

2024 Proper 18B

Wednesday morning's Bible Study may have been the best discussion we've ever had. They didn't all agree. Ideas were challenged, but always with respect that each was speaking from tender, sometimes deeply vulnerable experiences. I had to wrap it up after an hour, but I would have loved to let it go until lunchtime. It was that rich and meaningful.

The conversation started with Sandy (who has extensive experience working with the deaf community) stating, "I've never met a deaf person who wanted to be 'healed,' thank you."

Eventually I commented that I find the Paralympics far more inspirational than the "regular" ones. I asked if anyone else had seen the ads that ran, in which a couple of kids see a woman with a prosthetic leg, and whisper to each other, "What happened?" The woman hears them, and turns and tells them the story—not of how she lost her leg, but what she accomplished at the Paralympics. She refuses to be defined by what had happened to her, by what she 'lacks' She refuses to be seen as 'broken' in the eyes of society.

Meanwhile, my heart was full of concern for a friend whose dog had died. He is a hospice chaplain who understands the whole grieving thing. He is very good at

his job. And yet he was embarrassed by the depth of his sorrow. He said, “after everything I’ve lived through, who would have thought it would be the death of a stupid dog that broke me?”

I said maybe he wasn’t broken. Maybe he was broken *open*. The grief opened him up to parts of himself he had been refusing to make space for. Some parts he considered so damaged they had to be hidden away, even from himself.

I drove home pondering these questions.

Who defines what is broken or sick?

Who determines what ‘wholeness’ looks like?

Is anybody really “normal” in this world?

Who decides what needs to be changed?

Who does the changing?

What happens when society labels—mislabels—as broken or sick those who are different, who don’t fit our expectations of “normal”?

Our definition of “normal” gets narrower and narrower until none of us really feel like there is a place for us. We shut parts of ourselves off from God, forgetting that God loves diversity. People become spiritually malformed, afraid, isolated. And bad things happen. Things that really *do* need to change. Things that really *do* need healing.

Which leads us to that afternoon, when I arrived home to hear there had been another school shooting. I just sighed and asked, “How many this time?”

Now there is something that is broken. A society where that kind of violence has become commonplace. Where we just add those names and numbers to the ever-expanding list of victims to grieve, when—if—we have the time.

Where we satisfy ourselves by labelling the individual as the problem, as someone who is sick or broken or different, rather than actually doing anything to change the system that creates them.

What would happen if we stopped trying so hard to fix everyone else? To make people fit into certain boxes? To pretend that there is any such thing as “normal”?

What if, instead, we just set aside all the boxes and labels, and instead saw each person as themselves? What if we created spaces in our society where we *see* and *hear* people who are different, to help them find in themselves the parts of them that are lovely and loveable as they are. And yes, to help them find healing and wholeness when it’s necessary. BEFORE it reaches the boiling point.

What if we celebrated all the ways in which God can empower us to be bearers of the Gospel just the way we are? So that we can change the “what happened” narrative into a proclamation of the Good News?

You know. Be the church.

We can start by choosing mercy over judgment.

By making space for that which is different, even when it means we confront our own biases and assumptions.

By taking a hard look at the ways in which each of us daily falls short of truly loving our neighbor—as they are, not what we think they should be.

By seeing people not as broken beyond repair, but as a beautiful, quirky, unique parts of God’s diverse creation.

We might even find we are kinder and more compassionate and merciful to ourselves.

I want to finish by sharing a story I heard from at least one friend who is in the LGBTQ community. She grew up in a time when the world was just beginning to make space for people like her, but the church was still pretty closed. She shared that she spent years praying desperately that God would make her “normal.”

She grew more and more frustrated with the situation, wondering why God wasn't doing what she asked. She was so faithful, she was trying too hard to be "right." She would go to sleep begging God, "heal me!" She would wake up pleading with God, "change me!"

And then came the day when she screamed at God, "FIX ME!"

And finally heard God shout back, "NO! *YOU'RE NOT BROKEN!*"

Amen.