

The cracked vase: Pronounced precious

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My parents collected beautiful, delicate pottery from Southeast Asia. Since these pieces were arranged around the house just out of reach of running children and frisky dogs, it was not until I was a teenager that I noticed a vase that did not fit with the rest of the collection.

The vase had once been a fine antique with a cream glaze and blue Japanese design, but now it was damaged. It stood amid the finer pieces, a mass of cracks, crudely glued together with what was obviously the wrong type of adhesive—everywhere the 20 or so pieces met one another, glue had bubbled out yellow as it dried, creating the effect of scabrous scars.

“Why don’t you get rid of that one?” I asked my mother.

“Never,” she replied. “It’s the most valuable piece of pottery we have in this house.” Then she told me the story behind the cracked vase.

When I was a toddler, my journalist father was covering the Vietnam War, moving in and out of the war zone for weeks at a time. When he returned home, he brought a piece of Asian pottery to add to my mother’s collection. The vase was one of the finest he’d found, and he’d wrapped it in string and brown paper, then carried it carefully on several airplanes and buses before finally walking up the driveway with the special present in his hands.

But at that very moment, I, his two-year-old daughter, rushed forward, my arms outstretched for an embrace. Surprised and elated, my father could not push me aside to put down the vase. Instead, he simply opened his arms. As I fell into them, the vase fell out and broke into pieces. That night my mother pulled out the glue, clumsily repaired the vase, and pronounced it precious.

In Henry James’s novel *The Golden Bowl*, the central metaphor that predicts the suffering of all the characters is a lovely bowl. Running through it is a nearly invisible

flaw that renders the treasure less valuable than it appears to be. The beautiful but flawed bowl mirrors the false contentment of the characters as they move about in desperation in a society that has no room for flaws.

The church presents a different understanding of brokenness. When we gather around the communion table, the vessels, whether pewter plates or delicate chalices, are not the issue. It is in the breaking of the bread, tearing it out of the perfection of a formed loaf and leaving the edges jagged, that we remember what Jesus said: "This is my body, broken for you."

Those words render absurd our human preoccupation with perfection. True beauty comes not from the flawless piece, nor from the piece that pretends to have no crack.

On Sunday morning we acknowledge that our salvation lies in God's broken body. But in the frenetic pace of children's classes, choir rehearsals, efforts to create more programs and attract more people, a congregation can forget the beauty of being broken, and appear to be a congregation without flaw or fault. Happily married, a couple attended church, but after divorcing they wonder if they still belong. The grieving find peace in the sanctuary at the funeral, but on Sunday morning the church seems to be a place with too much cheerful veneer to allow their scars.

But when the church resists the culture of the golden bowl and acknowledges the beauty of the broken vase, remarkable things happen. The hungry are fed, the homeless are sheltered, and personal testimony moves from victory dance to truth telling.

If we can remember that the broken body of Christ was good enough to save us, we can pull our own broken vases out into the spotlight. We do not accept them as inferior pieces in the collection, but rejoice in the beauty that their lack of order brings to the collective mix.

Of course, order and flawlessness are seductive in a chaotic world. One evening my father was sitting at my once clean kitchen counter, littering it with an explosion of newspapers, magazines, coffee cups—all teetering on the edge of chaos. When he gestured to call my attention to something he was reading, a cup went flying, spilling coffee onto the papers in a sticky mess. "I'll get it," he said, using a magazine as a mop.

“No, Dad, it’s OK,” I said, with a tone that indicated it might be time for him to leave. “I’ll clean it up after you’re gone.”

After he’d left I picked up the pieces of the broken coffee cup, mopped up the papers and pulled out the spray-on cleaner. As the fumes of disinfectant hit my nose and the counter shone again, I breathed a sigh of relief.

That was the last time he drank coffee at our counter. I could not have known that I should have paid more attention that night, worried less about the mess and perhaps had him stay just a while longer.

My counter sparkles. But I want the mess back. I want to see the sticky rim of a coffee cup, mop up newspapers read and discussed and stamped with the date of a happier day.

But I still have the hope of the table, where my brokenness finds its place in the open arms of Jesus and my eyes are opened in the breaking of the bread. Clean counters, golden bowls and perfect people are no match for the broken vase on my family’s mantel. Its beauty lies in the scars themselves, reminders that over the generations God has picked us up, put us back together, placed us on the best shelf and called us precious.