

## “Paradox Four: Our Powerful, Vulnerable God”

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Based upon Phil. 2:1-11; Rev. 5:1-14

According to Greek mythology, when Achilles was a baby, his mother Thetis took him to the River Styx, which was supposed to make people immortal, or at least invulnerable, and dipped him in. Sure enough, Achilles grew up to be a great, seemingly invincible warrior. But because Thetis had dipped him in the river by holding onto his heel, that small part of his body was not protected. So, when a poison arrow caught him in the heel one day, that was that. Thus, when we now speak of someone’s “Achilles’ heel,” we are referring to his or her place of vulnerability or weakness, or to a potentially fatal flaw. It’s sort of a silly expression when you think about it because none of us is invincible, immortal, or flawless; we’re basically just big, giant vulnerable heels. But the myth and the expression do capture beautifully how human beings have tended throughout the ages to perceive vulnerability as an undesirable quality, a liability that needs somehow to be overcome, or at least hidden.

Few people like feeling vulnerable not just because when our real, soft, squishy cores, or flaws are revealed, we feel embarrassed and exposed, but also because there is a stigma associated with being vulnerable in our culture. Vulnerability is synonymous to many with weakness, and weakness is considered bad. We don’t want to be weak; we want to be strong. We don’t want to be fatally flawed; we want to be perfect. So, while Hollywood cranks out super hero movies to fuel our fantasies, we mask our vulnerability by seeking control over our lives and choices, power over others, and protection from anything and anyone who might take advantage of, or reject us for, whatever it is that we are trying to hide. As theologian William Placher has observed, it’s one of the greatest ironies of human existence. We seek power to prove that we are invulnerable, all the while we are being motivated by enslaving fear caused by the knowledge that we are vulnerable.<sup>1</sup>

The ancient Greek gods did not have this problem. They were viewed as all powerful and free from fear. Our true God, Yahweh, is also viewed this way. It has always been a core doctrine of the Christians faith that God is omnipotent. But unlike the pagan gods of old, our all-powerful God is also the God who, in Christ, died on the cross in a state of acute vulnerability. This seeming-contradiction presents us with yet another paradox of our faith, one that Paul described in last week’s text from *First Corinthians* by saying, “God chose what was weak in the world to shame the strong” and “God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” (1 Cor. 1:27b, 25b). What does it even mean to have weakness stronger than strength, and omnipotence and vulnerability simultaneously?

One of the classic images of this paradox in the Bible is the one presented in today’s lesson from *The Book of Revelation*. *Revelation* is a form of literature called “apocalyptic,” that

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<sup>1</sup> Placher, William C., Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 18.

was popular for the two hundred years before and after Jesus' death, which used symbols and coded language to provide a secret message of hope to a persecuted people. In the case of *Revelation* specifically, the people were the early Christians, whom Rome was torturing and killing in droves. Apocalyptic literature often reads like a Hollywood movie, and today's reading is no exception. The drama actually begins in Chapter 4, before today's reading, when the author of the text who is called John, but was probably not the John who wrote the gospel and letters by that name, is invited to peek through an open door to Heaven. He hears a voice like a trumpet calling people to a special worship service. There on the throne is someone who sparkles like gem stones and is surrounded by a rainbow. That throne is surrounded by twenty-four other thrones for the twenty-four elders symbolizing both the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve disciples. Around the thrones dance the seven spirits of God in flashes of light and thunder, seven being a symbol of perfection. There are also four living creatures with eyes all around, perhaps representing the apostles who wrote the Gospels, and cherubim and angels all singing "You are worthy, our Lord and God."

The singing and light show builds to a crescendo as everyone stares at a seven-times sealed scroll found at the right hand of God. The scroll contains Book of Life and God's plans for earth and humanity. "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break the seals?" an angel cries. The question ripples through the crowd, stirring up anxiety in John when it becomes clear that "no one in heaven, on earth or under the earth" is worthy to open it. Then an elder reassures John, "Don't worry, 'the Lion of Judah has conquered, so he can open it.'" The Lion of Judah was in the Old Testament a reference both to the nation of Judah (the southern kingdom of Israel), and to the Messiah.

