

## **Caring From Brokenness**

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2 Corinthians 1:3-11

We all have been wounded and hurt in this life. None of us are exempt. No matter how wonderful or “perfect” someone’s life appears from the outside, nobody gets around pain or affliction of some sort. This is part of what it means to be human.

A man named Paul, wrote a letter to a community of people in the city of Corinth. As you will hear in the passage I’ll read in a moment, Paul acknowledged that the people had been hurt, were wounded, and at times been in pain. In large part, this resulted from being bold enough to follow in Jesus’ footsteps. The way of life of a Jesus follower was counter cultural and at odds with those in power, who would often persecute them.

Understanding this reality, has consider our assumptions about the mistakes we have made, and our wounds, scars, and the affliction we have endured in life.

Most of the time, we think these take us down a notch. We think of them decreasing our value as

human beings and making us perhaps less effective in our roles in our families, and the way we contribute to the lives of others.

This plays out in the public sphere all of the time. Take for example the presidential campaign we observe in the news, or when a person is being nominated for a high office, like the Supreme Court.

The first thing that happens is these candidates come under incredible scrutiny by their opponents, who dig up dirt from their deep past with the intention of discrediting them.

The assumption is that if someone made a mistake, even decades ago, then they have a mark against them. If a person has enough marks against them, then they will be considered tarnished enough that they are disqualified from a particular position.

So, if they smoked marijuana, or perhaps if they inhaled when smoking ... If they painted their face black some 30 years ago ... If they spoke some offensive words or wrote a paper in college with a certain policy leaning ... Or if they treated someone of the opposite sex with disrespect — then all bets are off!

The assumption is that when we make mistakes, it is a sign of our forever character which follows us the rest of our life and necessarily determines any future choice, action, or decision. Our past mistakes, our past pain — anything from our past limits us in how we approach the present and future.

This is the assumption that runs deep in our culture, and it allows for no growth, no redemption, no transformation, and no forgiveness.

Listen to the beginning of a letter from a man named Paul and his protege and ministry partner Timothy, to a number of churches in and around Corinth, south central Greece.

## **READ 2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-11**

This scripture passage speaks of a different reality than the assumptions our culture holds. Paul and Timothy affirm that our past wounds and scars can actually be turned into a positive, both in our lives and the lives of others.

Our own pain actually can deepen our character, strengthen our integrity and resolve making us even more valuable in our families, and communities.

Rather than a mark against us, our wounds actually are a force for healing in the world.

This is not a new idea. Aristotle said 350 years before Jesus that we cannot learn without pain.

In the world of sports, coaches and athletes recognize that to improve and succeed they will need to face their own pain and move through it.

When our lives are focused with God's heart, our pain is used for our benefit and the benefit of others. God brings good out of all things. Now all things are not good, but with God, good can come from all things.

Jesus' example on the cross is perhaps the most prominent demonstration of caring for others through brokenness that we have.

Among other passages in the Bible, 1 Peter affirms this, when the author wrote,

*When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. (1 Peter 2:23-24)*

What amazing generosity and love lived out in such a selfless way. This is an example for us all.

Paul had been around the block a few times. He saw time and again how God worked to comfort and strengthen those who were in pain through others who also experienced pain.

We know this by our own experience. Once we have been through a personal challenge, we can grow a greater compassion for others who are also facing similar challenges. When we allow our hearts to remain soft and allow compassion to lead, caring will provide the space for healing.

I heard Shelby's story this week and it was so compelling I have to share it with you. Shelby's life is filled with joy, vibrance, energy, excitement, and a life full of giving and caring.

But that's not where Shelby's story begins. It begins when she was 21-years-old. Actually, it begins in the four years prior, during which her dad had a brain aneurism and nearly died, which was horribly difficult. She also came out of the closet as a queer woman while living in the south, which had her accepted by some and not by others. She was living in the space of not knowing whether some

family members were going to accept her or not, which propelled her into an eating disorder.

Fast forward to age 21, Shelby's mother was diagnosed with cancer. She had surgeries, got better, went home. Then all of a sudden, 11 months later she got sick again, went back into the hospital and died a week later.

Shelby experienced her mind and body shut down after her mother's death.

For example, from the time she was young, she was a classically trained singer, and it wasn't just for performance. She was one of those people who would sing wherever she was about whatever she was doing — singing was part of her normal routine. But after her mother died, she completely stopped singing. She had no song left in her. It was simply gone.

She felt as though her core was gone, like her soul was snuffed out, and she was convinced that she would not survive, and if she did, her life would never be full — like she would be simply a shell forever. Some of you can relate with that.

Later, after being completely stripped back to nothing with grief, she gave herself permission to simply be with that experience, not

making it wrong or bad. This allowed her to return back to her life, back to her true self.

One day a song came out of her unexpectedly, but it was a new song, a different song, unfamiliar — it spoke to her being home in a different and deeper way. She was different and therefore her song was different, somehow richer, deeper because of her grief.

Shelby described it like prior to her mother's passing she was "shelby" in all lower case letters, and when she came back after her mother's death it was SHELBY in all caps.

This was inspiration for her to reinvent her life, to write a new chapter. A big part of this is now offering a gift of deep caring for others and honoring their humanity.

She wrote book about the process of grief and loss called "Permission To Grieve: creating grace, space & room to breathe in the aftermath of loss."

Shelby also created a podcast, takes speaking engagements, connects with people for what she calls "grief guidance" one-on-one in groups, and online. In all these ways she helps people love themselves through grief, which she understands as a holy experience.

She is now developing retreats, a 12-week online class, and exploring many other ideas that are bubbling up in her heart.

This is where her heart is — creating a caring sacred space for the sake of others out of her own pain. Right now she is doing this while working in a flower shop and at a restaurant to pay the bills.

Some people tell her that the work she does must be so sad and heavy because she is continually with people who are experiencing loss and grief. However, Shelby says that she has never felt more weightless than when she does this work. She is energized by offering people a gift that came to her through brokenness.

She said that not offering all of this would not feel like living. She calls doing this work "inexplicable glory." She said,

*"It is an honor to be in the same room, or over the phone with someone who is expressing such a deep and profound human experience. ... I can't believe this is my life!"*

Shelby has embraced the messiness of life, the pain of life, the wounds, scars, and mistakes simply as part of the journey and

has chosen to turn her brokenness into caring.

What assumptions are you living with about your woundedness and pain, even about your mistakes? Underneath it all, have you been telling yourself that those things limit you, taken you down a notch?

Let me remind you that God wants to take that ugly past, that pain, that wound, that scar, that mistake, and make something beautiful with it, for the sake of others.