

DARING GREATLY

The Courage to Live a Worthy Life

Vulnerable Series (Part 5)

Texts: 2 Corinthians 4:1-18

We Can Embody an Alternate Way of Being Human

Some years ago, Amy and I went to hear a talk given by Anne Lamott, author of the best-selling book, *Travelling Mercies*. Anne recounted a conversation she once had with a Jesuit priest who explained to her what he called: Five Rules of American Life. With only minor variation, the rules were simply as follows: 1. Don't be vulnerable. 2. If you ARE vulnerable, get over it as fast as you possibly can. 3. If you can't get over it, pretend that you have. 4. If you can't pretend, don't show up because it upsets the rest of us. 5. If you do show up, be deeply ashamed.

My simple message to you today is: Dare to defy those rules. No matter how many other people you see living by those practices, trying to enforce them, dare to live differently. Refuse to be driven by SHAME, or a mindset of SCARCITY, or the world's limited concept of STRENGTH. God loves you profoundly, passionately, perseveringly, and personally. There is nothing so wrong with you, nothing so lacking from your life, nothing so afflicting you, that the all-sufficient GRACE of God cannot forgive, fill, fix, use or carry you through. Go back and listen to the messages in this series if you need more explanation or encouragement about any of this, but here's the headline: If you put your trust in the person and power of God, it is not only OK to be VULNERABLE, it is an essential part of your mission.

Tim Keller puts it this way in his message, *The Meaning of the Gospel*: "Christ wins our salvation through losing, achieves power through weakness and service, and comes to wealth via giving all away. Those who receive his salvation are not the strong and accomplished but those who admit that they are weak and lost... When we understand that we are saved by sheer grace through Christ, we stop seeking salvation in [power, perfection, control, competition, status or wealth]. The... cross... liberates us from bondage" to this world's rules. "The gospel... creates a people with a whole alternate way of being human."

That is what I want to talk about with you today as we close out this series. I want to challenge you – and all of us – to dare to live from this point out by the Gospel's different rules, by the Kingdom of God's alternate way of being human.

Make the Church a Place of Scandalous Safety

And here's the first new practice I commend: Dare to make the church scandalously safe for vulnerable people. It is hard for us to fully get how alternate Jesus' way was when it came to embracing imperfect people. I think we keep trying to reduce his way to something milder, something easier for us. But there was a reason that the religious people of Christ's day had a disgusted, pained look on their faces when they spat out: **"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them"** (Luke 15:2).

Unlike the religious people of his day, Jesus didn't wait for people to get their act together and their piety on and their language and clothes just right and THEN embrace them. He welcomed cussing fishermen, and vile tax collectors, and multiple divorcees, and messy kids, and oozing sick people, and hard-core sex-workers, and serious skeptics. Jesus didn't just welcome these people, he ate with them – which in Hebrew society with all of its laws about ritual purity and who you're allowed to fraternize with – was a scandalous act of acceptance and embrace. He didn't just tolerate them being in the building or say a cursory "hi" as he went by them. Jesus built relationships with vulnerable people. So here's my question: Why isn't every Christian church like that? If Jesus is our LORD – the one from whom we take our cues -- why are we not known as the safest place on earth for vulnerable people?

Author Phillip Yancey tells a story of a man in his church that can't help comparing being late for church to being late for his regular Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. When he's late for church, he says that he has the distinct feeling from everyone around him that he's not very responsible or he would get to church on time. When he's late for an A.A. meeting, however, the meeting stops, everyone jumps up to hug him because they realize he almost didn't make it, and they are so glad his need for them won out over his need for alcohol.

Commenting on this, blogger John Fischer asks: "What's the difference? The whole truth. The people who got to church on time may have gotten that one thing right, but they have a bunch of other things wrong with them, making them just as needy as the alcoholic. Fellowship isn't going to mean anything if we don't recognize the whole truth about ourselves. Real fellowship means stepping into the light of God's truth... and when we bring ourselves to the light, we discover we are not alone. There's a roomful of other believers all struggling with something too. That sense of shared need is part of the bond that holds us together."

If we truly love Jesus... If he is really our Lord, we will follow in his steps. We'll make this fellowship the most scandalously safe place on earth for vulnerable people to find a place at the table and the support and encouragement they need to grow toward their full potential in Christ.

Help the Change By Being Vulnerable Yourself

Creating that kind of alternate way of being human, however, will happen faster if we model what we want to be OK for others to do, and so here's my second challenge to all of us today: Dare to be vulnerable yourself.

The Apostle Paul puts it like this in his second letter to the Corinthians:
"Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shame-filled ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor 4:1-2).

I can't tell you how many times I and other pastors of this church sit and talk with people about the struggles in their finances or the pain in their parenting or the messiness of their marriage or some pattern of addiction or compulsivity that is like a thorn in their flesh, and we ask: "Is there anyone else at church that you are sharing this truth with?" "Oh, no, I wouldn't do that." "Why?" "It would be embarrassing. It would be burdensome to others. It would make people think I am stupid or bad or weak." So filled with shame about it, they keep it a secret. They use a form of deception to make people think everything's just fine. As pastors, we keep trying to tell people: "It's OK to tell the truth. You will not be expelled from the church. You will be helping to build the church with your vulnerability, because you are NOT alone."

