

## STRENGTH AND VULNERABILITY

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

John's disciples came to Jesus to ask if he was the Messiah, according to John's question from prison: "Is he the one who is to come, or should we wait for another?"

Jesus answered them,

"Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor receive good news."

Jesus was announcing the Kingdom of God. True, it was not as anyone expected; they were anticipating a warrior king who would lead Israel into battle and drive out the Roman Legions. Even John the Baptist expected something different from his cousin.

But this is the way of the Kingdom. It brings unexpected results: The lion lies down with the lamb. The crooked ways are made straight. Hearts and minds are changed through repentance and forgiveness. Miracles happen. The hungry are fed. The sick are healed. And the poor have Good News brought to them.

Yes, the Kingdom of God is most unexpected. People don't believe it could happen. And they are afraid of, and ashamed of, what might happen instead.

The People of Israel and their leaders were ashamed of what they heard. Shame is that voice in your head that answers, "I don't know what you're talking about," we don't have people here with those kinds of problems—or, "I know what you're talking about and it has nothing to do with me."

Brené Brown, an Episcopalian, a sociologist and writer, a TED speaker, says that shame is a very formidable emotion, and yet it is unspeakable—we don't talk about it, and for good reason. In our culture, women deal with their perfectionism, shame, and vulnerability differently than men do. For women, life and success are about doing it all, doing it perfectly, and making sure that you make it look effortless. And look great while you're doing it! Ginger Rogers said that she did everything Fred Astaire did, only backwards and in high heels!

For American men, there's one principle: Do not be perceived as weak. Shame is the ultimate experience of weakness. Men can't be weak! Therefore, men get their power from controlling and fixing everything!

It's certainly true of me. My wife and daughters would rather see me die than fall off my white horse. I'm the Rock of Gibraltar, a River to My People, the Knight in Shining Armor, and my sons-in-law are too. We can't be weak or ashamed or fearful. We're men, for heaven's sake! But shame, for men and women, is a universal human experience. It's the question that you ask yourself, "Who do you think you are? Don't you know you're not good enough?" It's when your identity is in peril. All the work, all the effort, all the trying could fail. And then where would you be?

But these are the fullness-of-time moments that make a person truly who they are, moments of struggle. Brown calls it becoming a “whole-hearted person.” And she says that it begins with those words in the Confession of Sin: “We have not loved you with our whole heart.”

At the heart of this struggle is our own, secret, individual vulnerability, she says. Vulnerability is the core, the heart, the center of meaningful human experience. Vulnerability is courage in action. It’s the willingness to show up and do your best under the circumstances. But in our Great American culture, we hate vulnerability. It’s considered weakness, being naïve. You know: Don’t let ‘em know you’re sweating. Don’t show a sign of weakness. After all, it’s a dog-eat-dog world we live in. And it’s a fact that a lot of people define success only as a positive experience.

But Brené Brown says that she cannot find a single example of courage in her study and her research that didn’t begin in vulnerability.

Think about the last time you saw someone do something brave. They start by taking a risk, by taking a chance that they will fail. When you allow yourself to be vulnerable, you recognize that you are taking risks. It can be very painful.

Love, says a popular song, is not a victory march. It’s a cold and broken Halleluiah. Vulnerability is gritty and difficult. Vulnerability can defeat you, but it does not have to destroy you. Being vulnerable can make you become stronger and tougher.

Teddy Roosevelt was a great example of vulnerability and courage. He was a sickly child, very near-sighted, unlikely to make much of a mark in life. But he became a man who dared to be great. He believed in showing up and being brave enough to try. He was a cowboy, a big-game hunter, a war hero, an explorer, conservationist, author, and American president. He was a man’s man, and yet he was fully aware that vulnerability is our common human experience. It is the center of spirituality. It is our connection with other people.

The whole process of growing up and becoming courageous is characterized by grace, but it is not graceful, says Brown. Vulnerability is the only way in and through. It starts with an openness to see how we are protecting ourselves, our real selves, from everybody else. Vulnerability is the underlying quality of lives that are characterized by meaning and purpose and wholeheartedness.

This is a true saying and worthy to be received: Vulnerability produces whole-hearted people, people who come to believe in their own worthiness. We have to overcome something in order to find wholeheartedness. And often what we have to recognize is our own broken heart. Brown says, “Our capacity to be whole hearted can never be greater than our willingness to be broken hearted.”

Look no farther than Jesus, the ultimate Vulnerable Man. He allowed himself to be vulnerable and genuine and loving. He bore the shame and sin of all, and he did so with courage and great humility. He knew the human condition and accepted it. He took upon himself the struggle we all know and experience. And though he was defeated in death, he was not destroyed; he conquered sin and death by rising to life again.

There is much for us to learn here, as individuals and as parents and grandparents. If courage comes out of struggle, why do we insist on making our children's lives perfect? Our need to protect has become perfectionistic—and it's destructive for us and for our children. We need to stop trying to protect them from life!

Many students who come to Auburn have never had real experiences with adversity. It shows up in their lives as hopelessness. Many expect their parents to rescue them—and parents think that is their job—to shield their children from disappointment, even if they're grown.

Hope is an outcome of struggle. Remember what Saint Paul told the Romans? Suffering produces endurance. Endurance produces character. Character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us. Hope is what we learn when we experience adversity, when we have relationships that are supportive and genuine. Our job as parents and grandparents is not to make everything beautiful and right and true. It's to look at struggle and to tell these young people, "You're not alone and I want to make sure that you understand that you're worthy of love and belonging. You can do this, even though you are afraid."

Let's see if we can put away fear, or to dare greatness even when we are afraid. Let's learn from our suffering and not let it destroy us. Let's get real and recognize that our Christian faith is based on love in the face of fear, grace in an atmosphere of chaos, and hope in the presence of doubt. AMEN.

SERMON 816

Third Sunday of Advent

December 15, 2013

924th Week as Priest

750th Week at St Dunstan's

15th Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

