



THE PASTOR'S PEN

Volume 45, No. 8

April 20, 2015

Kintsukuroi — More Beautiful for Having Been Broken

Kintsukuroi is the Japanese art form associated with repairing pottery. However, that definition is not enough. Kintsukuroi is something else far more than that. It is a very important something else, because the broken item is repaired with a costly lacquer. The lacquer is made of precious metal and it is used to fill in the gaps and join the broken pieces together in a very visible way that is supposed to make the piece more beautiful for being repaired, than it was when it was whole.

Of course, who would ever think of trying to repair a broken clay pot these days. Most of the time, we would just sweep up the pieces, toss them out in the garbage and buy a new pot. Truthfully, would you even consider a common, broken, ceramic pot to be worth an expensive repair job; let alone consider the repaired cracked pot to be more beautiful for having been broken? No, you probably would not, nor would most folks that you know.

However, if we stop for a moment and think about the whole matter, is throwing out the broken pot really the best answer here? Recycling and reusing are keywords in society at the present. Do we really need to add to our overflowing landfills? Then there is also the artistic side of the issue. After all, someone created that pot, made it by hand from a lump of clay and fired in a kiln forever changing its appearance and its structure. By their actions they have changed one part of our world into something else. In their creation of the pot we can see an expression of themselves and their quest for creating an object that transcends simple utilitarian needs.

Any handcrafted object, like a pot or a bowl, should be revered for the care it took to make it. It should be appreciated for its beauty, its function and its purpose. Yet, if it is broken, does it lose its value and its beauty? Should it be repurposed or repaired? Can such actions on our part actually raise the value of such an object to a whole new level of worth and consideration? From an American standpoint, no, it's broken and worthless, fit only for the trash heap. Still, in other cultures, such as those of the Far-East, the answer is quite different.

That brings us to consider the art of Kintsukuroi. The origin of Kintsukuroi is lost to the ages. We do not know who conceived of the art form nor do we really know who pioneered its techniques. All we really have on its origins is a piece of folklore from middle sixteenth century Japan. That story tells us of a great military leader who was known to have a short temper and that he was given to violent outburst.

One day he was to be honored by being allowed to host the elaborate and refined Japanese Tea Ceremony. This was indeed a great honor and he was quite pleased at having been chosen to host the event. As a part of this honor he was given a very beautiful bowl to use in the ceremony. Of course, the military leader demanded that everything must be perfect that day. However, during the ceremony someone dropped the bowl and it broke into five pieces. Everyone was in shock! One quick thinking guest saw what had happened and could see the rage building up in the leader. In a moment of inspiration, he spoke up with an improvised poem linking the name of the giver of the bowl, the style of the bowl, and the five broken pieces, making everyone laugh at what had just occurred. The military leader laughed also and his temper settled before exploding in a torrent of rage.

To commemorate the event of the broken bowl and the poem, the military leader had the bowl reassembled using gold to cement the pieces together and reform it back to its original shape. When the guests later saw the repaired bowl they were astonished at its beauty and inspired by its resiliency. Everyone agreed that the bowl had become more beautiful for having been broken. The story goes on to say that, “the true life of the bowl, *Tsutsui Zutsu*, began the moment it was dropped.” What made the difference? Was it the golden highlights that showed the brokenness that had been repaired that inspired the viewers? Perhaps, but it was also that the bowl proved that imagination and language had the power to make ill fortune good and settle harsh tempers.

So what is there for us to learn from this old story? For one thing, we need to learn the lesson of never accepting brokenness and defeat as the final word. For another thing, we need to learn that the power of our words can change people’s hearts and minds. Another even more important lesson that we need to understand from the story is that the master of the bowl has the power to determine its fate. He is the one who can choose to throw it away or put it back together. Likewise, if the bowl is repaired, it can be more beautiful after the repair than it was before it was broken. The Japanese would say it this way: “In other words, the proof of its fragility and its resilience is what makes it beautiful.”

Beyond this earthly story with its worldly teachings is a more spiritual application. For the Christian, we can see in it the story of human redemption. Much like the Japanese story of the broken bowl, the scriptures compare us to lumps of clay in the Master’s hands. It is Paul that uses this analogy in his writings. If we consider ourselves to be vessels of clay (especially since Genesis says that Adam was made from the dust of the earth) then what happens when we fall into sin and become broken? The answer is that God does not throw us away into a spiritual refuse pile. No, it is through the sacrifice and redemptive work of the Son that we are “repaired” and made whole again. The lines of the breaks that are the effect of our sins may still be seen in us, but we can be remade and restored by the death and resurrection of Christ. With the indwelling of The Spirit, the light of Christ shines from us. So like the kentsukori bowl, we also become more beautiful and resilient than we were before.

Take a moment and think about the purpose of kentsukori. If an old clay pot can be restored and made beautiful again when it breaks, then why not take the time and effort to restore a human spirit? That is what Jesus did for us. What are we now willing to do for Him?

Grateful for my repairs,

James