

We Don't Throw People Away  
United Church of Broomfield  
September 15, 2019

Psalm 51:1-10 Common English Bible

Have mercy on me, God, according to your faithful love!

Wipe away my wrongdoings according to your great compassion!

Wash me completely clean of my guilt;

purify me from my sin!

Because I know my wrongdoings,

my sin is always right in front of me.

I've sinned against you—you alone.

I've committed evil in your sight.

That's why you are justified when you render your verdict,

completely correct when you issue your judgment.

Yes, I was born in guilt, in sin,

from the moment my mother conceived me.

And yes, you want truth in the most hidden places;

you teach me wisdom in the most secret space.

Purify me with hyssop and I will be clean;

wash me and I will be whiter than snow.

Let me hear joy and celebration again;

let the bones you crushed rejoice once more.

Hide your face from my sins;

wipe away all my guilty deeds!

Create a clean heart for me, God;

put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me!

1 Timothy 1:12-17 (Common English Bible)

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength because he considered me faithful. So he appointed me to ministry even though I used to speak against him, attack his people, and I was proud. But I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and without faith. Our Lord's favor poured all over me along with the faithfulness and love that are in Christ Jesus. This saying is reliable and deserves full acceptance: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"—and I'm the biggest sinner of all. But this is why I was shown mercy, so that Christ Jesus could show his endless patience to me first of all. So I'm an example for those who are

going to believe in him for eternal life. Now to the king of the ages, to the immortal, invisible, and only God, may honor and glory be given to him forever and always! Amen.

\*\*\*\*

In the movie *Beautiful Boy*,<sup>1</sup> Nic Sheff is a young man with an addiction to methamphetamines. His father, David Sheff, tries everything to break the addiction and help his son have a healthy life with positive relationships. At times, it works. His son goes to rehab, but he backslides. His father had been warned that this might happen: “Relapse is part of recovery,” the addiction counselors said. Nic surfaces again and goes to an accountability group. He gets a sponsor. But then he reconnects with an old girlfriend and starts using again. Over and over there are patterns of addiction and sobriety.

About three-quarters of the way through the movie, we see David become weary. He finally resorts to “tough love.” He tells him he’s done all that he can, and that he can’t do any more. He tells Nic he loves him and will help him find treatment, but he can’t do sobriety for him. Nic has to decide he wants it.

Throughout the movie, David maintains an evenness. He does everything he can think of to help his son. He studies neurology and learns about how human brains respond to addiction. He seeks out expensive programs that might be able to offer his son hope. He does get angry, occasionally. He grieves. He feels helpless. But he also displays unconditional love for his son and patience throughout the process. He is gentle and persistent, even as he moves through his own fluctuating emotions.

He demonstrates what it means that we don’t throw people away.

\*\*\*\*

In the movie, tactics that aren’t helpful include *interrogating* Nic as to why he has chosen drugs and *shaming* him for hurting himself and his family. Those kinds of comments push Nic away, make him feel worthless and make the addiction one more thing that makes him feel repulsive. In fact, at one point in the movie, David discovers Nic’s journals. They feature elaborate drawings and disjointed sentences that reveal the dark thoughts and self-demeaning attitudes Nic has. Nic is profoundly hurt.

It becomes clear that although Nic’s addiction is part of the problem, it is also part of how Nic is coping with his feelings. He is clearly self-medicating. Telling him how much his pain is a burden for everyone else has done very little to change his self-perception or his self-medication with drugs.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Beautiful Boy*, United States: Amazon Studios, 2018, Sarah Esberg (Producer), F. van Groeningen (Director).

When David sees the journal, he understands his son's behavior better. When we have empathy to see what another person is feeling, we come to understand that we cannot blame them or judge them harshly for the coping mechanisms they have developed to deal with their problems. We can only help them find healthier coping mechanisms.

We don't throw people away.

\*\*\*\*

The scripture from today (1 Timothy) indicates that the author was not always a believer. I say, "the author," because while many scholars believe that it is Paul, there are many who believe it is not, based on reviews and comparisons of the writing. The author was not always kind. In fact, he used to be violent and an opponent to the movement of Christ-followers. This sounds a lot like Paul. But he has changed. Christ met him where he was, offered him mercy and grace, and was patient with him *as he changed*. Now, he endeavors to be an example of the mercy, grace and patience that Christ showed him. He wants to show those same qualities to others, to encourage them to be followers of Christ.

Maybe this sounds simpler or easier than it is. Offering mercy, grace and patience sounds easy enough: "just wait people out." But David and Nic show us the reality, that it's not so easy. It isn't easy to be patient and graceful when your child steals from you. It isn't easy to be patient and graceful when your children wastes thousands and thousands of dollars on drugs and rehab, again and again.

