

“The Vulnerability of God”
1 Corinthians 1:17-18
World Communion Sunday

October 6, 2024
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

There are, I imagine, many words that could describe how any of us have felt over the past 10 days:

Overwhelmed.
Scared.
Fortunate.
Frustrated.
Exhausted.
Grateful.
Helpless.
Wanting to help.

Am I in the ballpark here?

Along with all those feelings, there’s one in particular that has been on my mind these past 10 days:

Vulnerable.

How vulnerable we all are when a storm of unexpected strength plows through.

How vulnerable it feels have so little control over what happens to our neighborhoods, our houses, our schedules, our schools, our families...

And then there’s the vulnerability that our neighbors in North Carolina have gone through, what they continue to go through, which in many ways is of another category altogether.

Our topic this morning is VULNERABILITY.

Now I chose this topic way back in the summer.
Before any hurricanes were on the horizon.
And I chose it for a couple of reasons.

The first reason is because today is World Communion Sunday.
And part of the liturgy we will say from the table goes like this:

“Every time we eat this bread and drink this cup, we do proclaim
our Lord’s death—
 (in other words, his vulnerability)
 until he comes again.”

I chose the topic because communion has something to do with
vulnerability. With our common need to be fed by the grace of God.

The second reason I chose this topic was the Apostle Paul.
Paul had a lot to say about vulnerability.

In our second text for today, he writes to the church in Corinth:

“For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel,
and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be
emptied of its power.”

What is this power that’s found in the cross of Christ?
For Paul, it’s all about being...vulnerable.

When Paul speaks of the cross—
 the power of the cross,
 the death of Jesus on the cross—
 he’s not talking atonement theories.

He's talking about the character and nature of God.
The vulnerability of God.

Vulnerability is how Paul understood God's power working through Jesus. And vulnerability is how Paul understands the power of God at work through you and me.

As he writes in his 2nd letter to the Corinthians:

“...as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger...”

Paul puts vulnerability up on a pedestal.
So why does Paul do it?
I wish Paul wouldn't do it.

I'd like to kick vulnerability to the curb, after these past 10 days!

In fact, let's put it to a vote.
How many of you vote to kick vulnerability to the side?

Right.

Feeling vulnerable, being vulnerable—who enjoys it?
No one wants it. None of us like it.
We do our best in life to guard against it.

I say that...but sometimes, that's not true.

Sometimes, a person realizes that the place in which they belong is not a well-fortified place, or a safe place...but a very vulnerable place.

I saw a video on social media this past week of a gentleman who—during the flooding in North Carolina—he tried to canoe toward a woman who was being swept away by the overflowing river.

He was canoeing against the current of the river.

When he realized he could not control his canoe amidst the strength of the river, he made a split-second decision to jump in when the woman was about to pass him...and somehow, he reached the woman, held onto the woman, and when the two of them had been carried by the current for another 200 yards or so, they finally got to a place where he could regain some control.

He swam sidestroke, with the woman holding on.
They reached the edge of the waters, solid ground.
He saved her life.

How did that happen?

It happened because this stranger—
in the blink of an eye—
was willing to make himself vulnerable.

Maybe this is one reason why Paul preached vulnerability.
Because he knew that in the end, that's what the human heart is like.

Not just in the worst sense.
But in its best sense.

When we see our common connections to other people—when we see our own vulnerability in their vulnerability—bonds are formed.

Community is strengthened.

How many of you have seen strangers helping strangers this past week?

How many of you have been grateful for the power company workers from other states coming to work in our state this week?

Vulnerability is something of a paradox.
On the one hand, it's a terrifying thing.
And on the other hand, it can be a unifying thing.

Lisel Mueller once wrote a poem called *Monet Refuses the Operation*.

The poem is about the great artist Claude Monet deciding NOT to have his eyesight fixed by a doctor in his later years, and part of it goes like this:

“Doctor,
you say there are no haloes around the streetlights in Paris,
and what I see is an aberration caused by old age,
an affliction.

I tell you it has taken me all my life to arrive
at the vision of gas lamps as angels,
to soften and blur and finally banish the edges
you regret I don't see,

to learn that the line I called the horizon does not exist
and sky and water, so long apart,
are the same state of being.

...now you want to restore my youthful errors:
 fixed notions of top and bottom,
 the illusion of three-dimensional space...

