

# “Rainbow Stitches, Golden Lacquer”

**Sermon by David Livingstone, Ministerial Intern**

*February 6, 2022*

When I learned that I would be delivering my first sermon to an empty sanctuary, my first thought was, “Well, later in my career when anyone asks about my first time preaching, I will be able to proudly tell them that absolutely no one stayed to hear the end of it.”

The thought did worry me, however. What would it feel like to step into this pulpit and not see anyone in the pews? What would be going through my mind while speaking into an empty space? While reflecting on these questions, and on questions like them, a quiet thought fizzled up to the surface: I am not speaking to an empty sanctuary at all. I am speaking, not to an empty room, but to a congregation. To my community. To my friends and my family. And for that, I am grateful.

This month’s theme is Integrity. I want you to sit with that word for a moment. Integrity. What does it call to mind? What, or who, does it make you think of? Does that word sit easily with you... or not?

I must admit, for me the word itself seems almost imposing. Integrity. It brings to mind other terms such as “Steadfast.” “Resolute.” “Unbreakable.” After all, if we say that an object, for instance a teacup or a ship at sea, “failed to retain its integrity,” we mean that the object broke, perhaps by being dropped or by being steered into rocks.

We are familiar with characters both in our lives and in our stories that embody a kind of moral unbreak-ability. The kind of people who, when the chips are down, will always do “the right thing”—even when what exactly “the right thing” is... unclear.

Characters like these, who are often described as having “great integrity,” are folks whose personalities, stories, and wonderful works have grown and grown in their retelling. They have taken on a legendary status as people who remain unfazed in the face of temptation, and unaffected by moments of weakness. The “great integrity,” then, of such figures is as great as it is... unreachable. This is true for one simple fact. We are not unbreakable. No one is.

Acknowledging this one undeniable truth is frightening. It is difficult to sit comfortably with the fact that we will, from time to time, fall short. That we will, on occasion, fail and suffer breakage. But it is in this acknowledgement that we can find what it truly means to be a people of integrity.

Of the stories told about characters of “great integrity,” one in particular has been on my mind as of late. The Abrahamic traditions all recognize the prophet Moses, but he holds a special prominence in the Jewish faith as the emblematic prophetic figure. Indeed, throughout the Hebrew Bible, called the Old Testament by Christians, Moses is the figure against whom all other prophets are compared. We are told at the end of the Torah in the book of Deuteronomy, which details the supposed last day in the life of Moses, that there had never before been a prophet like him, and that there has never been one since.

But why, in a tradition that is rich and full of prophetic figures who speak truth to power and have intimate connections with the Divine, is Moses singled out as a prophet like none other? He is not a powerful king like David, an unparalleled warrior like Samson, nor is he described as the wisest man, like Solomon was in his time.

Even in his ability to perform miracles, Moses is not alone. One of the few who comes closest to being “the next Moses” in the Hebrew Bible is the prophet Elijah, whose life is described in the Book of Kings. Every element of Elijah’s life, from the litany of miracles he performs, to his visit to Mount Sinai, draws a direct comparison from him to Moses. But even Elijah, whose narrative mirrors that of Moses’, falls short of his predecessor. Why?

As the stories have it, it all comes down to a choice that each prophet had to make before God on Mount Sinai on behalf of their community. When Elijah fled to the mountain, God asked him, “What doest thou here, Elijah?” and Elijah responded, “I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts: because the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I,

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even I only, am left.”

In other words, “Why are you here, Elijah?” asked God. “Because the people of Israel are broken, but I am not,” said Elijah.

Moses, though, received a different message from God, and had a different response. “I have seen this people,” says the LORD to Moses speaking of Israel, “and, behold, it is a stiff-necked people: Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them: and I will make of thee a great nation.”

Presented with the opportunity to leave his imperfect community to a fiery fate and embrace a new nation of his own, the very thing that Elijah wishes for, Moses prostrates himself before God and says, “Turn from thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against thy people.”

Moses says no to abandoning Israel. He says these people are not perfect. They are not unbreakable. They have made mistakes. Love them anyway.

Love them anyway.

“And” the story goes, “the Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people.”

Moses’ integrity does not lie in the fact that he is unbreakable and perfect in contrast to those in his community. Indeed, later Moses is barred entrance to the promised land because even he makes mistakes. Moses has integrity because, through his works and his deeds, he recognizes that inconvenient truth about himself and about all people. All of us will suffer moments of weakness. Of doubt. Of breakage. Moses sees this, and he knows that it is okay.