All eyes turn looking for the great Lion, the conqueror with the power and holiness to do the job, who will come to save the day. But instead of a ferocious beast appearing, or even a nice majestic lion like C.S. Lewis' Aslan, what appears is a slaughtered lamb. In the words of *Revelation* scholar Eugene Boring, "This is perhaps the most mind-wrenching 'rebirth of images' in literature. The slot in the system reserved for the Lion has been fulfilled by the Lamb of God."<sup>2</sup> The text takes pains to show this is not some kind of stealth warrior lamb, like the vicious bunny in Monty Python's *Holy Grail* movie, ready to rip people's throats out as soon as their defenses are down. The lamb is described as "looking like it had been slaughtered," and is rendered even more innocuous by John's use in the Greek of the diminutive for "lamb." In essence, the Savior of the day is not a lion, but a "lambkin."<sup>3</sup> The Lambkin of God is not like any ordinary lamb, however. He has seven horns and seven eyes. Since, as I said, seven is the numeric symbol of wholeness and perfection, the horns suggest complete power, while the eyes suggest that the Lamb sees and knows all. The Lamb alone is qualified to open the scroll and does so. The rest of the book is about what happens as God's plan for redeeming the world unfolds in the end of time.

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<sup>2</sup> Boring, M. Eugene, *Revelation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 108.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 110.

In Jesus' day, not unlike our own, the idea of a conqueror, a savior, a God being depicted as a lamb was more than a little bit counterintuitive. So, as way to explain how an all-powerful God could possibly be a sacrificial lamb which was killed on a cross, the Christian hymn Paul included in Chapter 2 of his letter to the *Philippians* states that before Jesus was born, he "emptied himself" of divine power and took on the form of a servant. But even as the early Christians affirmed this divine emptying, or *kenosis*, in the Greek, they also insisted that by becoming a sacrificial lamb, Jesus revealed a power greater than anything humanity had ever imagined. It wasn't a destructive power, like in the end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, that God used to melt people's faces off and incinerate them on the spot. It wasn't an oppressive power either, ready to lock up all the bad guys and throw away the keys. It wasn't even a controlling power, which could rid the world of suffering and evil. God wanted human beings to be free to choose between good and bad, and free to learn and grow into faithfulness to and love for God. So, the power God chose and embodied in Christ the Lamb was the power to transform the universe through love.

Since day in and day out all we hear in the news are stories about hate, conflict, and violence, it may not seem at first like the power of love is much of a power; we are so used to thinking of power as "power over," not power that persuades and transforms without force. But love is not a wimpy power, as a story I recently read reveals. A man called Tom was tucking in his 6-year old son one night. Ben, the 6-year old, didn't want to go to bed and was frustrated by his Father's refusal to budge. "I hate you Daddy!" he screamed in his anger. "I'm sorry you feel that way, Ben," Tom said, "but I love you." Not yet ready to say, "Sorry Dad I love you too," Ben instead screamed back, "Don't say that!" Surprised, Tom continued, "Ben it's true. I love you." "Don't say that!" "But I do love you." "Stop saying that right now!" Ben screamed. Finally, Tom said, "Benjamin listen to me: I love you—like it or not." Tom's pastor David Lose interpreted the moment this way. He said, "Even at 6 years old, Benjamin realized that in the face of unconditional love he was powerless. If Tom had been willing to negotiate – 'I love you if you go to bed nicely,' then Ben would have been a player. 'OK, this time, but I'm not eating my vegetables tomorrow.' But once Tom refused to negotiate or make his love conditional, then there was nothing Ben could do but accept or flee that love."<sup>4</sup>

God's love is both uncompromising and unconditional. There is great power in that paradox. God's love had the power to save humanity, and it still has the power to transform us and our world, if we embrace it instead of flee. But by choosing to change the world through love instead of force, and by choosing to express that love from the cross, our God made vulnerability a means of grace. And by calling us to love as Christ loved, God called us to embrace vulnerability ourselves. This may be the hardest part of the paradox to accept.

