

**July 9, 2017**  
**Matthew 11:16-19; 25-30**  
**Vulnerability in Christ: The Source of all Life**  
**Michael Stanfield**

‘But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another,

“We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;  
we wailed, and you did not mourn.”

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, “He has a demon”; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!” Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.’

At that time Jesus said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.’

The words of God for the people of God. Let us pray. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, Our Rock and Our Redeemer, Amen.

“Which is the shortest way to London?” This was the question for which the best answer a London newspaper offered a substantial cash prize. And the answer that won the prize? “The shortest way to London is good company.”

Good company. Of course. Good company shortens any journey, no matter long.

And who makes for the best company? Those who engage you in a surprising way – those who invite you to share who you really are and what is most meaningful to you at the time.

Over my ministry I have discovered this to be true, not just for literal journeys from place to place, but also and especially for those most difficult of journeys – like from the time one enters the hospital to wait on the completion of a loved one’s dangerous surgery until that surgeon comes out to speak, or from the time one receives a dire diagnosis to the end of any treatments, or more poignantly, from the time one receives the news one is terminal until the day one dies.

Such journeys, just like rides in a car with good company, shrink the world down to the barest essentials reminding us of who we are to each other and just how vulnerable and precious life is.

Janet and I have never lived very close to either of our families of origin. To visit has always meant long car rides. But visit we always have – regularly – from the time our children were very small until they were fully grown. And we discovered something from that. From the time they were teen-agers to this day, for Janet and me, one of our favorite places to *be* with our children is in the car on a long trip – because we discovered such times to be instances of tender sharing, laughter, and deep contact.

Brené Brown is a research professor at the University of Houston’s Graduate College of Social Work. She has spent the past 20 years studying what makes for good company – what makes for wholehearted human contact.

I first encountered Brown a few years back. My ride home from my previous church was thirty minutes and it just so happened that “On Being” aired on the local NPR station in Knoxville from 12:00 to 1:00. The show’s host is Krista Tippett. The show consists of her interviews with fascinating individuals from around the world who have had a deeply spiritual impact on the world.

At any rate, Brené Brown was one of Tippett’s early guests and I just happened to be listening. I was fascinated by her work. Since then I have read extensively from it. The science is sound; but what makes Brown so appealing is her ability to present her formidable findings in the form of a kind of personal confessional. She is as good at story-telling as she is at research.

By Brown’s accounting, her research began with the premise that love and belonging are two of the most fundamental, irreducible human needs. To test this hypothesis, she amassed hundreds of interviews focused on personal stories related to these emotional twin towers. But what Brown discovered is anything but what she expected.

Among those who had the greatest capacity to love, she discovered that the experiences which contributed most to that ability were those involving wrenching heartbreak. Similarly, among those who had the most powerful sense of belonging, the experiences cited as absolutely foundational were those involving excruciating exclusion.

In other words, loving and belonging involved risking vulnerability; loving and belonging involve the risk inherent in sharing from the tenderest, rawest part of who we are – and all with no guarantees about how that most precious part of us will ultimately be handled.

Brown expresses in no uncertain terms how this rocked her world. Her mission to use science to control and predict love and belonging led her to the paradoxical discovery that the path to such things was paved with letting go of control and surrendering to the fact that life was unpredictable. In short, it led her to the fundamental necessity of *vulnerability*.

At first this made no sense to Brown at all. In fact, it sent her into a kind of personal and spiritual crisis. To make a long story short, it led her both to becoming an expert on vulnerability *and* a more faithful Christian.

Being vulnerable as the key to what it means finally to be a whole human being made no more sense to *Brown*, a scientist, than it did to the world in which Jesus prayed, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things (of the kingdom) from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants;' Or as the apostle Paul would later put it, "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the wisdom and power of God."

In other words, Brown has discovered through scientific research the essential tenet that is at the heart of the gospel – that of taking on the "burden" of Christ. And what is that "burden"? It is that although Christ was God he took on the form of a servant becoming human for our sakes. In other words, it is our ultimate vulnerability as human beings. The same vulnerability Christ ultimately demonstrates on the cross. And it is this "burden" of his that is actually easy and light.

This is the real truth about God – the love and grace of the Holy Spirit that convinces one that one truly belongs, comes only upon the vulnerable – the one willing to risk not belonging anywhere. When the risk pays off, it is the most powerful experience on earth. But it is a power very different from that conceived of by the rest of the world. And the bible is full of examples:

- Old man Abraham can become the father of three of the major faiths of the world for centuries to come – but it can only happen if at 75 he leaves the only land and people he has ever known to go God only knows where.
- Moses, the murdering stutterer, can only be God's great deliverer and Law giver – but only if he will take God's message straight into the seat of world power, risking his own life and that of everyone he loves.
- David, the boy shepherd will be king. But not before he faces the giant Goliath with nothing but a sling shot and three smooth stones.
- The deacon Stephen will have direct audience with the risen Christ but it will not be until he is in the midst of being stoned by an angry crowd.
- Saul of Tarsus will become Paul the Apostle, writer of most of what we recognize today as the New Testament but not before he is blinded on the road to Damascus is suddenly at the mercy of those he had brutally persecuted.

