

“The Courage of Vulnerability”

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²¹So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh.²²And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.” ²⁴Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. ²⁵And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

³ Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” ²The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” ⁴But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; ⁵for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

⁶So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. ⁷Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. ⁸They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

⁹But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?”¹⁰He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.”

¹¹He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” (Genesis 2:21 - 3:11)

A new pastor went out to visit one of his parishioners. He opened the garden gate and walked down the path graced with beautiful plants and flowers. He knocked on the door, but no one came to the door. He could hear someone rustling around in there, so he knocked again. Still no answer. He decided to leave one of his cards so the member would know he had come by, and before he stuck it in the screen door he wrote the "Revelation 3:20" on the back of the card. If the member looked that verse up, he would read the words "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking..."

The next Sunday after the service, an usher brought that same card back to the pastor. The member he had visited had brought it to church and dropped it into the offering plate. But before doing so, the member had written a response underneath the "Revelation 3:20" the pastor had written. The member's response was another bible verse: "Genesis 3:10."

When the pastor looked up that verse, he shook his head and laughed. His response to the pastor's scriptural code "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking..." was Adam's comment "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself."

Scripture jokes always kill, but it does work in this case because this sermon is about nakedness. When Adam and Eve tasted the forbidden fruit, their eyes were opened,



and they realized for the first time that they were exposed. They had been naked all along, but before that moment, they had been “unashamed.” They were unaware of their lack of clothing, unphased, completely comfortable with who they were and how they looked. But when they both ate from the tree in the middle of the garden, they began to see themselves and the world in a different way. They no longer felt comfortable being seen, so they covered themselves with fig leaves, and when God showed up in the garden, they hid.

This shame Adam and Eve were feeling goes well beyond a mere lack of clothing. In fact, in the Bible, nakedness is almost always a symbol of **vulnerability**. For example, someone accused of being a spy might be accused of coming “to see the nakedness of the land.” In these contexts, nakedness represents a lack of military readiness, a vulnerability to attack. It means the country’s weaknesses would be obvious for everyone to see. This is how Adam and Eve were feeling. They felt like their whole being was laid bare, and that made them feel vulnerable.

That feeling of vulnerability was quickly followed by another feeling: **shame**. According to Genesis, the sin of eating the forbidden fruit brought shame into the world. The Hebrew verb **bosh** means “to feel ashamed,” but it can also mean “to become anxious,” “to be confounded, disappointed, or dejected.” This combination of feeling exposed, vulnerable, and ashamed is something that the scholar, author, and Ted Talk celebrity Brené Brown has studied throughout her career. The essence of shame, she says, is a fear of loneliness and disconnection... a fear that goes something like this: “Is there something about me that, if it was seen or known by others, would make other people abandon me?”

In other words, shame is more than feeling like we have done something wrong. Shame includes a fear that, if we allow ourselves to be truly seen, truly known, that we will be rejected and alone. This link between nakedness, vulnerability, and shame is really obvious if you have ever had one of those classic stress dreams – you know, the ones where you are standing in front of a classroom, or making a presentation at work, and you suddenly realize that you are completely naked. Those dreams reflect anxiety that we are not ready or prepared for what is coming, and worry that our lack of readiness will be obvious, embarrassing, and shameful.

I imagine that is closer to what Adam and Eve were feeling, both about each other, and especially about God. They hid because they did not want God to see their true selves. It felt dangerous to be that exposed and that vulnerable. Honestly, I think most of us are uncomfortable with that kind of vulnerability. We feel much safer being cautious... guarded... not just clothed, but armored up against life. Add to that the fact that many of us, especially boys and men, are taught from an early age that vulnerability itself is something to be ashamed of. Toughen up, buttercup. Keep a stiff upper lip. Don’t ever show your weaknesses.

In sum, we see in Adam and Eve all of the things we tend to feel about vulnerability – it is scary, it is dangerous, it is to be avoided. But here is the thing we need to understand. In the beginning, Adam and Eve weren’t worried about it. They were naked, but they didn’t care. They did not feel vulnerable or weak or in danger. They were completely comfortable with total openness and honesty. They were willing to let themselves be freely seen and known by God and by each other. All that was lost when they bit that forbidden fruit. In that instant, the paradise of Eden was lost, and everything that comes after that in the Bible -- from the fourth chapter of Genesis all the way to Revelation, is the story of how God and

human beings are working to get Eden back. How do we rediscover paradise? How can human beings feel the way we used to feel? In other words, our goal as people of God is to get back to that place where we can be vulnerable and open again.

This brings me to the elders, deacons, and trustees who will be ordained and installed today. My point to everyone, but especially to the officers who are stepping into positions of authority today, is this: ***we cannot be the church without being vulnerable.*** Think about it this way... in all of his teaching, Jesus never talks about armoring up. Jesus never talks about avoiding pain. What he does talk about is loving, even when love seems crazy. He talks about serving instead of being served. He talks about telling the truth, even when the truth is dangerous. Following Jesus is never about keeping ourselves safe and protected. It is about putting ourselves out there. It is about taking up our crosses and following Christ. And there is nothing about a cross that is safe. It is actually the most vulnerable, exposed, powerless place there is. And we believe that being the church is the same way.

Here again, Brené Brown helps us understand our calling to be courageous in our vulnerability. In her professional work, she consults with all kinds of groups — religious groups, corporate groups, even military groups. Recently, she was working with a group of special forces soldiers, and she shared with them her definition of vulnerability, which is “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.” And then she asked these obviously courageous people a question. “Can you give me one example of a time when you have experienced or seen courage that did not involve uncertainty, risk, or emotional exposure?” There was a long period of silence. Finally, one young soldier stood up and simply said, “Three tours, ma’am. There is no courage without vulnerability.”

I’ve said this before, but it is worth saying again. You have said, as a congregation, that you want to be courageously vulnerable with one another. In the Mission Study completed in 2020, through prayerful discussions and focus groups, you communicated a desire to deepen your connections with God and each other by embracing vulnerability in a new way. “In a challenging world,” the report reads, “we strive to nurture each other and our neighbors by providing a safe haven where both joys and burdens can be shared... we desire a place where we feel safe sharing our failures as well as our successes.” It was such a bold, honest, and hopeful statement, and it recognizes the key truth that is the core of this sermon: that there is no courage, and there is no church, without spiritual nakedness and vulnerability.

He wasn’t talking about the church at the time, but I think President Teddy Roosevelt expressed very well what it takes to be a committed and courageous church in the world today in a speech he gave back in 1910. “It is not the critic who counts,” Roosevelt said, “not the [one] who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the [one] who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

His niece Eleanor Roosevelt shared this vision. Her childhood was far from easy, and she knew great disappointments in her life, but she still chose a life of bold and uncompromising honesty. “Courage,” she said, “is more exhilarating than fear, and in the long run, it is easier. We do not have to become heroes overnight — just a step at a time, meeting each thing as it comes, seeing it’s not as dreadful as it appeared, discovering we have the strength to stare it down.”

As we ordain and install a new class of leaders for Larchmont Avenue Church, as a new year of mission and ministry begins, we pause to remember the story of Adam and Eve, who knew what it felt like to feel exposed, humbled, and shamed, but later mustered the courage to come out of hiding, to let themselves be truly seen for who they were, and get on with the work of being God’s people. Still today, that is our calling as the church of Jesus Christ. God is calling us into the arena, calling us to embrace the courageous vulnerability of Christ, and to trust that God will take our vulnerability and make it our greatest strength.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**