1/16-17/21 Courage to be Vulnerable Rev. Amy Haines

Phil 2:5-11 (NRSV)

Think of your favorite hymn or praise song. How does that song lift up your praise of Jesus or echo the cry of your heart? How does it challenge you to live by faith or re-commit you to follow the ways of God?

Hymns and praise songs are foundational for our worship. One of the challenges of this pandemic continues to be that we are not allowed to sing during in-person worship. Instead, I invite you to pay attention to the words that we sing. How do they tell the story of our faith?

How do they challenge our faith? How do they lift up what is on our hearts and in our minds?

Singing has long been a part of worship. Today’s scripture passage is perhaps the oldest Christian hymn on record. The Apostle Paul quotes this hymn to remind the church at Philippi to live into the words they sing.

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus…”

Christ was obedient, humble, a servant. Do we follow him by following God’s ways, being honest with ourselves and others, and serving others with the love of Christ? Do we follow him by having the courage to be vulnerable so that others will see Christ in and through us?

Courage. Vulnerability. How often do we hear those two words and believe they do not belong in the same sentence, let alone lived out in the same person? How often do we live as if we must choose one over the other?

We value courage as strength. We view vulnerability as a weakness.

And yet, true courage begins in vulnerability. Courage is less about strength and more about the willingness to do that which frightens us. Courage is what compels us to act when we would rather do anything else than what we are called to do. There is no courage without vulnerability, because there is no courage without risk. When we are vulnerable, we open ourselves to hurt or possibly to loss. But when we are vulnerable, we also open ourselves up to love, to friendship, to growth, to courage.

Think of the times when you had the courage to be vulnerable.

You admitted to your boss that you were in over your head and needed help.

You asked someone out on a date.

You trusted a friend by sharing your struggles.

You spoke up in a Bible study, daring to ask about something you didn’t understand.

When I was younger, I struggled being vulnerable with others. I didn’t want to get hurt, or seen as a fool. I didn’t want to admit my struggles and do the hard work of being open to change.

As a youth, I was afraid that if people really knew who I was, if they really knew my hopes and dreams, my fears and failures, then they wouldn’t want to be around me anymore. When I first started ministry, I was afraid that if I shared too much of myself, then I would never be welcomed as a leader. I had to work hard in my counseling sessions to move beyond thinking through my emotions to simply feeling what I felt, and risk sharing those feelings with others.

Author C.S. Lewis once wrote about the courage to be vulnerable in love. He said:

…To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.

*--C.S. Lewis, The Four Loves, Harper One.*

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As followers of Jesus, we are called to love God, love others, and love ourselves. Yet our love takes courage. Our love takes commitment. Our love requires vulnerability. Our love requires risk.

These values are not often the ways of the world, which entices us to live another way. The world around us often wants us to claim power and control and dominance and strength. The world around us often wants us to judge others because they are not like us, and to look down on those we judge.

Think of the world of the Roman Empire and the ways that culture molded Saul, tempted Jesus and challenged the early church. The Roman Empire asserted power through strength and war and dominance. Legions of soldiers marched through Jerusalem in a show of force every holy day. Jesus was tempted to show off his divine power to get people to follow him. Saul sought to use brute force to stamp out the early church. If the early Christians did not bow down and worship Caesar as Lord, they were treated as traitors to the Empire.

We may think we have moved past the ways of Rome, but even now, how is power asserted in our society through those who have money or influence or control?

Lobbyists promise large contributions to politicians to do what they want rather than vote for what is best. Donations to non-profits are sometimes given only with conditions for how they are used. Even some Christians insist that society must cater to specific lists of morals and values.

In the letter to the church at Philippi, the apostle Paul reminded them, and through them us, that pride and control and dominance was not the way of Jesus. While their church community was fairly healthy, they still struggled with the sin of pride. And that pride led to divisions among the believers.

Paul reminded them that pride is not the way of Jesus. The way of Jesus is self-giving service; humility; honesty; love for others.

The ancient hymn we hear today reminds us that Jesus chose to empty himself. Jesus chose to restrain his divine power. Jesus chose to be limited to a specific time and place. Jesus chose to live by vulnerable love.

Jesus chose to live as one of us to understand the depths of our struggles as well as share with us God’s deep love for us. Jesus chose to live as one of us even to the point of death, a criminal’s death on the cross.

