

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter – 2022C

While I was reflecting on Paul's and Barnabas' experience in Antioch as recorded in today's first reading two things came to mind. The first was this verse from Isaiah, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." (Is 9:1) Paul and Barnabas were preaching the Good News of Jesus and the promise of eternal life. Many were overjoyed at hearing this message while other became angry and rejected what Paul and Barnabas were saying. This led me to think of Plato's allegory of the cave.

It is a story about a group of prisoners who were bound and chained from childhood at the bottom of a dark cave. With their legs and necks fixed and facing in one direction, all they could see was what was in front of them. The world that they interacted with was composed entirely of shadows projected on the wall by a fire that burned behind the prisoners. Within the cave, they heard noises and echoes of shadow people but were utterly convinced that what they saw in the shadows was in fact real and true.

What happens when one brave soul removes his chains and gets up the courage to walk toward the source of the shadows and into the light? With his heart in his mouth, he braves the darkness to walk from the bottom of the cave up to the light. Once he reaches the top of the cave, the light blinds him. His eyes have

become so accustomed to the dark that this strange light is terrifying. At this stage, the darkness of the cave is preferable to the pain he is experiencing, but in time, his eyes adjust to the light so that he can see clearly. He realizes for the first time that this world of light is the real world, and the world inside the cave is but a pale imitation of this light-filled life. Instead of a fire being the source of light, he understands that the fire is in fact the sun. Excited to share this news with his friends, he descends into the darkness of the cave once again. Once again, his eyes take time to adjust from brightness to darkness, but his mind knows to expect it this time. After some time, he makes it to the bottom of the cave, where his friends are still sitting chained.

With great passion and excitement, he tells them about what he has seen and points out that the wall they are staring at is not real at all. **Here think of Paul and Barnabas.** There is a whole world behind them if they would just be brave enough to leave the darkness of the pit behind! He warns them about the blindness that he first experienced going from the dark into the light but shares that, just as his eyes did, their eyes will adjust. Instead of excitement and curiosity in their eyes, he sees fear and hostility. They wonder if the blindness he initially experienced has harmed him permanently. He is dejected and demoralized by their attitude and realizes that he has become an outsider forever. A line has been drawn. The prisoners make known their intent to kill him rather than leave the security of

the cave and as such, it is the ending of something significant for both. The prisoners are no longer his friends, just as the bottom of the cave is no longer his home. He will never go back to pretend and live in darkness, and they will never have the courage to live in the light.

Many of us are like the people who stay in the darkness of the cave. It is a cave of spiritual darkness. A place where we think it is safer than breaking free into the light. One question that we ask and is longing for a voice is this one, "If God knew who I really was, would he still love me anymore?" The answer is yes. He knows, he sees, and he accepts and loves us, flaws and all. But why do we have difficulty accepting this fact?

Perhaps it is because we are all broken in some way. We all have a place in our soul where we hide away all those things we don't want anyone, perhaps even God, to know about. It is, so to speak, a spiritual junk drawer, the place where we keep our doubts, imperfections, feelings of unworthiness, the unkind words we have hurled about, the divorce that shatters our self-image, our addiction, the shame of abuse, times when we have been unforgiving and lacking in compassion, and of course, our favourite sin. So, we stay in our spiritual darkness.

God wants us to clear out our spiritual junk drawer so that we can receive new gifts of life. He wants us to move out of the darkness and into the great light. Opening our junk drawers can

be a painful return to some of the most difficult experiences in our lives. One of the biggest steps we can take on our journey is to name what or who it is that shames us and any residual guilt we may feel.

Shame and guilt, while connected, are not the same. Guilt is often an emotion that arises as a result of a behavior or activity. Shame is connected to our deepest identity and focused not just on the behavior or event but on our **self**. Guilt says, "What happened was bad," whereas shame says, "We are bad." At the heart of shame is the lie that we are unlovable, worthless, stupid, or useless. We must reflect on the passage in Scripture that comes from Isaiah and says, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine." (Is 43:1) God will always call us out of love. Evil, by contrast, will always call us by our shame. "Liar," "thief," "bad mother," "absent father," "junkie," "alcoholic"—shame whispers repeatedly until it breaks us down and sometimes we believe the lie even though we shouldn't.

I vividly remember Elsie, with whom I worked at the Indigenous Women's Shelter in Montreal. Week after week she would come to see me. She would recount the tragic story of her life. Often she would grab my hand and hold it to her cheek. Looking at me with eyes filled with tears she would say, "I am a terrible person. I have failed as a mother and a wife and I'm an alcoholic. I can never be forgiven." In spite of everything I said to

her to tell her that in spite of her mistakes she was a good and lovable person she would reply, “No, I’m not. I’m no good.” It broke my heart because I could see, in her, the spark of God’s love struggling to bring her into the light and transform her.

Shame rewrites the narrative about our potential and who we are created to be. Repetition is its currency. In the absence of support, love, and encouragement, shame can get a foothold in our lives and hold us back physically, emotionally, spiritually, and mentally as we try to climb out of whatever dark cave we are in. Shame will use whatever it can to twist the inner voice of love to the negative. "You don't deserve to be happy!" it shouts. "Don't enjoy this too much, it won't last," or the familiar "Wait until they find out who you **really** are"—it repeats over and over. We have to make the decision to end shame's power over us right now, and the release we will feel will wash over us in waves.

If you have a trusted friend, a spiritual director, or a counselor who walks with you, feel free to break down the contents of your spiritual junk drawer with that person by your side. If you are too scared to talk, write it down, reach out, or find a way to release the hold these experiences have over you. Clear out that spiritual junk drawer once and for all!

We all go through tough times, experience suffering, and make mistakes. Some of those mistakes are terrible or seem

irredeemable. We think we are ruined or tainted. Not so. When light and dark come together, something new and beautiful is always created. And the same is true in the ordinariness of life. When we break something like a plate or a teacup, we often cannot find a use for it any longer and regretfully throw the object away. But there is a practice in the Japanese culture called **kintsugi**, literally meaning "golden" and "repair," that teaches us to accept our mistakes and failures as the means of transformation.

The practice of **kintsugi** takes broken objects and repairs them with precious liquid gold, silver, or lacquer and dusts them with powdered gold. Each object that cracks or breaks does so in unique ways, and in the repair of the object, the breaks are not hidden or covered up but instead are highlighted. The cracks and scars are gilded and create a piece of art, far more beautiful than the original.

Throughout our lives, we crack and break open. Sometimes we try and put the pieces back together ourselves by hiding the cracks and scars that we bear. If we do not learn to accept where those fault lines lie, in time, the seams will open once more and we will fall apart.

But in making ourselves authentically available to God, and allowing him to heal our brokenness something beautiful happens. We enter a space where God meets us. He doesn't

gloss over our cracks but instead guides us in the repair process so that our cracks turn into golden scars that we bear, not with shame, but with love and acceptance.

And this teaches us a valuable lesson. We cannot be available to God and others if we sit inert, mourning our failures and cracks. The essence of resilience and beauty is found in all our experiences, not just the good ones, the perfect ones, the untainted ones. But especially in the experiences where we have been broken and the golden light of love knits us back together, imperfectly perfect just as God designed us to be.

God invites us to make ourselves available to him and offer up all that we are to the master craftsman, who wants to transform us through our sufferings and failings. It is not in perfection that we are made great, it is in our imperfections. As God tells us: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).