But we don't throw people away.

Each time Nic gets sober, the viewer sees him come alive. He has passions and interests he didn't have before. His character has depth and color. His father comes alive too. We see his father relax a bit, enjoy his family. And then the addiction returns. How can the viewer be sure that the last time is the last time?

\*\*\*\*

*Beautiful Boy* is a movie based on a true story, and therefore we know now that Nic Sheff has been sober for about 12 years or more. At some point, sobriety won. It will never be that addiction isn't part of his life. He will make daily choices for sobriety. But, at some point the last time *really was* the last time, and daily, his family and friends must trust that sobriety is where his life is at now.

The truth is, there are no certainties in life. There are no guarantees that an addict might not fall back on their drug of choice. But there is the constancy of Christ's love, grace and mercy; the patience of God to meet us where we are and wait for us to come through on the other side, even if there are backslides or relapses. Even if we move backwards and sideways more

often than we move forward, God waits for us and offers grace and patience over and over again.

God doesn't throw people away.

\*\*\*\*

There was a man in his 30's, a recent convert to Christianity, who was sitting in a pew filled with teenaged confirmation candidates reciting "I Do's" as part of the confirmation ceremony. It was very similar to me going through confirmation in my mid-30's, so the story caught my eye. This man, however, was a former drug-addict, a long-time alcoholic, and a former soldier, acquainted with the darkness of this world. Overcoming these challenges, he said that he chose goodness. He then wrote, "confirmation didn't banish temptation, didn't drive out despair....troubled by my continued sinfulness and seeking distraction, I happened [upon] the confirmation gift my [mentor] had given me, Father Jean D'Elbée's ... book on the spirituality of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, who spent most of her brief life in a cloistered convent."

In it she said, "I ask that from now on, you never let your past sins be an obstacle between you and Jesus. It's a ruse of the devil to keep putting our sins before our eyes in order to make them like a screen between the Savior and us. Think of your past sins to persuade yourself of your weakness; think of them to confirm your resolution not to fall again -- that's necessary -- but think of them mainly to bless Jesus for having pardoned you, for having purified you, for having cast all your sins to the bottom of the sea. Do not go looking for them at the bottom of the sea! He has wiped them out; He has forgotten them."

We don't throw people away.

In our reading from Psalm 51, we hear from King David. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions." Do you remember the particularly grievous transgression of which David is speaking? It's from 2 Samuel 11-12, when he took another man's wife for himself and then had her husband killed. King David had it all. Money, power, women – even the support of God. He let his covetous desires for Bathsheba be a priority. So much so that he killed her husband, Uriah, killed in battle. The prophet Nathan, speaking for God, points out David's sins to him and reminds him of God's frustration, anger and disappointment. God is quite upset at David's sin; his betrayal. "Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in God's sight? ...Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me...(2 Sam 12:9-10). God's anger is so strong that he could destroy David – yet he doesn't. In Psalm 51, David acknowledges his sin and repents; God you are justified in your sentence, wash me, purge me, create in me a clean heart. God punishes David, but God ultimately returns to forgiveness and shalom – for David will be the forefather of a future Messiah.

God doesn't throw people away.

People are not something to be washed away and sanitized **out** of existence, but rather allowed to wash away their mistakes, their guilt, their shame and welcome into community and family. Every person we meet is a beloved child of God, a reflection of God, the very one for whom Christ is waiting. While not all of us will experience severe drug addictions or homelessness, all of us are down on our luck sometimes. Each of us has a hard hand in one way or another. Each of us makes mistakes. We all sin. We repent and we backslide. We all need some help getting back on our feet, whatever our circumstances of hardship are and however the bad, dark times present themselves. God will wait for us. Christ will welcome us with open arms. We have grace upon grace. God's patience will not wear thin on us.

\*\*\*\*

Can we be examples of that same grace? Are we able to offer that same grace to each other? If not all the time, at least sometimes? Certainly, David Sheff is not the perfect father. He even admits in the film that he has made mistakes as a parent, but he chooses to be patient with his son and offer grace upon grace anyway.

If we can't be Christ-like all the time, can we choose to remember the example of Christ sometimes? Can we simply remember to do no harm and not blame or discard others for the ways they have coped with the hard hand they've been dealt? Can we be empathetic long enough to see that we are all coping with some difficult circumstances? We are all sinners, not only in need of God's grace and mercy, but one another's? We all deserve a chance to try a new way to cope, a new strategy for living a fuller life. If we hold fast to the idea that Christ is patient and grace-filled for each of us, perhaps we can show that example to others. Together, we can build a world where grace and patience with the human condition reign, where no person is thrown away.

AMEN.