It is not despite our imperfection, but because of it, that we are worth saving. That we are worth loving. And that we are worthy of forgiveness. Because if we give ourselves the space necessary for healing, being broken is not the end of the story. We have the capacity to repair and to be repaired. Allowing that reparation to occur—that is integrity.

When I first arrived at this church this past October, I saw a great many things that made my heart happy. I saw the restored steeple reaching out over the town of Newburyport; I saw the sanctuary resplendent and full of smiling faces; I

saw the Merrimack River ancient and quiet as it flowed eternally out to sea. But these were not that one thing that made me stop in my tracks.

The sight that above all others assured me that this is a sacred and beautiful place, was a flag. Hung on the front of the church, there it was. A Black Lives Matter flag. One like so many others—bold white text printed on a background of black. BLACK LIVES MATTER. But this flag was also *not* like any other. Running across the flag like rivulets of water, like a network of veins, was rainbow tape patching it back together.

In her paper, “Exploring Japanese Art and Aesthetic as Inspiration for Emotionally Durable Design,” Pui Ying Kwan describes what she sees as the primary failure of the human/object relationship in our society. “Waste is a symptom of a failed relationship,” she writes, “modern consumers are short-distance runners [...] who only stay for the getting-to-know-you period, when all is fresh, new and novel.”

When an object, whether it is a chair, a book, or a teacup, breaks for the first time, we tend to consider that breakage to be an ending. The object is over and done with. If it’s not perfect, it’s broken. If it’s broken, it’s not perfect.

Pui Ying Kwan reminds us that there are other ways to be in relationship with broken things. We don’t have to give up on something the moment it fractures. She writes about the art of Kintsugi, which means “Gold Joining” in the original Japanese. Kintsugi is said to date back to the 15th century when the Japanese Shogun’s favorite teacup broke.

Imagine a potter in her studio at her wheel. She spends all day at that wheel spinning teacup after teacup—producing a great number of perfect, identical cups. The next step of course is to bake these cups in a kiln so that they harden. But, when the potter places the cups in the kiln, she also places a giant unshaped blob of clay in the middle.

For those of you familiar with pottery, you know what happens when the kiln heats up. That blob of clay explodes like a bomb, sending shards of clay everywhere in the kiln, breaking all of the teacups before they even finish baking. This is by design.

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Later, when the potter removes the damaged, broken teacups from the kiln, she is waiting with a bowl full of sap from the urushi tree that has been mixed with powdered gold. Using this thick, syrupy, golden mixture, the potter pieces together the teacups one by one until she has finished and before her is a sea of cups each one different than the last. Every cup a gleaming map of beautiful, golden ribbons marking the places where it had been previously damaged and, importantly, where that damage had been repaired.

The rainbow tape on the Black Lives Matter flag outside our church is a sacred testament to this community's integrity. It is likely that someone intentionally tore that flag to send a message of hate and intolerance. The flag was, in that moment, broken—just as a society that allows that kind of hate to fester is broken.

But we did not throw away that flag. We did not replace it. We did not give up on it, just as we did not give up on our larger community. We repaired the flag. We repaired it with rainbow bandages, beautiful badges of perseverance that say, “something was broken but never irreparably.” Everyone, and everything, has the capacity to rebuild and to be rebuilt. No one is beyond the limits of love. We did not give up on that torn flag—why should we give up on our torn world?

What does it mean when we ask ourselves to be a people of integrity? A community of integrity? It means that we accept with open hearts the truth that our souls are not perfect porcelain plaques to be protected at all costs from the roiling vicissitudes of life—but that we are always subject to change. That life has shifts and surges and, yes, tragedies. And it is these changes, good and bad, that give us the chance to heal. To grow as individuals, and to grow closer to each other.

Moses knew this well. He experienced hardship and frustration from the actions of those he loved, and his story does not end with him entering the promised land. But what did Moses do when he learned that he would not live to see his people finish their journey? He walked with them anyways. He walked with his perfectly imperfect people towards the rising dawn of a new day—a dawn that he would not personally witness.

He walked with them. Guided them. Loved them. And even in his final hours, had faith in them, that they would continue to grow, to look after one another, and that they would all cross the River Jordan into a better tomorrow.

It is as the poet Rumi tells us,

*Your acts of kindness  
are iridescent wings  
of divine love  
which linger and continue  
to uplift others  
long after your sharing*

Amen.