The Broken Cup

The times when the cup of our life is broken are the Humpty Dumpty times –
when nothing – not all the king’s horses and all the king’s men,
can put our life back together the way it was.

The business we put our heart and soul into fails;
the job we cherished is ended with a pink slip;
a relationship we thought would be for a lifetime ends in bitterness and rancour;
the body which houses our spirit is changed forever by illness or accident or age;
someone we love dies creating a gaping hole where their presence used to be.
And none of these can be put back together, they way it was.

Sorrow, loss, and suffering come to us all in one form or another.
But let’s be clear that God does not send suffering into our lives –
either to punish us or to teach us – suffering is a part of our humanness.

As my mother used to say …it happens.
It happens because we are human, because neither we nor the world is perfect,
and because sometimes we say or do things that lead to brokenness.

We smoke and end up with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease;
we take one path and forever feel that we should have taken another;
we choose to love someone deeply and in doing so, open ourselves to the inevitable
grief and heartache to which love makes us vulnerable.

Sometimes our brokenness is the result of our own choices.
Think of Jesus. Over and over, he chose to follow God’s way,
even though it led to conflict with religious and political authorities.
And in choosing to the walk the road of love, the cup of his life was broken on the cross.

We know that the cup of our life is broken, when we are too pained,
too discouraged, too ashamed, too angry, too broken-hearted, too lonely,
to receive the love that we know God pours out in every moment.
In those times, the cup of our life is broken and we wonder if it can ever be whole again.

This was the life that the Gerasene demoniac must have been living –
a life among the tombs – in the dead zone, as it were –
a life cut off from himself and from community –
a life so broken that “night and day among the tombs and on the mountains,
he was always howling and bruising himself with stones.”

His family and friends, I’m sure, tried everything to help him.
In desperation, they had to restrain him with shackles and chains,
and when he broke free even from these, all they could do was send him out of their sight
to live among the tombs.
Yesterday at the seminar here with Dr. Kevin Morrison, we heard how all of us have emotions that we have dealt with in this way. Unable to face our rage or despair or fear or shame, we have sent it into the tombs – into the dead zone – where we bury it deep in our bodies so that it comes out in illness, depression, or chronic pain.

But there is a different way. Instead of burying it, we can greet our brokenness as a visitor with something to teach us. We can invite it to help us grow, by asking ourselves, “what can I learn from the pieces of my life that are broken and incomplete?”

Joyce Rupp tells the story of “a woman who was in a deep depression for many months. She couldn’t think straight, had no energy, and was assaulted constantly with negative thoughts about herself.

One day, she found enough strength to listen to her suffering. When she did so, she heard within it the call to be less controlling about her life. Being in control and always showing strength was an old message from her family that she had tried to live for many years.

The day she really listened to her pain, the pieces of the cup of her life began to teach her and she started to mend. She learned that life will not always be to her liking, that there is a natural cycle of the spirit similar to the earth’s cycle of seasons.”

As in nature there are seasons of blooming and fruitfulness and seasons of emptiness and letting go, seasons when the spirit feels empty, and seasons of satisfaction and joy.

By listening to her brokenness, she discovered that it takes more effort to bury it and keep it buried, than it does to listen and learn from this unwanted inner visitor.

So we can listen inside ourselves and be honest with ourselves – and we also can be honest with God when we are feeling like a broken cup. Most of us have been taught to play nice – especially with God – but the witness of the psalms has a lot to teach us about how to pray when life is tough.

The psalmists yell, and scream, and point fingers at God. They list their woes and bare their emotions, and then, having vented their feelings, they invariably say something like, “yet will I trust you.”

I’m in the pit of despair, God, but even here, I will trust you. I don’t know how this cancer will end, God, but I know that all will be well. God, I am without a job – again and I don’t know how long it will be this time, but however long, I will hope in you. And that trust is the beginning of healing.
Sometimes, though, the cup that is broken cannot be mended.
Robert Fulghum, author of *All I Ever Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, writes:
“Both my parents died without any reconciliation between us.
I, their only child, did not live up to their expectations. Nor did they to mine.

I wish it had been so, and they must have felt the same way,
[but] the ritual of reunion never happened.
The distance between us was so great that I didn’t even attend their funerals.”

But here’s the thing – Fulghum couldn’t mend his relationships with his parents,
but he could mend his own heart.
He could let them be at peace, by finding peace himself.

Sometimes all we can do is let it go –
stop resenting the way things never were,
stop trying to put the pieces back together – and tend to what is before us.

And the God who makes all things new will make us whole.

So in a spirit of openness and trust – let us reflect on our broken cup.

Focus on your breathing…
Now breathing in say, Healing God,
and breathing out say, I hope in you…
Turn your cup sideways in your hands…
Picture your old hurts and wounds in it…
Mentally take them out one by one…
Give them into the hands of the Divine Healer…
Now hold the cup upright in your hands…
Think about the broken pieces of your life that have been mended…
Give thanks to God…
Ask for patience and trust…

Amen