

# Broken Prism

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In Graham Greene's great novel, *The Power and the Glory*, he tells the story of a Mexican priest living in a time of Mexico's history in which religion is outlawed. Practitioners of the faith are being hunted down and executed. The priest finds himself the only priest left in his region, and as priests go he is a pretty sorry one. He is given to drink, he has fathered a child, and he has a list of sins that haunt him with every step he takes on his fugitive trail. He is known as the "whiskey priest". As I said, a sorry excuse for a priest, but he's the only one they got. So in his effort to stay ahead of the law the priest travels from town to town half in search of his next bottle, but also half in search of people looking for an agent of redemption. And what he discovers along the way – in his moments of sobriety – is that somehow it is his own brokenness that allows him to see the brokenness of others. It is his own need of redemption that helps him to see the need of redemption in others. It is his own failure as a priest and human being that allows him to see with mercy the failure of others. And at one point the priest when he is confronted with the desperation of another group of villagers says to himself, "When you visualized a man or a woman carefully, you could always begin to feel pity . . . that was a quality God's image carried with it . . . when you saw the lines at the corners of the eyes, the shape of the mouth, how the hair grew, it was impossible to hate. Hate was just a failure of imagination."

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And so despite his disqualifying life, the whiskey priest with every piece of imagination he has travels from town to town and God seems able to reveal the power and the glory through the broken vessel of an immoral servant.

Writer Anne Lamott is not reluctant to tell you in her stories and essays of her own life that got broken pretty early. Illness and divorce entered her early years which led her to become pretty cynical and pretty lonely and drink pretty heavily. For years she sort of staggered through life until she got acquainted with the writings of a Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, who convinced her that life was either of leap of faith toward God, or nothing at all. She took the leap. Years later she looked back and commented, "I was cracking up, but that's how the light get's in."

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You wonder, don't you, if that isn't a part of what the apostle Paul is talking about when he writes to the Corinthians – a fairly messed up church having to deal with all sorts of brokenness and failure and disappointment – and he says – "You know, we hold this treasure in clay jars – so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." And so what follows is Paul's listing of all the cracks – afflicted, but not crushed. Perplexed, but not driven to despair. Persecuted, but not forsaken. Stuck down, but not destroyed.

"We hold this treasure ... we hold this light, Paul says, ...we hold this light in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that the extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." The light comes in through the cracks and the light goes out through the cracks.

And so, Jesus says, You are the light of the world – and it is not to say that somehow we have some light producing agent in us, some perpetual flame that we are required to fan – but that we are the light of the world by virtue of the light that has come in and the light that goes out. We are the light of the world by virtue of seeing how much we are cracking up.

And we are cracking up, aren't we? Let's be honest. We wouldn't be here, would we, if we weren't cracking up somehow, someway. Not that I mean we are on our way to the loony bin – but that life has its way of chipping and cracking us. We are born in the image of God, but your life and my life never escape getting banged up along the way. Hurt and disappointment and limitations of mind and heart all conspire to create those cracks and imperfections in our souls and bodies wherein we realize that we are at best the clay of a creator who has wonderfully formed us – but that the years of life's handling can chip away at the ceramic. Nevertheless, this is where the light comes in ... and this can be where the light goes out. Broken prisms – but prisms nonetheless through which the light passes – and casts our own unique spectrum across those in whose presence we place ourselves.

Broken prisms through which the light passes – casting our own unique spectrum across those in whose presence we place ourselves. Could this be the imagination that Jesus would have for us? That in seeing our own brokenness we might have a great mercy for the cracks of others. And it is that mercy that bears the light of the world.

I don't know about you but when I hear the talking heads on TV and radio talking about this group of people and that group of people and blaming the ills of society on this group of people and that group of people – don't you wonder if there isn't a failure of imagination? That somehow they just haven't gotten close enough to see that mysterious image of God in each and every person and that each and every person has got their own story which isn't a whole lot different than our own with chips and cracks and disappointments and hurts and scars and wounds – and that the more we place ourselves into the mysterious presence of another – the more chance the spectrum of light might fall?

