

Sermon: Lent V

The Rev. Mike Wernick

March 22, 2015

Year B
Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 119:9-16
Hebrews 5:5-10
John 12:20-33

Our covenant today... is an oracle from the prophet Jeremiah... it another new covenant that God makes with God's people... Jeremiah tells Judah that it must submit to Babylon or suffer the consequences... he writes that the people must observe God's teaching... and live out its moral instructions... instead of relying simply and solely on the security symbolized... by the existence of the Temple in Jerusalem... and when the Babylonians offer Jeremiah a comfortable life in exile in recognition of his support... he refuses it... so he can remain with his people and begin the vulnerable process of rebuilding...

And this new covenant calls us to give our hearts over to God... this mechanical pump that keeps us alive... and this seat of emotion which *gives us* life... this new covenant asks that we make ourselves vulnerable... so that God... like a lover... can write God's law... not on stone tablets... but within us... on our hearts... and *like* lovers who forgive each other unconditionally... God will remember our sin no more...

When I studied Family Systems Theory years ago... I realized that being in touch with and expressing our emotions... our energy-in-motion... was a profound strength... but there's still an unhealthy energy in society that equates emotions with weakness... perhaps it's even a patriarchal and misogynist energy that equates them with feminine weakness... but the truth is... that our emotions... and our openness to vulnerability... are what make us fully human...

In preparing for today's sermon... I came across an article written by Ayanna Watkins... who is a Disciples of Christ minister... and in her article she referred to a TED Talk by Brené Brown... I lean on both of these women today... and... by the way... if you don't know what TED Talks are... please ask me about them later...

Brown is a researcher and storyteller... with a Ph.D. in social work... she focuses on human connection... the thing which most powerfully determines a person's ability to thrive... and she wrote about what research has long since concluded... that we need connection... but she adds the scientifically crazy assertion that the key to *successful* connection... is the very thing most of us... and most of the systems around us try to avoid... our vulnerability...

Brown claims that we often feel the need to push vulnerability away... but she says... we are all vulnerable... and the research has shown that we can't selectively shut down some emotions in favor of others... we can't put the ones we don't like somewhere over there... and pretend they don't exist... and put the ones we do like right in front of us and water them like a plant... turns out it's one of those all or nothing things...

Among Brown's research subjects were people *most in touch with the fact* that they could be hurt... could lose... could get it wrong... but they went ahead seeking connection anyway... and they were more likely to be happier... to have more satisfying relationships... and enjoy a higher sense of self-worth...

On the other hand... Brown contends that by guarding against pain... by choosing safer paths... by seeking certainty of all kinds... over any kind of gray-area... by choosing acceptance over authenticity... we actually distance ourselves from the sources of comfort... happiness... and belonging that we all need most... Her conclusion is that vulnerability may leave us open to pain... shame... and rejection... but it also leaves us open to love... acceptance... and belonging... And she adds that the word courage... from the Latin *cour*... means *to tell the story of who you are with your whole heart*... this kind of courage... includes the sacramental vulnerability of coming out as lesbian... gay... bisexual... or transgender... as someone with a physical or mental illness... as an incest or abuse survivor... it includes the vulnerability of speaking truth to power...

perhaps of acknowledging our financial limits... and it includes anything else which we mistakenly let shame or diminish us...

Ayanna Watkins writes... but we rarely associate God with vulnerability... for most of the church year... in most of our worship songs and texts... God is all powerful... all seeing... and everywhere at once... but as Christmas approaches... we turn to God as exceedingly human... a helpless baby... born in a barn... laid in a trough... wrapped in rags... and then quickly made to flee and live in his own *Babylonian exile* in Egypt... this is vulnerability...

We have to remember that John was written about sixty years after Jesus' death... the separation from Judaism has begun... the Christian persecutions have begun... and as John distills and writes their collective experiences down... he must also convey *what it means* to follow Jesus... it's John's way of saying... this is what you signed up for...

If you've ever had to put a pet down... you know what it is... having to do something in spite of the pain it causes... to not do it is to prolong suffering... and to do it is to endure suffering... the Jesus who John shows us is struggling... distressed... wishing he could take another road... he knows what he's been asked to do... but he doesn't like it... he sees the risks... feels them... but goes ahead anyway... letting things unfold as they will...

This too is vulnerability... though it's much easier to get our heads around a big... powerful... invincible kind of deity... one who fights our battles for us and wins... it's clearly... Watkins writes... who the fans at Jesus' Palm Sunday parade are hoping for... it's probably who the Gentiles in this week's Gospel think they're asking for... someone to rise up and rescue them from oppression... struggle... and evil...

But what... if only a vulnerable God can love us... what if... what it takes to have a *loving* God... also means having a God who can be hurt... Jesus is the one who says "I

love you” first... who weeps over us... who trudges toward death knowing it’s the only way to get to the resurrection... who says “I forgive you” to the ones who hang him on the cross... and forgiving first... is a real risk... because the Other might not think there’s anything to be forgiven for...

This vulnerability and courage is about daring to be who you know yourself to be... and not who others expect... and yet still sharing yourself with others... expecting that you will be loved... not by everyone perhaps... but by those who can receive you as you are... it’s not a safe way to go through life... but it might be the only way to live...

Watkins cautions... that she doesn’t think love means submitting to those who are bent on hurting us... but she says Jesus’ task was to be exactly who God made him to be... God’s incarnate love... even though those 2,000 years ago... and so many of us today... were hoping he’d be different...

The lesson Brown learned from her research... is the same lesson God has been trying to teach humanity all along... that ours is an omnipotent God who chooses vulnerability... covenants... forgiveness... and love... but God is also One who will only be who God really is... not who we wish God would be... God is One who not only offers us authentic love... but also shows us how it’s done... so we too can take a risk... can be open... can present our actual selves for connection... and trust that real love will arrive in return...

So how can our Lenten journey... and beyond... be made more meaningful... knowing we have a God capable of being hurt... how can the social... economic... and political systems which surround and support us be made more humane... and how can heaven be brought to earth more fully... knowing that to be more fully vulnerable... is to be more fully human... and to be more fully alive...

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