

## BROKEN WITHIN<sup>1</sup>

We begin today our sermon series, "The Healing of the Self." The Christian vision is that people—you and I—change and recover the original beauty and goodness of character that God intended when he created us. The Bible teaches that the original design and nature of people, each of us, was patterned after God's nature. Back in the creation story it says "In the image of God he created them."

This is how Jesus—a human being—could also be fully God at the same time. Our essential character is so patterned after God that one of us, namely Jesus, didn't have to lose any of his Godness when he became like us. The coming of God in Jesus speaks powerfully about our essential human nature as being good and righteous and capable of love, intelligence, and creativity.

Today, I want to talk about what has happened to our nature as God-images. And what has happened is that we have significantly damaged, ruined, and broken our originally wonderful selves. I'm not just talking about our bodies. By the way, about 50% of healthcare expenditures are for self-inflicted sickness—obesity, smoking and not taking care of ourselves. I'm talking also about the ruination of our will, our intellects, our social selves, our emotional lives. We've taken this complex human reality, which includes our characters,

---

<sup>1</sup>Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on June 1, 2008 at the First Presbyterian Church, LaGrange, GA.

feelings, and desires and we've inflicted damage on all of it. Other people have inflicted damage on us. What we have in ourselves is marvelous image-of-God creations that are broken in many ways.

Did it ever strike you as significant that despite our desire to have friends and lovers and to cooperate in working together, how frequently we have difficulty getting along? I'd guess that almost all of us want love in our lives. We've spotted attractive men or women with whom we'd love to spend our lives, with whom we'd love to create households, and grow old with. Yet despite all our desire for happiness together, how universal are deep crushing problems between lovers. Very few people have escaped crushing disappointments with boyfriends or girlfriends. Up to half of marriages fail. And of those that don't fall apart, many of the remaining relationships exist as wounded or perpetual disappointments. So, for all the earnestness with which all of us long for love and for all the effort we bring into relationships, it's jarring to ponder just how prevalent are deep wounds and disappointments.

What I'm trying to say is that while you and I were created on a divine pattern, we have used our freedom to do much self-damage. I'm not only thinking about failures in relationships. Ponder what fills your own thought life. Are your conscious

hours filled with love and gratitude, goodwill and joy. Or is Henry David Thoreau's description more accurate—"All lead lives of quiet desperation." This attended by fear, scheming, lust, self-promotion, depression, and so on?

The personal brokenness I'm working to describe is, according to the Bible, sin. Sin basically means that each of us has seized control from God of our lives, our feelings, our goals, our characters, and basically made to some degree a mess of things trying to be our own gods. Can you see the problem? We were created by God to be like God, but we want to be our own gods and live life our own way. Logically, it follows that there are going to be big problems.

Now, someone sitting here might be thinking that this sermon so far is becoming a predictable preacher's rant about how we're all bad and need to feel bad about that. You may be thinking that this is the backward mindset that leads to low self-esteem and religious fanaticism.

If that's your thinking, let me simply respond by saying that one of the most pernicious, toxic aspects of sin is that it perverts its own self-understanding. Sin is going to keep us from understanding what sin is doing to our lives. Just as alcohol addiction blocks its victim from a normal shame and

alarm that a non-addicted person would feel when say, convicted of a DUI, so does sin keep us from understanding sin.

I heard recently of a church that was founded as one half of the split of another church. Its first pastor left after having an affair and mishandling church finances. The second pastor, very popular, resigned after a hospitalization with stress. The third pastor, who lasted ten years, started giving himself secret salary raises and when caught, founded another congregation about 10 miles away. The final minister also lapsed into an affair with a parishioner and expected the governing board to cover it all up. He also founded a new congregation. I've described the 36 year history of a real congregation. And what has happened is not so uncommon.

Here's the point. Sin is very sneaky, very subtle, and very dangerous. Even among Christians who have been given God's perceptive diagnosis of sin and personal brokenness, there can be tremendous confusion and a failure to take seriously how subtle and destructive sin and human brokenness is. It's easy to get fooled.

Our lesson today contains these words: "There is no distinction since all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Paul is writing to the church in Rome that is experiencing conflict between its former Gentile members and its

former Jewish members. The ex-Jews want to look down on the ex-pagans. Paul is making the point that all are sinners. Jew and pagan alike are separated from God and are of damaged characters." I believe that that insight extends to me and to all of us as well.

Now, I'm sharing with you these things because the journey to healing of the self (we really want to talk about the healing) begins when you and I have a realistic idea of the condition of our hearts. Alcoholics Anonymous helps us. The first five of the twelve steps make it clear that addicted people must first face the problem before recovery is possible. What are they? One, I am powerless over my addiction and my life has become unmanageable. Two, only God can restore my sanity. Three, I've made a decision to turn my life over to God. Four, I've made a fearless and searching moral inventory of myself. And five, I've admitted the exact nature of my wrongs.

And here is the heart of this sermon. The healing and transformation of ourselves begins when we acknowledge the true condition of our souls.

Here's why that's important. When we realize what's become of ourselves when we are our own gods, we also realize that we will never be able, on our own, be able to undo the damage we've

done to ourselves and others. Only with God's presence and guidance will our own restoration be real.

What we're going to talk about in coming weeks is how our relationship with God brings the change we're thinking about. That means our idea system changes, our feelings change, our social interactions change. We mature and become more ourselves when we open ourselves to a continual conversation with Christ; when we do as he asks, when we replace our idea system or value system with his values.

By way of closing, let me suggest an exercise. Find a quiet place to be alone with God for about a half hour. On a sheet of paper write down two or three of your very best moments when you may have truly fulfilled your destiny as a being in the image of God. I'm talking about a time when you really loved, really sacrificed, really felt joy, really were a blessing for another.

Also write down two or three instances about which you are most ashamed. Were you ever truly cruel, truly greedy, or truly lost?

Take each item on your lists and ask yourself, "Where did that act come from?" What was going on in me that brought that act to being. Where was God? What was it that you were really wanting? What really was driving you? What ideas informed your

action? I'm guessing that your best moments in some ways originated from God's presence in your life. And your worst moments were the culmination of your own self-management that went awry.

Lastly, sin is neither the first nor the last word. You were created as an image or icon of God in this world. In God's original conception, you are essentially beautiful and good. And, in spite of sin, your original self is utterly worth saving. While we were yet sinners, Jesus died for us. The self that God gave his all to recover is what we are hoping in and working—with God's help—to restore.