

The Second Sunday in Lent
Year C
March 17, 2019
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Some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'" (Luke 13:31-35)

Last Week, Dorothy White talked to us about our identity as Beloved children of God, and what it means to root our sense of worth in that identity, despite all the messages we receive that tell us we need to prove our worth. After Dorothy's Adult forum on the topic one of you came up to me and said, you know, I can hear what she's saying (here, in my head), but I'm still struggling to find the courage (here..in my heart) to trust it ...and live as if it were true.

So, today, I'd like talk about courage, because all our appointed scriptures, in some way, deal with it. "Do not be afraid," God says to Abraham. "Of whom shall I be afraid," the psalmist sings out. "Stand firm in the Lord" encourages the apostle Paul...and then, of course, there is Jesus. And we'll get to that!

There are, in my mind, at least two kinds of courage. One is the urgent, situational kind: when a person in a moment of extreme need summons the courage to face an immediate danger. For instance, the by-stander who pushes someone out of the way of oncoming traffic or jumps into a river to save someone, at great risk to him or herself. Of course, this kind of courage, for the most part, isn't just a spur-of-the-moment thing but a display of character - an accumulation of traits and patterns of behavior that have been developed over a lifetime - that prepares you to act courageously in any given moment.

And then there is a second kind of courage, this one demonstrated not simply in a single moment or act but in the longer haul of anticipating an important, daunting, or even frightening challenge and not turning away from it, but instead, meeting it head on. This is also a sign of character - character that has emerged from a lifetime of facing fears and shouldering burdens or of accepting challenges and responsibilities that you could just as soon avoid.

In Harper Lee's, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the lawyer Atticus Finch exemplified this trait. He tells his children, "I wanted you to see what real courage is instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and see it through no matter what."¹

It is this second kind of courage that Jesus demonstrates in today's reading from the gospel of Luke. Certain Pharisees have come to warn him to flee from the countryside because Herod is out for his blood. We have no idea who these Pharisees are or what motivates them, but we do know they tell Jesus to run and save his life...and that he refuses. Instead, he going to stay on task, healing and casting out demons, and stay on the path to Jerusalem, where he'll meet his death like so many earlier prophets of God. Jesus' commitment to embrace his dark and difficult destiny for the sake of the people he loves...which is all people...is the ultimate embodiment of this second kind of courage.

Like many of you, I have often thought about the courage it took Jesus to move forward to Jerusalem and the death he faced there as a result of his trust in God, and his steadfast love of people. What struck me this week, however, is the critical role that vulnerability plays in this kind of courage. To anticipate challenge and suffering and not look away is to make yourself vulnerable for the sake of others.

And this is important, especially today. Because, as a culture, we don't often equate vulnerability with courage and strength. With love, and concern, perhaps, but not often with courage and strength. Take for example the behavior of so many of our nation's political leaders, who do all they can to avoid making themselves vulnerable, but have no problem engaging in conduct that, seen anywhere other than the political arena, would be labeled bullying. [But is that strength? Is that courage?]

At our worst, we see vulnerability as a sign of weakness, something to be avoided at all costs. At our best we might recognize the need to be vulnerable to those we care about most deeply. But we don't often see vulnerability as integral to living a courageous life.

And yet in today's gospel, I think Jesus is showing us how vulnerability is essential to courage by inviting us to discover the peculiar strength of being open to the needs of the people around us. He chooses the image of a hen gathering her brood of chicks to protect them in order to illustrate his own love and concern for people. This feminine imagery not only invites some re-imagining of our more masculine views of God – it's also an image of intense vulnerability. A mother hen is willing to sacrifice her life for her chicks, and when attacked, spreads her wings to cover her brood, and in so doing exposes her chest and makes herself vulnerable to the predator.

Having been a "mother hen" myself, I know what it is like to be exposed like this. At the same time, I've had to accept the fact that there is no way we can protect our children from all the threats this life presents (nor should we!). But, this not only leaves us parents vulnerable, it promises a level of suffering that we simply would not endure if we had not bound our self so fully to our child. It is often said: a parent is only as happy as her or his least happy child. That is vulnerability.

¹ <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/courage>

Jesus' choice of this image has helped me realize that it is our vulnerability that spurs our courage and nourishes our strength - and this is simply because you can and will do things for people you love that you just would not or could not do for yourself. And so, Jesus continues on to Jerusalem not to prove himself fearless or a hero, nor to make a sacrifice for sin to a judgmental, angry God; but instead, embraces the danger that awaits him out of profound love for others, a mother's fierce love that will stop at nothing to protect her children.

Few people have taught me more about vulnerability than Brene Brown. Through her TED Talks and books, this "story-teller/researcher" invites us to recognize that while vulnerability inevitably opens us up to feeling things we'd just as soon avoid, it also spurs us to be more authentically human and more caring, compassionate, creative, and courageous than we could otherwise be. Brene reminds us that courage comes from the Latin *cor* - "heart" - and she defines courage as living from the heart, the willingness to embrace our vulnerability in order to be our authentic selves.²

People who live wholeheartedly love without reservation or guarantees, they accept their imperfections, [and are unafraid to let others see them] and open themselves fully to whatever life brings, good or bad, pain or joy. In short, Brown says, wholehearted courage means letting go of who you think should be in order to be who you are - which you have to absolutely do for true connection with others."

Christian courage, then, might be the kind of whole-hearted living that that begins by trusting that as God's beloved children we are enough - and then in opening our hearts to those around us, who are also God's beloved children, and can benefit greatly from our love, our empathy, and respect...as we can from theirs.

And so, what if in today's gospel we see Jesus not merely acting courageously but embracing who God created him to be for the sake of those he loved, and in doing that, inviting us to be who we have been created to be - our true selves - for the sake of those whose lives we touch? What would this community look like if we decided together to live whole-heartedly, making room to name our vulnerabilities in the confidence that God is with us in this and has given us ample resources - including each other! - to not simply endure the challenges before us but to thrive as we discover how God meets us precisely in our places of vulnerability?

Perhaps the task before us this second week of Lent is to name where we are feeling most vulnerable - whether in a relationship, a job, amid pressure from peers - and to remind ourselves that God is with us in these places of vulnerability. And that in them we might discover more fully who are called to be and connect more deeply with those who God has placed in our lives.

To be vulnerable *is* a courageous thing, an outward manifestation of our trust in God. As Brene Brown would say, "You [just] can't get to courage without walking through vulnerability."

Amen

² Brene Brown's first Ted Talk can be found here:
https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability?language=en

