

“The Power of Vulnerability”
Isaiah 5:1-4,7/Matthew 21:33-46

In his biography of George Washington, Thomas James Flexner tells of a turning point in the American Revolution. The troops were exhausted, hungry, and feeling unappreciated. The final blow had come when the Continental Congress failed to appropriate money for them. Frustrations were growing toward mutiny when the officers called a meeting where they debated two options: either marching on Congress and forcing support or withdrawing the Continental Army to the other side of the frontier, leaving the colonies to defend themselves.

The general came into that meeting and tried to persuade the men with arguments they had heard many times before. After his speech, when he realized the officers were determined to pursue their own course of action Washington pulled out of his waistcoat pocket a letter written by a member of Congress which promised help. As the general unfolded the paper, he looked bewildered. The officers realized he was confused and they grew alarmed. Finally, he pulled out eyeglasses from that same pocket and with great melancholy said "Gentlemen, permit me to put on my spectacles for I not only have grown gray, but almost blind in the service of my country."

No one but his most intimate associates and family had ever seen glasses on him. To wear them in public was a sign of weakness in that era, a kind of personal humiliation, but in that simple gesture, his officers realized that they were all in this together. With that new glimpse of their leader, they chose to continue the fight and, as we all know, won the war. (as told by James T. Laney in "The Strength Of Vulnerability," *Emory Magazine*, 1983, p 13)

The passage we just read tells of a day when tensions were growing, too. It was not due to a battle for national independence or a group feeling unsupported, but rather a struggle between Jesus and religious leaders. The path ahead on that day was filled with uncertainty yet in that Biblical moment, we hear of one who chose a path of vulnerability, too.

Prior to our reading, Jesus had been confronted by the chief priests and elders. They demanded to know by what authority he was teaching in the Temple and he responded with a question they refused to answer. Jesus then shared the parable of a father with two sons as a way of reminding them there were times when God seeks a changed mind. The narrative records no response from his challengers to that message either and thus, he continues to speak.

“Listen to another parable” Jesus says and then tells them of a landowner who plants a vineyard, leases the property, and leaves for another country. At harvest time, the owner sends servants to collect his share, but tenants beat one envoy, kill another, and severely injure a third. The owner sends other servants who suffer the same fate. “Finally,” Jesus says, “he sent his son to them, saying, “they will respect my son.”” When the tenants see the heir drawing near, they conspire among themselves: “Come, let us kill him and get his inheritance” and quickly carry out their plan. Jesus then asks his listeners, “Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” His challengers reply, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.” Jesus cites a verse from Scripture that speaks of a rejected stone becoming the cornerstone and then interprets his story; telling how the kingdom of God will be taken from them and given to others.

That parable, one of only three found in all of the synoptic gospels, is better understood as an allegory with each component representing someone or some group. The vineyard is a frequent Biblical image for the people of ancient Israel as our Old Testament reading shows and thus the landowner is God. The tenants represents the Jewish leaders—both political and religious—who have resisted the rightful claim of God upon their lives while the mistreated

servants are the many prophets who tried to bring the people back to faithful living. The son in the story is clearly Jesus as the description of how tenants kill him outside the walls anticipates the crucifixion, while the giving of the vineyard to others reveals how the Good News will move from an audience of only Jews to include Gentiles, too. Once the religious leaders realize both parables are about them, they want to arrest Jesus, but fearing the crowd, bide their time.

In so doing, they ignore the most surprising part of the parable. It was not the depiction of an absentee landlord as that was common in those days. Nor was it the scheme of tenants to acquire the land, for maintaining possession for three years would have caused the property to come to them. No, the part of the story that must have puzzled them, even seem far-fetched to Jesus' adversaries, was how the owner reacted to two moments of violence carried out on two groups of servants. For the expected step would have been to call on authorities to arrest the tenants and bring them to justice, yet the landowner chose a different course of action in sending his own son. Instead of exerting power, he showed vulnerability; a decision that surprises still.

