

The Strength of Vulnerability

Genesis 45:1-15, Matthew 15:21-28

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One word claims our attention: **vulnerability**. It sounds like weakness to our ears, but in the Bible it is a positive capacity. To be vulnerable is to be powerful and redemptive.

Look, I know we are seduced by the illusion of invulnerability. The current cinematic love affair with every five and dime comic book hero is evidence enough that we are feeling vulnerable. Somehow we cling to the illusion that when all seems lost, Superman will save us, Spiderman will rescue us, or Batman or Iron Man, or Captain America. The illusion of invulnerability. But truth is, we are not invulnerable: Disease, drought, depression, death.

The anger in the health care debate is fueled by our fear of death. Medical science has God-status, and we cling to the hope that doctors and "miracle" drugs will get us out of here alive. But if everyone gets health care, there might not be enough for us, we cry. Nothing scares Americans like the threat of scarcity. Guess what? We are not getting out alive. Yet Jesus says, "Don't be afraid."

Harder truth: We are called to be the one thing we most pretend we aren't – vulnerable. But this biblical vulnerability is the power of God operating to release redemption in the world. It is the capacity to be wounded, and it is this paradox that gives us so much trouble. It is the capacity to endure what is done to us. No one ever escapes what life does to us without our permission, choice, or desire. Joseph endures a slavery he didn't choose, a prison term he didn't deserve. The Canaanite woman endures the awful unto death sickness of her daughter, a sickness she could only describe as demonic. We can't escape being done to by the hard and unyielding nature of this risky world. Not even the Word made flesh. My attraction to country music has nothing to do with the music but it has to do with the understanding of country singers that life is often a series of things done to us, what just happens to us, and how it crushes our spirits, breaks our heart, and turns life into tragedy piled on top of tragedy.

Vulnerability is a fitting subject for us. As a nation, we are living with a widespread sense of vulnerability. On 9/11 and in 2008, we encountered negative vulnerability (people messing with our power and our money) and it has reduced our politics to rancor and fear. Last week the newspaper headlines screamed FEAR: "A Wave of Worry Threatens to Build on Itself," "Stocks Dive Again on Europe, Economy Fears," "Fear Returns for U.S. Banks." I couldn't help but muse that fear never leaves poor people. Maybe now we are ready to hear a pair of Bible stories that show

us how vulnerability is the **“enabling condition for relationship with God”** (Ellen F. Davis). There are thus two kinds of vulnerability: Negative vulnerability produces fear and anger; positive vulnerability places the church in the world with a capacity to be wounded, and wounded in ways that effect reconciliation and redemption for others.

Begin with the vulnerability of God. Our traditional language about God makes it difficult to think of God as vulnerable. Yet the story of God is a story of unimaginable pain. God is powerful, and we pile up words to make God out as invulnerable: omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, but God is also broken-hearted, wounded, again and again, by acts of unfaithfulness, cruelty, and abuse. Love anything or anyone and you are vulnerable to hurt, and God loves an entire world (cosmos – the word can mean a world in active rebellion against God). That a ton of hurt. “For though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened.” “He came into his own and his own people did not accept him.” The world God made and loves is a cruel and desperately lonely place for God. “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I^{*} called them, the more they went from me.” And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. ^{*} God vulnerable to our treachery, betrayal, mistrust, and wickedness? You betcha.

At every stage in the story of Joseph, God risks the future of the people of covenant. Do you see now how vulnerable God is? If Joseph becomes an Egyptian and forgets his own people and his God, then it would be better if the world had never been made. God risks everything on Joseph. People sold, like Joseph (for twenty pieces of silver), not once, but twice, into slavery, and taken to a foreign land are usually never heard from again –

that should have been the end of Joseph. A slave accused of sexually molesting his master’s wife – **that should have been the end of Joseph.** Down in prison, Joseph, was just one more slave without power. **That should have been the end of Joseph.**

You know the story. Joseph gets out of prison and into the good graces of Pharaoh. You know the story, because you love success stories. Ex-con rules Egypt. CNN and FOX would have reporters camped out at the palace for weeks. But this is not a story of individual success; this is a story of divine salvation. This is about God’s patience, providence, and care. God has made a risky world. **“And God takes the riskiness to an extreme point in making a world in which there will emerge creatures with minds and freedom”**(Rowan Williams). So is God vulnerable? You betcha!

