

The Rewards of Vulnerability

There are at least two kinds of courage. One is the immediate and situational courage of the person who, in a moment of extreme need, summons the courage to face an imminent danger. This is the courage of the by-stander who pushes someone out of the way of oncoming traffic or jumps into a raging river at great risk to him or herself to save someone struggling to swim. Such courage is a display of the person's character, an accumulation of traits and patterns of behavior that have been developed during life preparing one to act courageously in any given moment.

There is a second kind of courage. This one is displayed when someone is anticipating a significant frightening challenge and does not turn away and meets it head on. This courage is also a matter of a person's character that has emerged from a lifetime of facing fears and shouldering burdens.

It is this second kind of courage that Jesus displays when he knows death awaits him in Jerusalem. The Pharisees warned Jesus to hide because Herod is out for his blood: "As Jesus visited a village, some Pharisees came and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.'" Luke 13:31 They tell him to run and save his life, and Jesus refused. Instead, he kept traveling toward Jerusalem to meet his death like other prophets did before him. The commitment to embrace this dark and difficult path for humanity is the embodiment of this second kind of courage.

What is important to notice is the central role that vulnerability plays. To anticipate challenge and suffering and not look away is, by definition, to make oneself vulnerable for the sake of others. When Jesus continued his journey to Jerusalem, he demonstrated that vulnerability is essential to courage and important in our lives. It stands at the core of an authentic Christian life.

When we open our hearts to love and trust others, we become vulnerable to being hurt.

In high school I was hurt when my girlfriend decided she wanted to break up and I experienced what vulnerability was all about. It was one of my first experiences of deep emotional pain. I think it was also one of the reasons I was attracted to the celibate priesthood. Normally the requirement of celibacy scares many away. But for me, it seemed like a way to avoid the vulnerability and pain romance can create. People who have experienced a divorce may for a time experience something similar.

In the Gospel, Jesus chooses the image of a hen gathering her brood of chicks to her for protection and safety to illustrate his love and concern for people. Notice the feminine imagery – God is like a hen spreading her wings over her baby chicks. Such nurture, warmth and love. It's also an image of tremendous vulnerability, especially when he refers to Herod as a fox in Luke 13:32.

You parents know --- the very moment your oldest child was born, you were held hostage to his or her fate and were a captive to her destiny. The result for a parent is a sense of profound vulnerability and a level of suffering that you simply would not have endured if you had not bound yourself so fully to your child. It is our vulnerability, which spurs on our courage, that motivates us to do things for those we love that we would not or could not do for ourselves.

It is precisely this characteristic that Jesus embodies and reveals as an attribute of God – that God becomes vulnerable to all the ups and downs of human life by becoming one with humanity through the incarnation of Jesus.

And so Jesus continues on to Jerusalem not to prove himself fearless or to be a hero, not to make a sacrifice for sin to a judgmental God. Rather, Jesus marches on to Jerusalem and embraces the cross that awaits him there out of profound love for the people around him, like a mother's fierce love that will stop at nothing to protect her children.

In other words, perhaps in Jesus' mind, his mission was not so much to do the will of God, rather, he was captivated by the love he had for people and that is what motivated his selfless act that will be displayed for all the world to see on Good Friday. He could not deny being loving. He lived his life out of vulnerability, which like a parent's love for her child, created immense courage, and this is what pleased God.

Our experience of vulnerability spurs us on to be more authentically human and more caring, compassionate, and courageous than we could otherwise be. The word courage comes from the Latin *cor* – "heart" – and defines courage as living from the heart, the willingness to embrace our vulnerability in order to be our authentic selves. Christian courage is the kind of whole-hearted living that comes from believing that as God's children we are enough, and that those around us are also God's beloved children and therefore they deserve our love, compassion, empathy, and respect. It is an understanding that we are all intimately connected to one another. We see this in the life and teachings of Jesus. Regardless of the person's religion or ethnicity, Jesus extended healing and compassion.

So, we need to remember that God is with us in those places of our greatest vulnerability. Be courageous and lean into your vulnerability, make love and compassion your aim, and there you will find the presence of God, but it will probably also involved some suffering.

~PB

(This article is adapted from Luther Seminary professor David Lose's commentary on Luke 13:31-35, "Courage and Vulnerability".)