

Lent 02 C 2019
March 17, 2019 :: Luke 13:31-35
Fr. Jim Cook

“Courage and Vulnerability.”

It seems to me that there are at least two kinds of courage. The first is an immediate and situational courage, that enables a person to act in the blink of an eye. This is the courage, for example, of the bystander who rushes in to push someone out of the way of oncoming traffic, even while risking their own well-being.

However, this kind of courage is not a spur-of-the-moment kind of thing, that just anyone can muster. It's ultimately a display of the kind of character that has developed over a long period of time, through the accumulation of traits and beliefs, of training and patterns of behavior, which enables someone to act courageously at any given moment.

By contrast, the second kind of courage is revealed in someone who is *anticipating* a significant, or a daunting, or even a frightening challenge, and rather than turning away from it, faces it head on.

This kind of courage is also a matter of character; a character that has developed from a lifetime of facing fears, and shouldering burdens, and accepting challenges ... *that one could otherwise have avoided.*

It's this second kind of courage that Jesus displays in our gospel reading. Some Pharisees have gone to Jesus and warned him that Herod is out for his blood, and that Jesus should take immediate evasive measures. But Jesus refuses. Instead, he stays true to his mission, and he continues his ministry. And it's this commitment to stay on a dangerous and risky course, *for the sake of others*, that is the very embodiment of this second kind of courage.

And though I've read this passage so many times before, what struck me about it, this time around, was the absolutely critical role that *vulnerability* plays in this kind of courage. I mean, to anticipate a challenge, and perhaps even suffering, and *not* look away, is, by definition, someone making themselves vulnerable for the sake of others.

And that's really important to think about. Because, as a culture, we don't generally equate vulnerability with courage. Sure,

we'll equate it with care, or love, or concern, but not so much with courage. But here's the thing: When we're at our worst, we'll see vulnerability as a sign of weakness; as something to be avoided. But when we're at our best, we'll recognize the *need* to be vulnerable *to* those, and *for* those, we care about most deeply.

And so, not only does Jesus demonstrate that vulnerability is essential to courage, but also that vulnerability is at the very heart of the Christian life. Because vulnerability enables us to discover that unique and particular strength that comes from being open to the needs of those around us; that comes from being vulnerable.

By the way, did you notice the imagery that Jesus chose to illustrate his love and concern for God's people? Yes, it was the image of a mother hen gathering her brood of chicks under her wings, in order to protect them and keep them safe. What an interesting choice!

I mean, beyond the provocative feminine imagery that almost begs us to reconsider some of our views of God, it's also an image of unparalleled vulnerability. Because, to be a parent — as Peggy and I discovered when our daughters were born, and, more recently,

when our first grandchild was born — to be a parent is to be held hostage to fate, and a captive to an unknown destiny. Because there is no way you can protect your children from all of the threats that this life might present. (Nor, it might be argued, should we.) And that fact not only leaves parents profoundly vulnerable, but it also promises a level of suffering that someone would never voluntarily endure, if they weren't so completely bound by love to their child or grandchild.

And by embodying this combination of courage and vulnerability, Jesus is suggesting that this is true of God as well. In other words, through Jesus, God has also become vulnerable to all of the unpleasant and unfortunate circumstances of life.

And so Jesus continues on the road to Jerusalem. But not to prove that he's a fearless hero. And not to make a sacrifice for sin to a judgmental God. And not even to combat death and the devil. But rather, Jesus marches to Jerusalem, and embraces the cross that awaits him, out of a profound love for all of humanity. In other words, Jesus is enacting a mother's fierce love, that will stop at nothing to protect her children.

I know that embracing this kind of vulnerability might spur feelings we'd rather avoid. But I also know that it enables us to be more fully human. And more caring, and compassionate, and courageous than we otherwise could be. And what's more, it might even allow us to reach the point where we can actually have the eyes to see that all of humanity deserves our love, our empathy, and our respect.

In the end, I wonder what this world might look like, if everyone decided to embrace the vulnerability that true courage requires? If everyone had the assurance that the best place to encounter God was where we felt the most vulnerable? If everyone had the confidence that God has already given us all of the resources (including each other!) that we need? And not just the resources that would enable us to merely *endure* the challenges and hardships that we all inevitably face, but resources that would enable us to *flourish* right where we're at? I really do wonder what this world might look like then.

But, for now, I can only imagine.

Amen.