street, I could see that Jim was changing before my very eyes. (By the way, I watch the people of our parish each and every Sunday).

A couple of months later Jim checked into the local hospital for tests. Everything came back negative. “There is nothing wrong with you”, the doctor said. I visited him frequently in that time...I had more time for visitation then. But the days rolled into weeks. Jim kept getting worse, continuing to confound his doctors. Soon he was eating next to nothing. By the time Christmas came, it was critical. By New Year’s Day, we had his funeral.

I was talking to his best friend a few days later. I said, let’s call that man Tom, (both were internationally know in the steel industry) “What do you think happened to Jim? It seemed to me that he just did not want to live any more.” Tom said, “You are right, Reverend, I think he died of a broken heart”. I was amazed back then: “He died of a broken heart”. I had never heard the expression before that moment. That kind of possibility had never occurred to me. But in the long days and decades since, I have come to recognize it in a myriad of stations and places.

Now "dying of a broken heart" is not precise enough for medically minded men and women, I know. You will never read it on any medical chart. A physician would be the laughing stock of his compatriots if he ever wrote down: Cause of Death: “Broken Heart”. But I know it to be true. I have seen it endless different ways.

For example, I cannot tell you the number of times in my ministry when after a long and lovely marriage together, one or the other of the partners dies. Then, before very long...oh sure, I know it’s related to the stress of the readjustment and to the change of diet and regular eating habits, to the fact that both are in their elder years, I know. But I have too many times watched the other become bewildered and the zest for life trickles away, tiptoes out into the night; and before you know it, it often appears in the form of a specific illness, life itself drifts away. The doctor writes coronary, cancer, etc. But I know what should be on the Death Certificate: “She died of a broken heart”. Jim did. I think my mother did as well. Surely my father did before her...etc.

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It happens in other ways, too, doesn’t it, broken heartedness, I mean. For example, I would say a broken heart lies behind much of the misbehavior that we see. I could apply it anywhere, everywhere. But let me choose a common and actual location. Think of what happens to those in the minority segments of our society. Pretend you were strong and young with great ambition, and because of the color of your skin, or the land of your birth, or your accent, or some accident of time, or some spiraling coupling of genes gone out of control, the doors around you appear to be closed. It happens; natural longings to happiness and success are thwarted, in places where there is no motivation to go to school or to achieve. All around are drugs, and idleness, and worse. The only heroes, save athletes, are those who make a quick dollar in crime. In ways dramatic, a young person gets into trouble trying to find his pleasure in any way he can.

Then it is one job after another, one drink after another, stronger drugs, one following the other, one prison sentence after another, one illness after another, all too early a death or

long imprisonment. The number of minority men who die young is entirely disproportionate and a great disgrace. The percentage of those in underprivileged areas who end up in prison, or other troubles untold, or death, is legendary, compared to those with homes and education to support and nurture them, although, many of them get into trouble, too. Life can be confusing and misleading.

Some people place the blame on these ill-directed youth. “They get what they deserve”, some people say,” Why can’t they be like the rest of us?” Well, I know why they can’t. I could say it in a thousand different ways. I do not mean to defend their misdeeds. I do not mean to defend their anger, far less their violence. I mean to explain their disenfranchisement! Their hearts and hopes are broken.

Sociologists, and psychologists, and all the other ologists study and examine what goes wrong. The professionals invent all kinds of categories to fit the action. But I have never bought into that. In my opinion, why these disappointed young people get into trouble, why some even take their own lives in violence, why they get shot in the streets, is explained by the stress caused to the soul and psyche, stress by a broken heart.

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There is still another aspect to this point, one so close to home it might make you uncomfortable or at least make you wiggle in your seat. It might cause your wife to give you a little elbow in the ribs, or cause a tear to form in the corner of your eye. I speak now of that large and countless number of people I have known, and still do, who spend their whole long lives seeking to find some purpose, some meaning, to find the love they need, and never really find it.

They function through life fairly normally. They even seem to be happy, usually at a party. Some of them, as Benn Crader and Kenneth, are successful, on the outside. But inside they are lonely, dissatisfied, secretly angry and afraid to stop. The stress caused by all that wishing and hoping and running and weeping, in a life which promises more than it delivers, is so harmful that their hurt explodes one day, or after years of self-neglect and punishment, or it comes in an accident, maybe it is even self-inflicted, but they die an early death. Do you know the kind I mean? Some say they die of wishing to be dead. Some seem to have a secret wish to go. The paper often reports their suicide. I say they died of a broken heart. Loneliness can kill you, all by itself.

