

## ***Brokenness***

Dear Jesse,

This is a letter I hope you can skim, and never need to read again. But if you do, I have some great news for you. The same mercy-giving God that you passionately proclaim to others in their brokenness is also able to sustain you through the deepest valleys of your private world.

I know, because it happened to me. In the late 80's I heard those words I never dreamed of hearing: *I'm in love with another man and I'm leaving you*. The next morning, the woman I'd pledged my heart and life to was gone, never to return.

Suddenly, my whole world changed. As you might guess, the next few chapters of my life were filled with great pain, a lot of learning, and an extended time for healing. I wasn't just divorced. I was a divorced pastor. I wasn't just a failure. I was a pastor whose marriage failed.

I thought: *Who wants to be connected with a guy like me?* I'll tell you who—the God of amazing grace and the many mercy-extending members of His body who just wanted the chance to love me through it. Now, of course, not everybody is so loving, but I believe God has a pocket of people for each of us in our brokenness if we'll just open our eyes.

You see, I had been a ministry loner. I had bought into that old horrible advice in seminary to not get too close to anyone. And when my world fell apart, I

had to face the fact there were zero people who knew me intimately. But a letter from a brother in Christ started to crack me open. He wrote:

*Dear Gene,*

*I cannot tell you how much I feel for you at this time, and I wish there were words to describe my sorrow. We are praying daily and thinking about you constantly. You are a dear friend and a constant source of Christian uplifting in our lives. I realize that at a time like this, time by yourself and with the Lord is most important. But don't forget that my lines are open for you. I wish I could just give you a hug and take over all the pain you are feeling in your heart, but since this is not possible, I would like to share the load with you. For a friend to share the load, this means to be there any time of day or night. I'm here for you, pal. I hope you will turn to me for anything you want. Our home is wide open for you; our hearts are open for you. You are like a brother to me, and I love you. When you are good and ready, please contact me any time of day or night, it doesn't matter. We won't stop praying for you, or thinking about you!*

Well, I decided to take the risk and make contact. It was one of the best decisions I ever made. And over the years God has given me crucial friends at timely moments to share unconditional acceptance, love, and confidentiality. If you wisely look for them, you'll find them too. I'm sorry that it took a broken heart to open me up to such relationships, but I'm grateful I discovered them in this lifetime.

You will probably tell others many times during your ministry that brokenness is one of the greatest schools of higher education they will ever attend. However, it's altogether different when you're the one enrolled in this graduate program. When this 2 x 4 hit me in the head and upset the whole basket of my life, I learned things about myself I'm not sure I would have learned in any other way.

First, I learned the importance of total truth-telling in relationships, even when I have to face ugly things about myself and my relationships. Second, I realized I had an unhealthy work ethic. Third, I discovered the importance of balance in my life. And fourth, I learned that when you lose everything that's important to you, you still have a relationship with Jesus Christ, and that He is enough.

You may want to ask, *Gene, during those times when you thought there would be no tomorrow, how did you hang on? How did you get through? What do you do when those from whom you desperately need love and forgiveness choose not to forgive you?*

I remember well those awful nights feeling lonely, feeling like a failure and wondering if this dark season would ever end. Do you know what got me through? I would often sit quietly in a dark place just singing to myself, *Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to Him belong. They are weak but He is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so.* Then, afresh, I would feel Christ's deep

love. And that's the love I'm committed to communicating for the rest of my life with anyone who will listen.

Jesse, never lose heart, no matter how difficult a situation may confront you. God is good. God is able. And He can use any experience to heighten your sensitivity to people and to remind you that the message you preach is the same message that saves you.

Grace and peace,

Gene Appel

Willow Creek Community Church, South Barrington, Illinois

*The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and  
saves those who are crushed in spirit.*

*Psalm 34:18*