

A Piece of Work

Ephesians 2:1-10

CWZepp, BWC0B, March 11, 2018

If I were to tell you nothing about my friend John, other than to say that he is “a real piece of work,” most of you would basically know what I am talking about.

John was one of my coworkers on the Farm team when we were both volunteers at Gould Farm in Massachusetts 15 years ago. I could spend quite a while trying to describe him, and you probably wouldn't get a clearer picture than you do when I simply say that he is a piece of work. There are some other idioms that you could use to describe him – he is a “character,” they “don't make 'em like that” every day. Point being, John is one of a kind. He is eccentric, interesting, unpredictable, peculiar, unconventional, bizarre, and more than a bit weird.

Having worked side-by side with him for a year as we led work teams, extended care, and helped create community with and for folks with major mental illnesses, I came to know John pretty well. For all his wild and flamboyant quirks, John also a person of significant depth. He had a caring and compassionate heart, thought deeply about a very wide range of topics and issues, and was committed to his work. He was absolutely fearless in learning and trying new things (sometimes frighteningly so for those around him!), and he was the kind of guy who would do just about anything to help anyone – literally give you the shirt off his back, even though, not believing in wearing deodorant and spending all day working on the farm, it might be a bit more than most of us could stand to wear.

He also had his problems. But don't we all.

I haven't been in touch with John for a long time, but he was the first person I thought of when I asked myself who I personally knew who embodied what is meant by the phrase “piece of work.” I was asking this question after reading the sermon starter from *Homiletics* that gave my homily its title.¹ The example it used was the late comedian Joan Rivers. In 2010, a now highly acclaimed documentary film about her was released, tellingly called *Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work*. The film follows the 75 year old comedian for 14 months, and makes “an effort to ‘[peel] away the mask’ and expose the ‘struggles, sacrifices and joy of living life as a ground breaking female performer.’”² While I haven't seen it, it sounds like a pretty good film. Roger Ebert wrote that it is fascinating and has a lot of laughs in it, but is also more. He says it is “the portrait of a woman who will not accept defeat, who will not slow down, who must prove herself over and again. A brave and stubborn woman, smart as a whip, superbly skilled.”³ But as the *Homiletics* article reminds us, she could also be opinionated, harsh, vulgar, cruel, and some might even say abusive. She was a plastic surgery junkie who battled her insecurities on stage for all to see. In doing so, she freely admitted that she was a “piece of work.”

But the phrase, as it is most often used in our culture today, does not generally carry positive connotations. It often is used to describe someone who is annoying, overly complicated, melodramatic, or difficult to deal with. And because of this, it is almost never a phrase that

¹ “A Piece of Work.” *Homiletics*, Vol. 30, No 2. March 11, 2018. pp 14-19

² *Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work*. Wikipedia Online: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joan_Rivers:_A_Piece_of_Work

³ Roger Ebert. Online Review: <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/joan-rivers-a-piece-of-work-2010>

people apply to themselves. Instead, it's most often heard in the 3rd person – “Well isn't he a piece of work?”

The *Homiletics* article goes on to point out that the phrase was not always used this negative context. It cites the Oxford English Dictionary as naming the first use of the phrase “piece of work” occurring in the year 1473 to refer to a product or something manufactured. It also makes explicit the connection of the phrase with the word “masterpiece,” which refers to an outstanding “piece of work,” especially in the world of art. So whether the piece was a utilitarian product or aesthetically pleasing art, a “piece of work” originally meant something good.⁴

I think we can safely assume that it was with this more positive meaning in mind that the author of Ephesians calls us “pieces of work.” Now of course, that isn't the exact phrase that was used, but idioms never translate precisely. Yet as it reads in verse 10 – “We are what he made us.” We are, each of us, pieces of work – God's work. And as such, all of us are “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

But... (there is always a but isn't there?)

We don't always feel like God's masterpieces, do we? We might feel like a real piece work a lot of the time, but not the God-inspired, God-designed, and God-created kind. Or even the life-lived large and vulnerably kind like Joan Rivers or my friend John. No – quite often when we look at ourselves we see someone worthy of contempt – broken or stained, wounded or shameful, fearful or unlovable – a piece of work that isn't up to standards, is imperfect, and ultimately isn't worth very much.

I was thinking ahead about all this during worship last week, when Jeff pointed out the pieces of broken pottery at the foot of the cross. And I was reminded very viscerally about an experience at National Youth Conference four years ago. My mind flashed back to the summer of 2014, when Josh Brockway, who offered daily reflections as the lead spiritual director for NYC, walked onstage with a large piece of terra cotta pottery in his hands – the kind in which you plant small decorative trees – raised it high above his head, and dropped it on the floor of the stage, shattering it into numerous pieces. I don't remember exactly what he said, but the gist of it was that it was an illustration of how we often feel – broken beyond repair, our value shattered.

It was incredibly resonant image...one that stuck with many of us in that audience. It continues to echo in my soul. And I suspect that it also would have resonated with and echoed in the souls of the Ephesians. As the first few verses remind them...it wasn't that long ago that they were mired in that old stagnant life of sin, letting the world, which doesn't know the first thing about living, tell them how to live.⁵ They probably saw themselves as broken pieces of work too.

But the writer reveals that there is one fatal flaw with that line of thinking. God wasn't finished with them yet! Rather than giving up on them, God embraced them in their brokenness and

⁴ pp. 14-15

⁵ Ephesians 2:1-2, *The Message*.

made them alive in Christ.⁶ By God's grace, they were saved. And most importantly, they were reminded that it wasn't their doing – it was God's.

How often do we need to be reminded that we are God's handiwork? That – as *The Message* paraphrase puts it – “we neither make nor save ourselves,” and that it is God's desire to “shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus?”⁷

There are so many things that threaten to overtake that message of grace in our lives, so many things that get us down, that hold us in bondage, that keep us separated from God. But the good news is that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.⁸ Because each and every one of us is a priceless piece of work – God's handiwork – and as the saying goes – God don't make no junk. And we are what God made us, created in Christ Jesus to join him in his work.

Thanks be to God!

⁶ Ibid, 2:5

⁷ Ibid, 2:8-9.

⁸ Romans 8:38-39.