

**Sermon for Pentecost 2—Year B 2015**  
***Not Losing Heart in a Breaking Bad World***

A theme of brokenness and broken community runs through all of our readings this morning.  
In Genesis God seeks out the first humans who have broken covenant with God through breaking a commandment.  
In Mark Jesus is attacked by his Jewish community and he appears to break ties with his mother and sisters and brothers in order to claim a wider family in those who follow God.  
Paradoxically Jesus says—*a house divided against itself cannot stand*.

And in the midst of all this brokenness and breaking up, St. Paul says to brokenhearted Corinthians, *So we do not lose heart*.

But, my inner dialogue with Paul says, it's all too easy to lose heart.  
The world and our experience of living within it, gives us all sorts of causes and reasons for discouragement.  
We experience it in our lives, in our families, in our communities, large and small, and in our life together as church—we experience this temptation to "lose heart."  
For when that which we see; and that which we have come to rely on; that which has guided and governed our living; yes, that which the world says matters most, begins to erode?  
It is easy to despair; it is all too easy to lose heart.

As Paul is wont to do, he uses the analogy of the human body here—the easily seen evidence of the changes brought about by aging or illness or injury.  
Like us, he knows that perhaps we experience this “eroding” of hope most intimately when this reality comes home to us in this way—in our own bodies, and in our own heartbrokenness.  
Even so, whenever and wherever there is decay, corruption, or 'wasting away,' it is easy to "lose heart."  
And while Paul speaks of the reason for our hope in the *ultimate* sense, there are certainly ways in which we experience that 'eternal weight of glory' which makes itself known to us even now.  
Only that can be awfully hard to see when the wasting away takes center stage.

Are any of you fans of the recent series *Breaking Bad*?  
I only just began watching this extremely popular series recently—*Breaking Bad* was never supposed to be popular.  
In fact, the series creator Vince Gilligan hesitated to even make the show because of the similar theme of another cable show called *Weeds*.

Also, he felt that the show just might be too dark.  
The lead character, Walter White, does not exactly elicit sympathy from his audience – because he’s kind of anti-hero.  
The storyline is pretty simple: Walter White is an ordinary high school chemistry teacher who just can’t get ahead on his teacher’s salary.  
He works part time at a car wash to make ends meet.  
He has a pregnant wife and a teenage son with cerebral palsy.  
And a couple episodes into Season 1, Walter is diagnosed with terminal lung cancer.

In desperation and fear (and, I would say, a lot of anger)  
but also through a series of serendipitous events,  
Walter decides to use his chemistry knowledge  
to manufacture and sell crystal meth  
in order to leave a nest egg for his family when he dies—  
or so that is the reason he gives to himself and others for *breaking bad*—  
for becoming a broken and divided person  
who appears to be a gentle and loving law abiding husband and father at home  
and yet is a secret criminal, a violent outlaw.  
And as a result, Walter’s world goes mad,  
a downward spiral of death and destruction.  
It’s pretty dark and grim stuff.

In the opening episode of *Breaking Bad*,  
Walter as chemistry teacher instructs his HS students that  
“*Chemistry is the study of transformation.*”  
He tells the class that there are different rates of chemical reactions—  
slow, almost imperceptible ones like rust forming on the bottom of a car  
and then there are reactions that are instantaneous—explosions.  
In the case of an explosion the transformation is easy for all to see.  
Now rust on the bottom of a car will eventually cause the car to fall apart.  
But this transformation is insidious because it takes time and in the case of a car—  
unless we are looking underneath the car vigilantly  
the rust will corrode the seemingly strong and incorruptible metal,  
creating instability in the base of the car.

What we see with Walter’s character  
over the course of the *Breaking Bad* series is just that:  
first there is the explosion of his diagnosis of terminal lung cancer  
which sets in motion the rust-like transformation of Walter from  
a person who simply wants control of his life  
into a person who is building an empire of selfish power  
with destructive and catastrophic results.  
It is the transformation of Mr. White into the evil drug kingpin Heisenberg—  
which is his criminal persona.

*Breaking Bad* is a cautionary tale on many levels,  
but from a theological perspective I would say that  
the story of Mr. White is a portrait of a man who is devoid of faith,  
who despairs completely and is overwhelmed by his rage at unfairness of his situation.  
He is a person who not only loses heart, he loses his soul.  
I'm tempted to say he also loses his humanity and becomes a monster.  
And yet his decision to *break bad*—or go outside the law—  
to seek control and power over others,  
to lose heart and place our trust in everything else but God is,  
when all is said and done, all too human . . . just ask Adam and Eve.