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You might be wondering what I want you to do. The Lord wants you to bind up the broken heartedness in the world. Some of you are breaking other peoples hearts – “Quit it!”. And, if you are not helping to mend a broken heart, “Start it!”

The Bible knows all about broken hearts and how to mend them. Jacob’s heart was broken when he buried his beloved Rachel; David’s when his son Absalom died; the women who had to watch while Jesus trudged on up the Via Dolorosa; the poor who were

trodden on in Old Jerusalem, the father whose young son ran away into the foreign country; the one at the side of the road as the Priest and Levite passed by. Maybe most of all the Samaritan woman at the Well, the one who had been married five times and was living with a sixth man. She was thirsting for “the living water”; Jesus called it, not the water that you draw from a community well or faucet. He said, “My dear, if you taste this Living Water you will never thirst again. Your broken heart will be mended in a moment.”

Our scriptural text is in Isaiah 61:1 “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted, He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and to comfort all who mourn.

When Jesus Christ read the Scripture in his own synagogue in Nazareth, the one and only record we have of our Lord selecting a scripture reading, which He said applied to Him. He chose the words from Isaiah 61: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, to bind up the brokenhearted and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”

Every word matters. Each was inspired of God. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. I am anointed. The association of the servants of the Lord with the anointing of the Lord is not a part time job. With Moses, Isaiah, Deborah, Abraham, Lydia, Peter, Paul and Mary. They didn’t just go searching around, climbing the hills or the walls, trying to decide what they should/could do to give meaning to their lives.

No, they stopped and waited for their assignments. The outline was always given: to bind up the broken hearted, to bring good tidings to the afflicted, to those in distress, to the poor, the lonely, the confused and the dying; to comfort all who mourn and have a spirit of heaviness.

For years, maybe decades, Johnny Cash, the famous Nashville singer, dressed only in black. In fact he used to sing a song about that, in mourning, in black, for those who had troubles and woes.

The chosen ones will never be the same again. However meek and frail they seem they will be like oaks of righteousness. If the Spirit of the Lord is on you; if you are trying to mend a broken heart...you will be like an oak, like a huge terebinth evergreen. “They shall build up the wasted places; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastation of many generations.” Remember they had recently returned from three generations of captivity in Babylon. When they came back, Jerusalem was broken down and dangerous. It was in need of restoration.

I was in West Palm Beach at noon yesterday, over at City Place by the big fountain to celebrate the graduation of Robin Wiles, one of our Church School teachers here at the Chapel, from Palm Beach Atlantic College. It was grand: the party and the place.

But I was thinking back, in the middle of all that beauty, to the days when Mrs. Cromie and I first came up here to be at the Chapel, half a dozen years ago. When we came that space was desolate. Who would have ever dreamed then that people would pay hundreds of thousands of dollars to buy a town house or condo on Sappodilla or Hibiscus or Quadrille or Tamarind. Just five, six years ago people were afraid to drive by there, even in the daylight. The streets were usually deserted. There was a dream connected to it, but one that had not worked, not yet. But by now the broken hearts of those who never lived to see it, are mended.

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I know it is a little dangerous in the Theology of things to add what I about to say, but I will run the risk. I think you could say that our Lord Jesus Christ, after three decades of life and three years of trying to change the world, and seeing so little difference no matter what He did. No matter how much he gave, it did not change. I think you could say, although Pilot and Herod, and Caiaphas and the soldiers did it to Him...I think you could say that He agreed to go to the Cross because his heart was broken. I think that you can say that He died of a broken heart.

The whole topic reaches its zenith in Psalm 34, Verse 18, where the Psalmist wrote:

“The Lord is near to the brokenhearted. He saves the crushed in spirit...many are the afflictions of the righteous, but when they cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them from all their troubles. The Lord redeems the life of His servants, none of those who take refuge in Him will be condemned.”

The Lord provides for us the power to heal the brokenhearted. It is up to us to do it –for now and evermore. Amen.

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