

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on November 21, 2021 (Christ the King)

Sometime in the 15th century, the Japanese Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa broke his favorite tea bowl. This wasn't like one of us breaking a wine glass while doing the dishes. For a shogun, a tea bowl had near mystic qualities. It held a place of prominence in the ancient tea ceremonies of Japan. These gatherings, rooted in ritual and symbol, bound the assembled samurai warriors to their Shogun. And so the tea bowl wasn't just a utilitarian dish, it was a sacred vessel.

Shogun Yoshimasa sent his beloved tea bowl all the way to China to have it repaired. But when it came back, months later, he was disappointed. The metal staples used to piece it back together ruined the bowl's character, and it was just...ugly. In desperation, he sent it to a local craftsman whose solution was to fill the cracks with gold.

And thus, a new art form was born. Kintsugi, which literally means "golden repair," is a method of patching pottery that honors the artifact's unique qualities by emphasizing, rather than hiding, the piece's imperfections. When you look at a bowl or a vase that has been repaired this way, the cracks look like a beautiful design feature. The piece takes on an entirely new character, even as it holds its original look and shape. And, of course, the alternative would have been to just pitch the broken vessel onto the trash heap.

What I love about this whole concept is that it views blemishes not as shameful, but beautiful. Like human scars that tell stories of courage or survival, these cracks become part of the character and history of the vessel, magnifying its storied journey through ages and empires.

On this day in the Church year, we reflect upon the kingship of Jesus and the reign of Christ. And we learn pretty quickly that Jesus is not your typical king. Birth in a stable rather than a palace is our first clue. Giving away rather than amassing power is another indication that the kingdom of heaven has little in common with the kingdom of, say, Herod. As we just heard Jesus tell Pontius Pilate in no uncertain terms, "My kingdom is not of this world." It is certainly not the kind of kingdom where white vigilantism runs rampant and parallel legal systems exist based on little more than skin color — as was on full view this weekend. This is a different kind of kingdom and Jesus is a different kind of king.

This is a kingdom, like that broken tea bowl with its golden cracks, that embraces humility and vulnerability, blemish, and failure. Not because imperfection is the goal, but because God's grace fills in the inevitable cracks in our facade. God's grace mends the instability of our own foundations.

As with Kintsugi, this doesn't mean our cracks magically disappear. Instead they become part of who we are, part of our identity as beloved, forgiven, and redeemed children of God. The process of being cracked open is often painful and hard. That's the nature of trauma and failure and the surrounding aura of shame. But our cracks often end up becoming avenues to know God in deeper ways. Our brokenness doesn't define us, but it is an integral part of our story. The cracks help form our beautiful, if imperfect, identities. As human beings we are all broken, yes, but through faith in our King of kings and Lord of lords, we are healed and restored and made new in God's very own image.

As we look at the arc of Jesus' life in the context of what I like to call the upside down kingdom, I'd suggest the crucifixion is the ultimate demonstration of Kintsugi. In his post-resurrection appearances to the disciples, Jesus doesn't seek to conceal the wounds on his hands and feet, or the hole in his side. Nails were driven deep into his flesh; his side was pierced by a sword. Blood flowed, gaping wounds were opened. Yet he tells Thomas, he of the doubts, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side." In other words, look at my broken body, see the cracks; but know that through the resurrection all has been made new. And that through belief in me you, too, will one day enter the kingdom of heaven.

All you have to do is pick up a crucifix to see that for generations the Church has highlighted rather than covered up the wounds of Jesus. We see the nails that have pierced his body and through the lens of Kintsugi, we can envision the holes lovingly covered with gold. We don't deny that our king was crucified or that he suffered an ignominious and painful death. To the contrary, we acknowledge it and give prominence to it because he was crucified for *us*. As the prophet Isaiah writes, "He was pierced for our transgressions...by his wounds we are healed."

And so Jesus points the way for us to embrace our own woundedness. For it is often in our weakness, our brokenness, our pain, that Jesus is most fully present to us; that we feel most acutely his deep and abiding love for us.

It's true, however, that embracing rather than covering up our cracks is such a counter cultural way of imagining ourselves! Whether through concealing makeup, or Facebook posts that collectively present a carefully cultivated image, or a forced and cheerful "things are great! when asked how we're doing, we're quick to cover up any faults, real or imagined. Through our public personas, we don't want anyone to think we are anything less than perfection personified. To fill in our cracks is to acknowledge

that we even have any. And to acknowledge we have any cracks is to show weakness. And to show weakness is the greatest American societal “sin.”

But I think there is great freedom found in the Kintsugi concept of embracing our flaws, rather than hiding them. Imagine all the extra breathing room you’d have if you didn’t spend all that energy trying to convince the world everything is okay in your life, at moments when it decidedly is not.

There is freedom in exposing rather than suppressing our vulnerabilities. Acknowledging our woundedness, sharing our vulnerabilities, exposing the cracks in our foundations, allows our true selves to shine even brighter. It lets us live more fully as the people God created us to be.

Now, just so we’re clear, this isn’t some new age thing that finds us staring in a mirror and reciting self-affirmation mantras. This vision of wholeness stands at the heart of Jesus’ kingdom. A kingdom, Jesus reminds us, that “is not from this world.” For the reign of Christ is built upon a realm of invitation rather than coercion; a realm of inclusion rather than isolation; a realm of peace rather than fear; a realm of truth rather than deception.

We don’t need to disguise our cracks. We can value our scars, both visible and invisible, as marks of life and relationship with the living God. And so enter the kingdom of heaven — this upside down kingdom — broken but whole, wounded yet healed.