In example after example, God comes with power, not upon those who are in control, but upon the "weak" and the vulnerable – those who are willing to risk the tenderest part of who they are on a love that promises it will not let them go.

Meanwhile, our culture at large lives on trying to control and predict so we won't have to risk. It lifts up power *over* as *the* answer. It is a tree of insanity and it appears that we all have eaten of the poison fruit.

There is a parable along these lines that I believe to be particularly informative. It goes like this:

One year in a mythical kingdom, the entire main stock of grain became poisoned. Anyone who ate of it would become insane. First, they would become possessed by the thought that deep down inside they were not enough – not enough of a son or a daughter – not enough of a spouse – not enough of a father or a mother– not enough of a man or a woman and ultimately, not enough of a human being.

This was bad enough; but the insane solution to which the poison drove those who consumed it was worse – and that was that *having* enough would finally fix the feeling of not *being* enough. And so, the poisoned would begin to accumulate things of which there was plenty for everyone – things like water, and food, then possessions and money. But, of course, in spite of the excessive water, food money, and possessions accumulated, it could never abate the warped conviction that they themselves were not enough.

This state of affairs would be so unbearable that it would finally lead the consumers of the poisoned grain to a specific but near fatal delusion that they were supermen and superwomen, who could use their superpowers to finally *have* enough, to be able say that they *were* enough. The result, as you might imagine would be constant war over perceived scarcity, a devastated landscape, and near chaos in the kingdom.

Now, it just so happened that some pure non-infected grain had been stored from years past, but only a small amount. All the rest, of which there was more than enough, was poisoned. The king fell into a quandary. Should people eat and become crazy? Or starve to death? Finally the king decided to let the people eat the contaminated grain so they would live. But he reserved a little of the good grain for a handful of people – so, the king said, someone will know that the rest are crazy and can hopefully work out an antidote to disseminate to the population at large.

Friends, a relationship with the cross and the crucified one *is* the partaking of a separate diet of the good grain. Giving up control; Being willing to risk it all on love, forgiveness, and grace with no guarantee of the outcome.

The “secret” that Brene Brown discovered is one of which the church has been in possession for two millennia. One doesn’t become sane and truly able to live until one accepts one’s human vulnerability. In fact, Christ-like vulnerability is *the* source of becoming whole – the source of abundant life. It is *the* birthplace of joy, love, and creativity.

And the poison in the grain, as it were, is Shame – shame based on a fear of disconnection. Brown reports that a major variable that separates those who have love and belonging – those who are *really* connected from those who aren’t – is that they believe, deep down, that they are worth it. In other words, the poison that keeps us from connection is the shameful fear that we are not worthy of connection. The antidote is the dawning on our souls that it is precisely our perceived unworthiness, our vulnerability that connects us to the source of life – none other than Jesus himself – who experienced the depths of human vulnerability on the cross.

Finally, Brown discovered that those who felt this genuine worthiness, did (or did not do) three things: 1. They didn’t hide, 2. They acknowledged their shortcomings and 3. With a God’s eye view, they had compassion for those shortcomings in themselves first.

As a result, they had the capacity to let go of who they thought they had to be, to become who they truly were. In other words, they fully embraced their vulnerability – they believed that what made them vulnerable made them beautiful. They talked of this vulnerability as being necessary – of having a willingness to put themselves out there when there were no guarantees.

The late Christian Psychiatrist, Scott Peck put it this way:

*Community requires the confession of brokenness. But how remarkable it is that in our culture brokenness must be "confessed." We think of confession as an act that should be carried out in secret, in the darkness of the confessional, with the guarantee of professional priestly or psychiatric confidentiality. Yet the reality is that every human being is broken and vulnerable. How strange that we should ordinarily feel compelled to hide our wounds when we are all wounded!*

*Vulnerability is a two-way street. Community requires the ability to expose our wounds and weaknesses to our fellow creatures. It also requires the ability to be affected by the wounds of others, to be wounded by their wounds.... But even more important is the love that arises among us when we share, both ways, our woundedness. M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum* (Simon and Schuster, 1998), 69.*

Or as Jesus says, 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

Let us pray:

Gracious God, give us the courage to eat of the pure grain of Christ, for we know that our strength is indeed in the weakness we share. In his name we pray, Amen.