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Open Arms

Mark 10:16

Martin Marty tells of an orthodox Jewish congregation in San Jose, California which was confronted with a unique problem. There were very few Jews living in the community and even fewer Orthodox Jews. There were sixteen bachelors in the congregation who had almost no chance of meeting women who shared their faith. Someone decided that it might be fun to run an advertisement in a national Jewish publication. It said, "Seven brides for seven bachelors urgently needed...it's a desperate situation." The response was phenomenal. A woman in the congregation who volunteered to handle responses found herself processing dozens of calls every day from cities as far away as Pittsburg, Miami, and Boston. Some of the calls were from men asking if they could meet some of the overflow. She observed that the people who were calling were serious about wanting to get married. In a most surprising way this congregation found itself becoming a place where people brought their brokenness and their hopes for a better future.

In the second chapter of the Book of Hebrews, we find the church being described in these terms. The writer of Hebrews sees the church as a community where broken people come hoping for a better future. The reality of hope comes to life as broken people encounter Jesus Christ. Jesus meets us precisely where we experience pain, conflict, and disappointment. The humiliating death of Jesus on the cross demonstrates his solidarity with the brokenness of humanity. The Book of Hebrews affirms this solidarity by describing Jesus as one who "is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters (Hebrews 2:11)."

But Hebrews goes on to point out that Jesus' solidarity with the human community is not just a matter of sympathy. To be a sister or brother of Christ means to be part of a community where brokenness is embraced and wholeness is tasted. It means to belong to a community where people look beyond their brokenness to see and respond to the pain of the world around them.

In the 10th chapter of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus describes the community he is forging in a similar way. He notices that the disciples have been turning children away. They have bought into ancient society's view of children. Children were not valued in that culture. They had no status and no rights. They were considered sub-human at worst and a nuisance at best. When Jesus receives the children with open arms and blesses them he is calling into question the values of his culture. But more than that he is demonstrating that everyone is welcome in the kingdom of God. The grace of God is at work to bring wholeness to all who are broken. He is challenging the disciples to become a community which receives with open arms all who are in need.

This past week *The State Journal-Register* has carried a series of articles about churches which have decided to relocate to the periphery of our city. In one case the pastor was quoted at great length describing how impossible the old location was and offering a shopping list of altruistic reasons for moving to the land of unlimited parking. In another case church members have been arguing in editorials and letters to the editor over the real reasons for their congregation's decision to leave downtown. Some say that the move is an act of welcome and compassion. Some say it is about finding

a more attractive location from which to increase market share. Both of these congregations are learning that there is a hefty price tag attached to the decisions they have made. In one case there will be a \$4,000,000 debt after the construction pledges are paid in three years. In the other the construction pledges have already been paid, leaving a residual debt of \$11,000,000.

At Westminster we addressed this issue in very direct fashion in the year 2000. This congregation voted to remain at this site and embrace our city from its historic core. We then began a process of investing \$2,000,000 to bring our entire 50,000 square foot building to a high standard of safety, beauty, and functionality. We have done this work with love and care to keep our indebtedness below \$600,000. Our debt retirement campaign this Fall is an opportunity to bring this process to a successful conclusion.

As we have made this journey together one fact has been very clear. It has not been about increasing market share. It is about serving. Our investment in this site says that our arms and our hearts are open to broken people wherever they are. It is my privilege from time to time to meet with leaders from neighborhood groups who are struggling to keep the historic neighborhoods of our city healthy. They always tell me the same thing. "Thank you for being the solid anchor which holds this area together. Thank you for making our job so much easier." The fact that WPC continues to thrive at the center of our city is a sign of the wholeness that God intends for all of us.

The nature of the wholeness to which God calls us has been described by Lillian Daniel. Her parents collected beautiful, delicate pottery from Southeast Asia. When Lillian was a teenager she noticed a vase that did not fit with the rest of the collection. The vase had once been a fine antique with a cream glaze and blue Japanese design, but now it was damaged. It was a mass of cracks, crudely glued together with what was obviously the wrong type of adhesive. Everywhere the 20 or so pieces met one another, glue had bubbled out yellow as it dried, creating the effect of ugly scars. And yet it stood among the finer pieces. She asked her mother why she did not get rid of this awful looking piece. Her mother told her that this was the most valuable piece of pottery in the house. Then she told Lillian the story behind the cracked vase. Lillian writes:

When I was a toddler, my journalist father was covering the Vietnam War, moving in and out of the war zone for weeks at a time. When he returned home, he brought a piece of Asian pottery to add to my mother's collection. The vase was one of the finest he'd found, and he'd wrapped it in string and brown paper, then carried it carefully on several airplanes and buses before finally walking up the driveway with the special present in his hands.

But at that very moment, I, his two-year-old daughter, rushed forward, my arms outstretched for an embrace. Surprised and elated, my father could not push me aside to put down the vase. Instead, he simply opened his arms. As I fell into them, the vase fell out and broke into pieces. That night my mother pulled out the glue, clumsily repaired the vase, and pronounced it precious (*Christian Century*, August 8, 2006, page 31).

Our brokenness finds its place in the open arms of Jesus. We are called to extend these arms to the broken people of our city. In so doing we witness to the God who has picked us up, put us back together, placed us on the best shelf, and called us precious.