Brené Brown is a social scientist who has made a name for herself as an expert on shame. But while she was researching that topic, she kept tripping over a weird paradox of her own that led her to explore a second subject: vulnerability. She discovered that the very vulnerability

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<sup>4</sup> Edited illustration listed under "power" in *Animating Illustrations Library*, HOMILETICSONLINE ([http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration\\_search.asp?keywords=power](http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?keywords=power)).

which provoked shame, fear, and a struggle for worthiness in many of her subjects, was in other subjects their source of joy, creativity, empathy, belonging, authenticity, accountability, and love. This latter group, whom Brown called the “whole hearted” because they did not carry an empty place of unworthiness in their hearts, instantly threatened her because she herself loathed vulnerability and avoided it at all costs. Like many of us, she tried to “opt out” of vulnerability by controlling situations, micro-managing people, staying busy, and cultivating a brave and happy external image. Yet the more she studied her subjects, the more she could not ignore the data. Vulnerability was both a good thing, and also essential for true connection, and connecting with others is what made people feel whole and worthy.<sup>5</sup>

This is what the cross calls us to embrace, the vulnerability which is necessary for true connection with God and with neighbor, the vulnerability which births empathy, authenticity, love, and worthiness. We can choose to see this as a terrifying thought and resist it with all our being, or we can choose to see it as the most amazing permission-giving gift, and rejoice. God chose vulnerability to reveal God’s power, therefore we too can be vulnerable without having to feel like weak or flawed failures. We can weep when we are sad and talk about our worries. We can reveal our secret brokenness and imperfection without shame. God has shown us that we are loved just as we are. Accepting that truth is the pathway to freedom; it is the beginning of the process of being transformed by God’s love.

It isn’t enough for us to accept this individually in the privacy of our own bathrooms however. In order for true transformation to take place, the Church must also accept God’s call to vulnerability so that we can embody God’s love in Christ to the world. This is easier said than done because being vulnerable in church is not something Christians are known for doing well. For most Christians, church is a place where you put on your good clothes and a happy face. You don’t come and talk about the ugly divorce you’re going through, or your struggles with addiction. You don’t come and talk about your fears of inadequacy, or your paralyzing pain, your money problems, hair loss issues, loneliness, or grief. You put on a smile and say, “These things too will pass” or “I’m fine” even when you really aren’t, or you don’t come at all when you feel you can’t fake it well enough. In the Church we haven’t yet embraced the message of the cross fully, you see. We accept the gift of salvation, but not the gift of vulnerability. Yet the cross proclaims that it isn’t weak to have feelings. It isn’t failing to have flaws. It isn’t shameful to need others. God made us all to be vulnerable beings, and then in love and mercy, God came and met us there.

Speaking in an interview about how she settled in an Episcopal Church in New York which, according to her own description, was “so low it’s sort of underneath the ocean,” author Madeleine L’Engle said, “One Sunday I visited the church and a man stood up. ‘I hope this is appropriate to ask,’ he said. ‘I was an abused child. I’m terrified of being an abusive father. I need help and prayer.’” In that moment, she knew that it was a church she could stay in. “Because people are willing to be vulnerable,” she said, “this church is very different. Sometimes

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<sup>5</sup> Brown, Brené, Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead (New York: Avery, 2012), 32-56.

it gets messy, but that's okay. People are not afraid to ask questions. We're able to admit we're all broken, we've all made terrible mistakes, we're all in need, and we all want things we don't have. We meet in an upper room. The building was sold, and we gave all the beautiful things to the Metropolitan Museum. There's not a mink coat in the place... The five o'clock Eucharist is largely street people—on drugs, HIV-positive, or with AIDS. One member told me it was the only place where he was called by name. It's a church in which a mother whose 27-year old son has died is free to say, 'People think I'm terrible because I can't pray.' And I can reassure her, 'You don't have to pray. We're praying for you. That's what the body of Christ is about.'"<sup>6</sup>

The power of unconditional love is unlike any power in the world. It can make the unworthy feel worthy, and the broken feel whole, and the good news of the Gospel is that this is the kind of power that God chose to use to save us. Rejoice in the knowledge that we can't do anything to stop God from loving us, and embrace the vulnerability that Christ was not afraid to embrace. It is the pathway to joy, creativity, connection, and love in and outside of the Church. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Edited illustration listed under "vulnerable" in *Animating Illustrations Library*, HOMILETICSONLINE ([http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration\\_search.asp?keywords=vulnerable](http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?keywords=vulnerable)), citing "An interview with Madeleine L'Engle," *The Other Side*, March-April 1998.