One night in the early 1980s Jordan's King Hussein learned from his security police that seventy-five army officers were, at that very moment, meeting in a nearby barracks plotting an overthrow of the kingdom. The security team requested permission to surround the barracks and arrest the plotters. After a pause, the king refused and said, "Bring me a small helicopter." When it arrived, the king climbed in with the pilot and flew to the barracks, landing on its flat roof. The king told the pilot "If you hear gun shots, fly away at once without me."

Unarmed, the king walked down two flights of stairs and into the room where the plotters were gathered. Quietly, he said, "Gentlemen, it has come to my attention that you are meeting here tonight to finalize your plan to overthrow the government, take over the country and install a military dictator. If you do this, the army will break apart and the country will be plunged into civil war. Tens of thousands of innocent people will die. There is no need for this. Here I am! Kill me and proceed. That way, only one man will die." After a moment of silence, the rebels, rushed forward to kiss the king's hand and pledged loyalty to him for life." (Bailey, Kenneth. *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2008, p. 428).

The choice by that landowner in Jesus' parable was equally unexpected to those who first heard it, but reveals the key choice God made to stay in relationship with rebellious tenants over the millennia; namely, with people like you and me. As God did not come to earth with mighty armies, but in the form of a baby. God did not send Jesus to lead a political revolution, but a spiritual one. When earthly authorities turned on his son, God did not send angels to rescue Jesus, but instead chose the surprising path of allowing his son to die. Our faith consistently teaches us that God took a vulnerable course of action to stay in relationship with us, not because it was the only option, but because God decided it was the better way. Thus, Jesus told that parable not as a model for legal matters, but to reveal a central truth about the nature of our relationship with his father, and perhaps to suggest something about our ties with each other, too.

Brene' Brown is an author and professor at the University of Houston who has described herself as a "researcher-storyteller" as she studies what makes for meaningful human connections and then shares her insights in ways that persons easily find themselves. In a TED Talk called "The Power of Vulnerability," she says "in order for connection to happen we have to allow ourselves to be seen, really seen." and then notes that persons often choose a different path. Brown asserts that we are the most in-debt, obese, addicted, and medicated adult cohort in U.S. history; much of which she attributes to misguided efforts to hide vulnerability.

"One of the things I love to do," she writes in one of her books, "when I teach the concept of vulnerability is to show students videos of flash mobs and other moments of collective joy.

What you'll see in these videos is the way school-aged children unapologetically and wholeheartedly lean in to the experience. Adults? Some yes and some not so much. Tweens and teens? Rarely," she notes. "They're more likely be mortified. Both joy and pain are vulnerable experiences to feel on our own," Brown says 'and even more so with strangers."

Still, she argues, "the foundation of courage is vulnerability, the ability to navigate uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. It takes courage to open ourselves up to joy. In fact...I believe joy is probably the most vulnerable emotion we experience. We're afraid that if we allow ourselves to feel it, we'll get blindsided by disaster or disappointment. That's why in moments of real joy, many of us dress-rehearse tragedy. We see our child leave for the prom, and all we can think is 'car crash.' We get excited about an upcoming vacation, and we start thinking 'hurricane.' We try to beat vulnerability to the punch by imagining the worst or by feeling nothing in hopes that the 'other shoes won't drop.' I call it foreboding joy...

"To seek out moments of collective joy [though] and to show up for moments of collective pain, we have to be brave. That means we have to be vulnerable. In all my research's two-hundred-thousand-plus pieces of data, I can't find a single example of courage that didn't require vulnerability. Can you, in your life? Can you think of one moment of courage that didn't require risk, uncertainty, and emotional exposure? I know the answer is no; I've asked too many people who say this—including special operations soldiers. No vulnerability, no courage. We have to show up and put ourselves out there." (Brown, Brene', *Braving the Wilderness*. New York: Random House, 2017, pp. 144-45)

Another verse of Scripture sums up that approach in this way: "For God so loved the world, he gave his only son." A key starting point in the relationship with our Maker that invites us to be seen, really seen, with each other, too.