The brothers of Joseph are certainly vulnerable. Their land is drought-devastated. They are on the edge of starvation when they show up down in Egypt, and just when they think bad luck is their middle name, they discover that the man in charge of distributing the bread is the brother they thought they had gotten rid of years earlier. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." The text alerts us that all the bitter history between Joseph and his brothers still hangs in the air: "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into slavery." In slow motion the brothers shuffle toward Joseph in tight formation. Vulnerable? You betcha!

Turn now to the story of the Canaanite woman begging Jesus to heal her sick child. First Jesus ignores her and then he tells her, "Sorry, I can't help you. **"I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"** (v. 24). We can try to take away the blow of this awful statement by claiming that Matthew and the early church have placed these words on the lips of Jesus. Or claim this is Jesus' famous sense of humor at work. Or suggest that Jesus is testing the woman or just using irony. Of course, it is hard to make a case for irony when you have called a woman a dog or the modern street word for dog. You are welcome to any of these possibilities.

But we can just let the words hang there on the lips of Jesus and take them at face value. Read this way, the words subject Jesus to the narrow prejudices of his culture. Well, what else did you think temptation was? We too are tempted by the prejudices of our culture. Do you think God helps those who help themselves? Do you believe that rank, riches, privilege, and status make people better than others? Do you object to our confessing the sin of war? Then you are a victim of cultural prejudice. Cultural prejudice and Christian conviction are not the same.

Tempted in all ways just like us. Is Jesus vulnerable? You betcha! Not convinced? Well, listen to a pagan woman who argues with Jesus. "I may be a dog. In fact, you can call me whatever you want, but my daughter is dying and there's not a damn thing I can do about it, but you can. You can help me and sir, even dogs get the crumbs." Are we witnessing the education of the messiah with a strong, sassy woman his teacher? I want to suggest that the teachers of Jesus include a variety of such women: the woman at the well in Samaria – married five times and now living with a man, the woman at Simon's house – a prostitute, and the Canaanite woman – a pagan. Do you feel uncomfortable at the idea of these strong, questionable women teaching Jesus?

Likewise, the woman from Canaan appeals to the one thing Jesus most needs – vulnerable people willing to have great faith. And to his credit, Jesus shows himself ready to be persuaded by great faith. He moves from "only the lost sheep of Israel" to an embrace of the faith found in a pagan

woman. Remember what Jesus told the centurion: Truly I tell you, in no one* in Israel have I found such faith. ¹¹I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. Spread the word, Jesus accepts faith wherever he finds it. ¹²By the time Jesus' ministry ends, the least likely to believe will have believed with their whole heart. Jesus, it turns out, will take faith, even a little, rag tag, mixed up, convoluted, desperate, doubting faith, wherever he finds it and for that we should be grateful.

In the Canaanite woman, Jesus has someone who not only stands up to him but stands with him, someone to count on. What finally matters is not what Jesus calls the woman, but what Jesus affirms about her: "Woman, great is your faith."

Of such is the positive vulnerability that produces the capacity for radical transformation. Joseph is a changed man. It's not about what's been done **to** Joseph but it is about what God has done **for** Joseph. Joseph's mission is to feed his starving people not balance Pharaoh's budget. So Joseph makes a crucial theological decision: He forgives his brothers, and interprets his life in terms of the purposes of God. Four times Joseph says, "God sent me."

And the Canaanite woman is changed. Her daughter is healed and her faith held up as exemplary to a people who thought they had cornered the market on faith.

Being vulnerable can be a positive capacity and I have argued that this is what God expects of the church. What we fail to understand about the Bible at times is what is created in these stories "is an ever-pulsing portrait of just how impossible and essential it is to live in close quarters with those maddening creatures called human beings, especially those you regard (Heaven help you) as family" (Ben Brantley, NYT Theater Critic, "Chekhov's Slugfest, With Pratfalls," August 8, 2011).

Now do you see what we must do? God looks for beings to show something of God's ability to make new things and to make relationships. Joseph turned out to be one of those beings. The Canaanite woman turned out to be one of those beings. Will we turn out to be one of those vulnerable ones? Will we learn that it no longer matters what has been done to us but what we do with what has been done to us (Ellen Davis)?

I am a bit fearful but I invite you to join me in an ongoing immersion into the spirit of positive vulnerability. I invite you to trust one another, pray for one another, love one another, forgive one another, bear one another's

burdens, encourage one another. Are we willing to be vulnerable? I want to answer for all of us: YOU BETCHA!