Ken Robinson observes that, "One of the tragic ironies of modern life is that so many people feel isolated from each other by the very feelings they have in common, including a fear of failure and a sense of not being enough." It's weird, isn't it? How do you feel when someone dares to be vulnerable with you about something significant in his or her life? Does it usually send your respect for their courage up or down? Does your sense of compassion and connection with them usually increase or decrease? So what, beyond stubborn human pride, is stopping us from daring to be more vulnerable? If even Jesus could confess to his friends in the Garden of Gethsemane, **"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow... Stay here and keep watch with me"** (Matt 26:38), what stops us from speaking the truth more often and asking for the support and prayer we need?

I do want to note that author, Brene Brown, offers a helpful qualification about this: "Vulnerability is based on mutuality and requires boundaries and trust. It's not oversharing, it's not purging, it's not indiscriminate disclosure, and it's not celebrity-style social media information dumps. Vulnerability is about sharing our feelings and our experiences with people who have earned the right to hear them." So, pick your audience thoughtfully, but dare to speak the truth.

We'll know we're doing this when phrases like this are a regular part of our speech: I disagree—can we talk about it? It didn't work, but I learned a lot.

Yes, I did it. Here's what I need. Here's how I feel. I'd like some feedback. Can I get your take on this? What can I do better next time? Can you teach me how to do this? I played a part in that. I accept responsibility for that. I'm here for you. I want to help. Let's move on. I'm sorry. That means a lot to me. Thank you.

Confess your sins. Admit your fears and struggles. Describe your dreams. Ask for what you want. Acknowledge that you don't have it all or understand it all, but you are grateful to be in the hands of God. Dare to believe that God can take our greatest weaknesses and make them his greatest platform. Jesus was never so weak as when he hung on a cross, confessing his anguish; yet was there ever a place where the work of God's grace was ever so strong? As Paul writes: **"For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ"** (2 Cor 4:6).

Put Your Hope in the Light in the Jar

Let me close our time together by leaving you with an image that may help to make even clearer the import of that verse and the text that follows it. In the ancient world, as today, light was a precious thing. When darkness fell, people would turn to these simple containers they bought quite cheaply in the marketplace. These vessels were ordinary things, just jars made of clay. They were vulnerable to chipping and to cracking. But their ultimate value didn't lie in their strength. It lay in the fact that they could be filled with some paraffin or some congealed oil with a wick. And when a flame was touched to the wick, even the cracks and the chips in the jar became an asset. They made it easier to see the treasured light that emanated from within.

Do you understand the import of this image for your life? It's what St. Paul was getting at when he wrote: **We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.** There is a slithering Evil that doesn't want you to let that truth sink into you. He keeps hissing in every human ear a message of shame and scarcity and counterfeit strength. He thrills at the havoc his false religion is wreaking from the Middle East to Washington to the halls of our churches, schools, and homes. The Serpent is working overtime to make sure that we never get a really clear view of what has been God's abundantly good intention since the very Beginning. He is afraid we will find out that from the first moment God poetically scooped up some dust from the earth and molded that clay and breathed his life into humanity, it has always been OK to be vulnerable vessels, so long as we are filled with His light and His love for one another (Gen 2:7).

God still wants us to know it and be changed by it – to show us and our world an alternate way to be human than that which the Serpent hisses at us. It is why, when he might have shouted at us from the heavens or sent angel armies

to reclaim this broken world, he did what Satan could never have expected and has never overcome (John 1:5). God made himself vulnerable. He took the form of the most fragile kind of clay – a human baby. He set that little jar in a manger in Bethlehem and shone out from it a light that would show the world the Way back to communion with its Creator and into an alternate kind of human community.

But that's a story for another day. For now, please join me as we pray...

God, you keep doing it. You keep working with jars of clay. Your scriptures tell us that Abraham was elderly. Elijah was suicidal. Joseph was a braggart. Job went bankrupt. Moses had a speech impediment. Gideon was afraid. Samson was a womanizer. Rahab was a prostitute. Noah drank too much. Jeremiah was young and naive. Jacob was a liar and a cheater. David was an adulterer and a murderer. Jonah ran from God. Naomi was a widow. Peter was a blowhard. Martha was a worrier. Zacchaeus was small and greedy. The Samaritan woman was divorced, many times. Eleven of the first twelve disciples abandoned Jesus. Paul was a judgmental Pharisee. And yet, YOU came to each of them. You filled the earthen vessel of their vulnerable lives and made these weak people agents of your strength.

Don't let us forget that. If any one of us has been relying on his or her own power and not yet asked you to fill our jar with your forgiving grace and marvelous light, then let today be the day of decision. Come into that life right now. Help that precious soul start a new relationship with you and your people today. Then also help those of us who are already your disciples to make your church a place of scandalous safety for others, a place where imperfect people can meet stunning love and amazing grace. Move us toward that reality by giving us courage to be vulnerable before one another. Then send us out to dare great things for your Kingdom, to live truly fearless and worthy lives, because the all-surpassing power for that is of YOU.

In Christ, we pray. Amen.

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Brene Brown, Daring Greatly, pp. 45-46
Brown, p. 210