What we see in *Breaking Bad* and throughout the bible  
is the all-too-human tendency to long for and seek out “me-based” solutions.  
We lose heart and despair with me-based solutions,  
whenever we place our trust mistakenly in things we think will solve our problems—  
and more often than not this usually is money or things like drugs or alcohol  
or some form of power over others.  
We so often place our trust in things that will fail us.  
And notice this, we always insist on giving pieces of our heart  
to things that simply cannot love us back.  
No wonder it's so easy to lose heart.  
No wonder we live in such a *broken*, “*breaking bad*” world—  
Because we are not alone in any of this.  
You and I may not *break bad* in such an extreme way  
as chemistry teacher turned meth dealer Mr. White,  
but each of us has placed our trust in something that has failed us,  
some me-based solution that has broken our heart  
and probably broken the hearts of our loved ones as well.

And while it might be easy at this point as your pastor  
to suggest the solution to this is to just “trust Jesus more,”  
that seems perilously close to placing our trust in *our ability* to place our trust in Jesus  
and then we are right back where we started—i.e., a “me-based” solution.

It just so happens that there is a solution, but there is good news and bad news about that.  
The bad news is that it's not a me-based solution.  
The good news? It's not a me-based solution.  
Sounds a little crazy right?  
But it's good news mostly because the solution isn't me-shaped.  
The solution is it's cruciform, cross-shaped.

The solution isn't to place our trust in our ability to place our trust in Christ —  
the solution IS Christ and that's different.  
Because if the problem is that we place our trust in things that fail us,  
in things that cause harm or promote death and destruction,  
in things that can be taken away then know this:

there is and has always been and will always be something that cannot be taken away, something that truly is incorruptible, something that promotes healing, reconciliation and is eternal and will not fail us or leave us.

As the prophet Isaiah reminds us,

*The grass withers, the flower fades:*

*but the word of our God shall stand forever.*

The word made flesh will stand forever.

So every time we bottom out and are tempted to lose heart,  
every time our own solutions to our own problems just create more problems,  
every time we find our selves in our own version *breaking bad*,  
every time our me-based solutions to our me-based problems rusts away,  
know that God's love and mercy will stand forever.

God is there in the midst of messes and failings,

God is there with us in our deepest hurts and greatest losses.

And I will say that, yes, God is even there with us in our greatest and darkest rages.

God is our rock. God is our salvation.

And God in Christ is longing to love us back to life.

Paul reminds us once again today that

while we sometimes experience God in mighty acts of power,

nevertheless God's ultimate act of redemption and revelation

was through suffering on the Cross. (See—the solution is cross-shaped!)

It's crazy and we don't understand it and we may want to reject it,  
but we experience the power and the glory of God's love and grace  
in our human weakness.

As we continue to place our trust in Christ,

Paul tells us that beyond our ability to see it,

the promised transformation of the Holy Spirit within is at work.

God is present in all our brokenness—seeking to heal and renew,

to bring resurrection and new creation out of death and our breaking bad ways.

*So we do not lose heart.*

Yes, the temptation to despair, to cling to me-based solutions is real and strong.

But Paul directs our sight back to the cross-shaped solution—

the abounding grace that is for your sake and mine.

Placing our trust in Christ, this is God's will for your life and for mine—

we who in baptism have been made the family

that is the mother, brothers and sisters of Christ.

And then we are sent with cross-shaped trust and hope as agents of  
the love and mercy of God in Christ.

And, (as St. Paul tells us) *grace, as it extends to more and more people,*

*may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.*

That sounds to me a lot like *let your light (the light of Christ) so shine be others that they may see your good works and glory your Father in heaven.*

The light of Christ makes it possible for us to face the darkness.  
The light of Christ reminds us that we do not place our trust in our ability to trust Christ,  
but place our trust in Christ who has promised to be with us  
even unto the ends of the earth.  
*So we do not lose heart.*

In a few moments we will be singing the hymn *Thy Holy Wings*  
written by Carolina Sandall Berg.  
Carolina was a Swedish PK—Pastor’s kid.  
Her father was a Lutheran minister.  
When she was in her late teens, she was out on a boat on a lake with her father.  
A storm arose and the boat capsized.  
Carolina survived but her father did not.  
Now it may seem crazy to many but it seems that this heartbreaking event and loss  
did not cause Carolina lose heart.  
No, she began to write hymn and hymn.  
Many of her hymns are in the hymnal we use today, nearly 100 years later.  
Her hymns have brought the light of Christ and God’s grace to generations  
of many who are tempted to lose heart.

So my prayer and my hope is that we will be like Carolina.  
That we will trust in Christ and let the light of Christ shine in us and share it with others.  
*So we do not lose heart.*