

“Vulnerability”

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Text: Luke 10:25-17

I have a friend named Rev. Traci Smith. She’s one of those brilliant people, who always seems to have everything together. She is a mother, a pastor, a writer. She writes practical books on spiritual practices for children at home. She’s very creative. She stays right on top of her social media game. *And* she’s a popular conference speaker.

We text often. That’s how I keep track of her whirlwind life. Then one day, she quit texting back. I got a little concerned, but I knew she had changed jobs, and gone through a big move. Two of her close friends had died. She had a lot going on, so I wasn’t too worried.

Days turned into weeks; weeks turned into a month. I started to get anxious.

Finally, she replied with a quick message to tell me that she had been hospitalized, she couldn’t explain it now, but she was fine. Then when she got out of the hospital, I heard the whole story.

She had come home from work one evening, and she turned to her husband and told him that he should put the family first. She repeated the words very emphatically. Then she wrote the message on a note card: “Put the family first.”

He furrowed his brow, side eyed her, and said, “Okaaaaaay.”

And then things got stranger from that point. Soon, she didn’t recognize her husband. She had no awareness of who were kids were. Her house confused her. Then she didn’t remember anything. Everything went dark, until she woke up in a mental hospital, until she found out that she had suffered a complete psychotic break. She had never had any mental illness in her life. But there she was. She stayed in the hospital for a couple of weeks, she got her medication stabilized, while she remained under observation, and she was released.

Traci asked me if she should tell her congregation. She had told them, generally, that she had been hospitalized, and they gave her sick leave, but she wanted to know if she should let them in on all the details.

I immediately answered, “No.” I argued that she was new to the congregation, that they didn’t need to know, that they would see her differently if she told them. I worried that they would think of her as weak and ineffective. It can still be difficult for women to be pastors, and I didn’t want her congregation to reduce my amazing friend with all of her gifts and talents to one single psychological diagnosis.

I think the more I gave my reasoning, the more I explained that she needed to put on a mask of strength, the more resolved she became the she was going to do it. She was going to tell her congregation exactly what had happened. Traci argued back, that mental illness was so stigmatized in this country, because we're unwilling to talk about it. She needed to break the silence. If she could tell her story, if she could be vulnerable to them, and they could still open their arms to her, then that would go a long way toward relieving the stigma and building trust with the community.

Back and forth, we went. I thought it was too risky; she didn't want to hide.

In a strange way, our conversation reminds of this parable that Chris read this morning.

Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. It's one that many of us have probably heard. Jesus affirms that we should love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Then a lawyer asks who our neighbors are, and Jesus responds by telling the story of a man who is walking along the dusty road between Jerusalem to Jericho.

Jerusalem was the capital city. And Jericho was to the east of it. Jericho was a plain, a flat land, which was surrounded by mountains and close to the River Jordan. From what I can tell of Jericho's history, it seemed to be a place that was continually destroyed and occupied. There was a lot of violence and unrest, and they seemed to be constantly rebuilding. At the time of Jesus, the Babylonians had just destroyed the city. Anyways, the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was extremely dangerous, in fact, it was known as the "Way of Blood."

So, a man is travelling this violent path, when robbers strip him naked, beat him, and leave him there on the road half-dead. A priest walks by, sees the man and just keeps on walking. A Levite (who is someone who helps with the priestly duties in the temple) travels along, sees the man and keeps walking. But the Samaritan (who is a person who is really despised by the group that is listening to Jesus) stops and takes care of the man.

I have heard a thousand sermons about how we should be like the Samaritan. Which, of course, is true. We should always be willing to help those who suffer. And we constantly need to be reminded of that fact, but I'm not sure that was the whole of Jesus' intention, because I don't think that Jesus was putting the listener into the role of the Priest, Levite, or Samaritan. Jesus had us in the ditch!

We are the ones who have been beaten up, stripped naked, and left half-dead. We can't get up from that hot, dusty road. We moan, even though our tongues are stuck to roof of our mouths. We feel the ache of our bruised ribs, split lips, and swollen eyes. And we have been left there to fight death itself. We are the vulnerable ones. Jesus says our neighbor is the one who has mercy on us.

Every one of us has been through something devastating. We look great, but no one has a charmed life, and our neighbor is the one who carries us through it. Our neighbor is the one who sticks around when we receive the terrible news of our impending divorce, or the Stage Four cancer. Our neighbor is there during the terrible miscarriage. The neighbor remains, through our bankruptcy proceedings. Our neighbor is the one who remains connected, and in community with us, even when we are stripped down to our most vulnerable moments. Even when they have no idea what to say or how to say it, they show up anyways.

We don't like to be vulnerable, but we will be. There is no avoiding it. And it is through that vulnerability that we learn to be neighbors.

Brene Brown is a popular researcher on vulnerability and leadership. I've read a lot of her books and what I've learned is that we try not to be vulnerable, because it exposes ourselves to risk. It's hard to be the first one in a relationship to say, "I love you." It's difficult to be the first one in an argument to admit that we have done something wrong. It's a courageous thing, in our day and age, to confess our sins, and make amends to one another. It's certainly hard to be the victim, the naked man in the ditch, groaning for help.

So, we hide our weaknesses. We put on masks to hide our vulnerability. We learn to numb our pain, to pretend everything is fine. But when we do that, we cut ourselves off from one another. For we meet one another in a deep way when we see each other's wounds, when we allow another person to hold us in our frailty.

My friend, Traci? She totally ignored my advice. Instead, she was courageous and told her congregation. And, amazingly, it has worked out exactly as she expected. They didn't look at her as weak; they saw her as strong. She was vulnerable and truthful, and as a result, her church didn't have to go through all the cover-ups and hiding, that usually happen when a pastor has some issues. Now she is working on her third book on the experience, to further break the stigma.

Traci understood an important truth—when we can receive mercy, then we can become neighbors. Then we can become a beloved community.

The Youth are about to go on a mission trip. We are super proud and excited. We're thankful for all of the work that Kibbie and Erika have put into this. And I want to talk with the youth for a minute. You have gotten together your things—your air mattresses, your t-shirts, and long shorts. You'll be packing this week. And as you go, I hope that you not only see yourselves as the Good Samaritans, but I also hope that there is a bit of the guy in the ditch as well.

I have spent the last year pastoring in a church in Appalachia, and I learned a lot there. One of the main things that I quickly realized is that people may not have individual wealth, but their wealth is in the community. For instance, if someone dies, their family probably won't have enough money to bury the person. But they will throw a big fundraiser, and everyone will come together, and give money for the plot, and the casket, and anything else that the family might

need. They may not be able to call a plumber, but there is always a guy who knows how to do things, and you might be able to barter the vegetables from your garden for the work that needs to be done.

In other words, where you're going, many communities have learned to reach out, to be vulnerable with one another, how to rely on one another. And so, as you help to build, as you go out and become Good Samaritans, I hope that you can also look around and learn. It's an extremely important lesson.

And may it be one that we all learn.

To the glory of God, our Creator, our Nurturer, and our Liberator. Amen.