“I will not return to a universe of objects
 that don’t know each other, as if islands were not
 the lost children of one great continent.

“Doctor, if only you could see
 how heaven pulls earth into its arms
 and how infinitely the heart expands to claim this world...”

Do you know why I think Paul preached vulnerability?
 Not just because it’s what the human heart is like.
 I think he did it because vulnerability...is what the Christian heart
 is like.

I wonder if any of you know the name Pedro Arrupe...

In 1938, Pedro Arrupe was a young Jesuit missionary in
 Yokohama, Japan.

He taught school.
 He celebrated Mass.

After Pearl Harbor, Japanese police imprisoned him, because
 Arrupe had studied in the United States, and received his degree in the
 United States, and was therefore suspected of espionage.

So they placed him in a six-foot-square cell, all by himself, for
 over a month.

Yet when Arrupe was released, he harbored no bitterness toward his Japanese parishioners.

Now Arrupe had trained as a doctor before becoming a Jesuit.
And after Yokohama, he worked in a Jesuit house in Hiroshima.

When the United States dropped an atomic bomb on the city on August 6, 1945, the Jesuit house in which Arrupe lived happened to be behind a hill, shielding it from the direct effects of the blast.

And you know what Pedro Arrupe did next?

After the shockwave swept by, he organized a team and went into the city to find the wounded. He turned the Jesuit house into a makeshift hospital, for something like 200 survivors of the blast.

In other words, in the midst of nuclear horror...

Pedro Arrupe found the vulnerable.
And he reached out to the vulnerable.
And amidst all that radiation swirling in the air, he made himself vulnerable.¹

You don't have to be a Jesuit priest nominated for sainthood to understand the love and power of God in this way.

You see, I think Paul preached vulnerability—
because it's what the human heart is like, yes...
because it's what the Christian heart is like, that too...
but he did it because that's what the heart of God is like.

¹ The primary reference for this story comes from Bill Gardner, "Disciplines for Freedom," in *Plough*, July 5, 2024.

“The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

Look—after the power is back on at your house, and you’ve had a chance to catch your breath—any one of us may want to think about another power that is at work in your life right now.

And that’s the power of God.

And we might ask ourselves where we will find the power of God at work in this world.

Will it be in safe places?

Well-fortified places?

Or will it be in the most vulnerable places?

Let me get at it like this.

I want you to image that you’re describing Westminster to someone who doesn’t know our church.

How would you do it?

Well, you could start with our church’s vision.

What’s the vision of Westminster?

Open Minds, Open Hearts, good.

We are a church of Open Minds Open Hearts.

You may even want to mention our pillars:

Hospitality

Generosity

Justice

Imagination

Joy

I hope you say that those are the core values of Westminster, and they are part of the reason that you are a member of this church.

Those are good words to use.

And if you also said that we're an inclusive church...

a warm and welcoming church...

or a purple church...

or a growing church....

I wouldn't object to any of that.

But I'm wondering...

To describe our church, would you ever use the word
“vulnerable”?

I belong to a vulnerable church.

A church that's not afraid to be vulnerable.

A church that reaches out to the vulnerable.

What does a vulnerable church look like?

I've got an idea.

What if it looks like a baby,

born to a teenage mother,

and he grows up in a poor family,

but it's a good family, a faithful family.

A family that lives under the thumb of Roman occupation.

And he learns something from that family.

He learns something about who is most vulnerable in his society.

And when he's an adult, he shows his love for God by spending
time with the rejected and the despised and the vulnerable in his society,
and the people in power say, don't do it!

The people in power say to him, “You’re not supposed to eat with those people, you’re not supposed to forgive those people, you’re not even supposed to be associating with those kind of people.”

But he kept doing it.

And even though it made him more popular with those people, it also put him in danger with those who ruled over the people.

Until finally, one day, those in power were THREATENED by how popular he was becoming, and they said ENOUGH!

And they arrested him and tortured him and they crucified him.
And here’s the thing:

He let them do it.

He forgave his executioners.
He never fought back.
He never tried to save his life.

Instead, he gave his life.

He gave it for the people who followed him and the people who murdered him.

He did it to show the world that ***this***—

THIS is what the love and power of God is really like.

What do you think?

Do you think a vulnerable church ought to look something like that man’s life? Better yet, do you think God would like Westminster to be that kind of church?

(Amen.)