Woody Allen said that 80% of success is showing up. And while he never intended those words to show up in a sermon – it is perhaps a truth that lies behind what Jesus says about being the light of the world. The light comes in the showing up. And the showing up comes when we realize that if

there is anything we hold in common with our brothers and sisters in the world it is that we're all to some degree cracking up.

We've seen the pictures this week of the devastated landscapes of the Philippine islands in the wake of the monster typhoon and it doesn't take much imagination, does it, to see these victims and survivors as nothing more and nothing less than vulnerable human beings who have endured what we all know could happen to us. The uncontrollable waves have cast their vessels upon the rocks – and we know that the same has happened and can happen to us. It makes us want to show up, doesn't it? Just a broken prism of light ... casting some sort of spectrum of mercy and grace.

I remember being given the chance to visit the Mississippi coast line just a couple weeks after Katrina laid waste to so much and as we were touring various sites a man drove up in his pickup truck towing one of those little Bobcat front loaders. "Who needs help?" he asked us. We pointed him a few directions and then asked who he was working for. Nobody he said. Well, who asked you to come? Nobody, he said. I just saw the pictures and I told my boss and my wife I was taking my bobcat and we were going. I figured once I got there, I'd find a use for myself.

Once I got there, I'd find a use for myself. Being the light of the world, has something to do with showing up.

When I was finishing my seminary training I took a summer and joined an inner city ministry in Washington, DC called Emmaus Services for the Aging. And when I got there I had a whole bunch of ideas of what we could do to help these low-income elderly survive in the slums of Washington. Programs that would make a difference. But when I got there they assigned me to a man named Ernest. Ernest Williams. 72 year old Ernest Williams. And I said, What does Ernest do? What program does he run? Oh, they said, Ernest just walks around. What do you mean, just walks around? Oh, he just walks around and talks to folks. Visits them, finds out what's going on. He does it five days a week. He walks these six square blocks. And when he finds someone who looks like they need help ... well, then Ernest tells us about them and we do what we can to help. Where's his office? I asked.

Oh, Ernest doesn't have an office here, his office is out there. So for three months I walked around with Ernest. Ernest was a little rough around the edges and carried his own cracks and scars from an earlier chapter of life. But I watched him show up. Day after day, week after week, he just showed up at people's houses and stoops and street corners. Shot the breeze and found out what was going on. Discovered their needs and did something about them. And somewhere along the way Ernest said to me, "You know there was a time when I was down on my luck – a time when I had some pretty big needs – and there wasn't anyone around to help me out. I had to find my own way. And so I said to myself when I started this work ... I don't want to wait for them to come to me. Instead I'll go to them. And that's made all the difference.

It's all about showing up. Broken prisms casting unusual spectrums. Being the light has a lot to do with getting there.

You remember the story of Alvin Straight. The 73 year old man from Laurens, Iowa whose eye sight had gotten bad enough that they took his license away. So what was he to do when he got the call that his Wisconsin brother, who lived 240 miles away, had had a stroke? No money to fly, no Skype to call, no sight to drive – at least a car. But he did have that 1966 John Deere riding mower in the back shed. No one said he couldn't drive that. So he rigged up a trailer to the tractor that held his suitcase, his gasoline, his camping gear – and off he went to be with his brother. At a top speed of 5 mph the trip took 6 weeks. 6 weeks! But he got there. He got there. Because it's the getting there that matters.

This is the God we see in Jesus Christ, isn't it? The God who gets there. This is the story toward which we are so drawn. The God who so loved the world that he gets there. Becomes as vulnerable as those he seeks to help. Takes on the fragile clay jar of our existence and becomes himself the prism of light. All the way to the brokenness of the cross that casts the divine spectrum across all of creation.

Back to Graham Greene's whiskey priest, after hearing yet another confession he says to himself, "It was for this world that Christ had died; the more evil you saw and heard about you, the greater the glory lay around (his) death; it was too easy to die for what was good or beautiful, for home or children or civilization – (the world) needed a God to die for the half-hearted and the corrupt."

What an imagination this God must have! One shared with the likes of us? You are the light of the world, Jesus says. You, yes you. With all your broken pieces, your cracks and chips and wounds and hurts and rough edges – You, yes you, are the light of the world. So get there. Wherever there is ... get there. Show up. Place your cracked up prism in the presence of someone. And let the light shine in you and let the light shine through you.