

Wounded. Broken. Serving Still.

*I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud,
and your sins like a mist;
Return to me, for I have redeemed you.
(Isaiah 44:22)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on World Communion Sunday, **October 7, 2018**
(Volume 02 Number 12)
Christ of the Hills UMC, 700 Balearic Drive, Hot Springs Village, Arkansas 71909

It's 18th century Colonial America. A young man named Jonathan Meigs rides high in the saddle, filled with confidence, high expectations. He will today request permission to marry the girl he loves. The girl's father, a stern Quaker, coldly rejects Jonathan. "*Unqualified,*" he said of the young man. *Beneath expectations. Entirely unsuitable.*

Wounded and broken, confidence shattered as his unworthiness plays over and over in his head, he mounts his horse and rides away but, before he gets out of earshot, he hears his love's voice calling from an upstairs window, "*Return! Jonathan! Return!*"

Jonathan never forgot that moment, when the simple word "*Return*" overcame an awful sense of rejection. So sweet was the sound that he and his wife would name their firstborn son, *Return Jonathan*, the very same *Colonel Return Jonathan Meigs* who served valiantly in his country's struggle for freedom under General George Washington.

Return. Invigorating word. Two sweet syllables of grace. Peter heard it just as his life was plunged into an abyss of shame. Like Jonathan, Peter had been riding high in the saddle, filled with confidence, boasting, "*Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.*" Yet now, warming himself by the fire outside the house of Caiaphas the High Priest, he denies that he knows this Jesus at all.

Once, twice, a third denial and then the cock crows. Jesus, being escorted to confinement, turns and looks at Peter. The eye contact splinters Peter's heart so that he goes out and weeps bitterly, bearing the awful load of unworthiness and guilt. *Unqualified. Beneath expectations. Entirely unsuitable.*

Listen closely, though, and you can hear it as he must have heard it, the sweet sound echoing, "*Return! Peter! Return!*" Jesus had prepared him for this broken moment by saying, "*And you, Peter, when once you have turned back, strengthen the brothers.*"

Throughout the Bible and throughout Christian history we witness what our own lives have taught us well enough, that despite one's riding with great promise and high confidence, Others will be Wounded, Others will be Broken, Others will betray their Lord. *Unqualified. Beneath*

expectations. Entirely unsuitable.

What of you, Elijah? Surely you are one of those Others, one moment riding high in the saddle, the valiant warrior of Mt. Carmel facing down the prophets of Baal. Yours was a great victory, calling fire and rain from the heavens. “*Nothing can stop us now,*” you must have thought as the clouds poured forth the long-denied rain for a drought-starved land.

Then, as if out of nowhere, disaster knocks you out of the saddle. What an interesting word, disaster, pointing to the loss of one’s guiding stars. You can hear the word, *astral*, in disaster. How Elijah, could you have so suddenly lost your guiding stars? Within days you are Wounded and Whining under a desert broom tree, dazed, weary, wishing to end it all. I’ve seen broom trees in the Judean wilderness, well-named as they look like brooms growing out of the soil. Why not cut off a branch of the broom tree to sweep up the collapsed stars of your once lofty dreams. *Unworthy. Beneath expectations. Entirely unsuitable.*

Yes, but God wasn’t finished with you, Elijah. He sends an angel to minister tenderly to his wounded prophet. Then, in the fire, wind, and quake -- messengers of fury -- are found to be empty of any divine word. Until at last, Elijah, you hear a *still, small voice* in which, somehow, you made out the voice of God saying, “*Return! Elijah! Return!*” Wounded, yes. Broken, yes. But Serving Still.

What of you, David? Once the apple of God’s eye, the sweet singer of the shepherd’s fields of Bethlehem. You wrote once as you looked to the stars, “*The heavens declare the glory of God, the firmament sheweth his handiwork.*” No wonder the sight thrilled you, for how well-placed were those stars for you! Yours is a Cinderella story as Samuel the prophet tested the slipper of royalty on your foot and found the perfect fit. The stars of your glorious fate were all aligned, readied for you to step into your glory.

Where are your stars now, David? Fallen they are, and scattered to the ground the moment Nathan pointed the finger to say, “*Thou art the man?*” Wounded and broken, your gaze was torn away from the heavens you so adored, now writing introspective words of guilt and shame. You must, though, have made out God’s “*Return! David! Return!*” You prayed so eloquently, “*The Lord is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit . . . Create in me a clean heart, O God, put a new and right spirit within me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation.*”

Peter shamed through his denials. Elijah crippled through fear. David broken through moral failure. Entirely unsuitable, all. Beneath expectations, all. Wounded. Broken. Unqualified to serve. Yet they hear the voice of grace from the lips of their love, “*Return to me, for I have redeemed you.*”

Wounded they were, and broken, the enemy’s arrows burying them under an avalanche of guilt. But if buried, they are buried no deeper than the heart of God. Lovely tomb, that. What more enchanting place for burial, for if buried in the heart of God, resurrection is a given.

Perhaps there is an Other here who, having been wounded, feel yourself unworthy of being seated at the Lord's Table. May you hear on this World Communion Morning the word "Return," and know, in the words of Thornton Wilder, that "*in love's service, only the wounded soldiers can serve.*"

May you know today, as Vance Havner wrote, "*God uses broken things. It takes broken soil to produce a crop, broken clouds to give rain, broken grain to give bread, broken bread to give strength. It is the broken alabaster box that gives perfume . . . it is Peter, weeping bitterly, who returns to greater power than ever.*"

Our faith journey sometimes takes us into valleys of brokenness in which faith in ourselves, faith in others, even faith in God can seem to evaporate. We bolt down the pews and build our churches to look like fortresses, putting forth the impression that Christianity is a way to get everything in life tied down, fixed, orderly, and stable. The church appears so magnificent in its confidence, riding high and proud within our community. Surely its people must be just so. We know, though, that it's not always so that sometimes, wounded and broken, we know ourselves to be . . . *Unqualified. Beneath expectations. Entirely unsuitable.*

Are we, though, useless for future service? No, but he graciously calls to us, "Return," and invites us to serve him still.

Return to me, for I have redeemed you.
(Isaiah 44:22-23a)