These verses today are the apostle Paul’s version of the incarnation, good news that we so often remember at Christmas yet neglect to reflect on the rest of the year. The baby in the manger grew up to show and share the ways of God. He died on a cross, was risen from the dead, and is now exalted by God.

Yet Jesus’ power was not shown through politics or force, but through vulnerable, self-giving love for others.

…Instead of intimidating people into following him or winning out over others, Jesus’ vulnerability brought people around to recognizing his true power. This true power, “the glory of God” shown in Jesus, turns the world’s definition of power upside down. Jesus’ power is in being for others and with others. It is much less courageous to remain closed off from others, especially those with whom we disagree.

--“Courageous” 2021 www.gnjumc.org/breakthrough

It is much more courageous to continue to reach out to others in love, even when our love is rejected.

When we have the courage to be vulnerable, do we recognize the same mind of Christ in our interactions with others? When we have the courage to be vulnerable, do we recognize the strength we gain from one another? When we have the courage to be vulnerable, do others recognize the love of Jesus through our words and actions?

Our vulnerability doesn’t mean we tell every stranger we encounter our deepest and darkest secrets. Our vulnerability doesn’t mean we don’t have healthy boundaries.

Our vulnerability is rather a willingness to live in humility, in obedience, and in healthy, honest relationships with others. Our vulnerability is an intentional effort not to be overcome by pride, by thinking better of ourselves, or by abusing our privilege in life.

Yes, having the courage to live by faith, being vulnerable and honest and willing to share and love and forgive and grow together, this way of life is not easy. We have to risk admitting we don’t have all of the answers. We have to risk being rejected by those who refuse to even listen to our stories of faith. We have to risk being hurt by those who won’t let us love.

John Ortberg once confessed:

It’s a strange truth that I admire vulnerability in other people,

but I don’t want to have to be vulnerable myself.

*-I’d Like You More If You Were More Like Me: Getting Real About Getting Close (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2017), Kindle Electronic Version.*

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Yet what if your vulnerability encourages another! What if humbly sharing a part of your story resonates with someone else who is struggling!

Renowned author Henri Nouwen used the book *I*[*n Memoriam*](https://amzn.to/37FxXgO)to tell the story of his mother’s death and his consuming grief.

Somebody asked Nouwen, “Why do you do this? Why are you so public about your personal problems?”

Nouwen replied, “I always try to turn my personal struggles into something helpful for others.

*-- J. Howard Olds, in Ministry matters, August 1st, 2008.*

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Years ago I led a study on finding our purpose through our SHAPE—our spiritual gifts, heart, abilities, personality and experiences. I was reminded of that study today as we are called to have the courage to share our stories, for our experiences help to shape who we are, and they also shape our faith witness. Don’t discount your story! Have courage to share it when God guides you, for the struggles you have overcome, or the faithfulness you show in the midst of struggle, or even your doubt and uncertainty may be the light of Christ someone else needs!

As Brene Brown has observed,

…Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it.

Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy—the experiences that make us the most vulnerable. Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light.

*--The Power of Vulnerability, TED Talk, 2010*

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We live in a world of much darkness. And yet, Christ still offers us light and faith and hope.

None of us are perfect. All of us have our weaknesses, our struggles and our stories of risk.

And yet, even as we are human, God invites us to have the same mind of Christ. To risk and learn and fail and grow as we seek to live by love and hope and forgiveness and grace.

To have hard conversations around our differences and hard conversations on the ways God keeps calling us.

Brené Brown again reminds us:

…Society has taught us that vulnerability is synonymous with weakness—but it’s just the opposite. Vulnerability is the willingness to show up and be seen by others in the face of uncertain outcomes. There’s not a single act of courage that doesn’t involve vulnerability.

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Last week we were reminded to have the courage to claim our identity as God’s Beloved sons and daughters. This week we are invited to have the courage to be vulnerable as we live out our faith in Christ. Be honest with your struggles and your growth. Be humble in your relationships with others. Be willing to journey together, not thinking less of others or of yourselves.

Continue to sing. Continue to live. Continue to be of the same mind of Christ, to have the courage to follow the ways of Christ in our lives, our ways, and our relationships with others.

May God guide us to make it so. Amen.