

Blessed are You When You Are Vulnerable

November 11th, 2016

Luke 6:20-26

Grace and peace to you from God Our Father and from Our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ, amen.

The latest fad for the rich is something called “destination funerals.” You’ve probably heard about destination weddings where the ceremony takes place on an exotic island in the Caribbean or horseback in a park. Destination weddings are nothing new. In many respects a destination wedding is much easier to plan than a destination funeral. For one thing you have weeks or months to plan the destination wedding and all you have to worry about are arrangements for the wedding party, who are all… um, … alive… Think about all the logistics that go into a destination funeral. I mean finding a funeral director at the remote destination willing to do the funeral. Locating the cemetery and obtaining a suitable burial plot all from afar. Then there’s the matter of getting all the family and friends to the destination location. If the death was unplanned, the last-minute airfares can be quite expensive… Then there’s transporting the body. Even if the remains have been cremated, you still need to look up the local laws and regulations about where the ashes can be either interred or scattered. I’m certain these are just a few of the added details that need to be worked out above and beyond the numerous details for planning a stay home funeral. Yet these destination funerals are growing in popularity in leaps and bounds, especially among the rich who can afford such luxuries.

I think I understand the motivation why these people want to throw these lavish funeral parties far away and in exotic locales. I think deep down it has to do with vulnerability, or more precisely, our strong desire to avoid being vulnerable. I mean, why grieve and mourn when we can all go on a trip and celebrate instead. All the planning and travel, the excitement of an exotic location, even the business of planning the numerous logistical arrangements, all of it allows the one who was left behind to avoid the reality of that one thing that makes every last one of us vulnerable, death. Vulnerability is a nice sounding word, but it names a condition most of us would like to avoid. It’s the uncomfortable condition of need and dependence our culture regularly tells us we can and should avoid. Hence the popularity of “destination funerals” that are just one more way we avoid examining how completely helpless we all are.

Another aspect of vulnerability is when you’re the first one to ask that girl or guy you have that huge crush on out for a date. Or, it’s when you invest your time and energy in a relationship that might never go anywhere. It’s any time you make the first move and risk being rebuffed or embarrassed. It’s when you admit you’re not connected, but what you really want most of all, is to be connected. To be vulnerable is to admit to being, well, human. We’re all frail and fragile creatures and I don’t care who you are, we all have times when we don’t think we’re good enough and that we don’t quite fit in. Some of us are better at putting on a façade than others, but we’re all vulnerable just the same.

Because we don’t like feeling vulnerable and risking showing our true selves, we do all kinds of things to mask those hard emotions like grief and sadness…our vulnerability. Statistics show the current generation of adults are the most obese, the most addicted, the most medicated cohort ever to have lived on this planet. When things don’t go well at work or we have an argument with a friend or our spouse, we come home and have a couple or three beers, a chocolate donut, or an anti-anxiety pill to make us “feel” better. We try everything we can to numb ourselves so that we don’t have to feel the pain of vulnerability. The sad truth is that the more we numb ourselves to feelings we want to avoid, the more we numb ourselves to all the good emotions we would like to experience like happiness, joy, satisfaction, and love. As we numb ourselves and cut ourselves off from pain and suffering, we also cut ourselves off from the real joy of living. It’s no surprise our society faces problems on a scale never seen before in the history of the human race. We’ve numbed ourselves into oblivion…

Today’s Gospel reading is from Luke’s version of Jesus’ Sermon on the Plane. This story is repeated in all three of the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The three Gospels are similar, yet each has their own peculiar take and locale. Mark has Jesus preaching from a boat just off shore of the Sea of Galilee. Matthew has Jesus giving these teachings from a higher place and we know it as the Sermon on the Mount. The Gospel for today is Luke’s version of the Sermon on the Plane because Jesus came down from the mountain to a level place where he could be with the people.

In the verses just before today’s Gospel reading Jesus had been up on the mountain praying with his 12 special disciples, those he dubbed apostles. When he was coming back down he mingled with the great crowd of the regular disciples. These were people who had heard about Jesus and were following him around. They had come to listen; they also come to have their illnesses cured, and demons cast out, and needs met from his abundant power. These people are vulnerable in the extreme, and Jesus knows it. So rather than invite them on a spiritual pilgrimage up the mountain, or beckon his disciples up the mountain to talk about “those” people, Jesus comes down into their midst to talk to them and to meet them in their vulnerability and need. He came back down the mountain to meet them where they were. He didn’t expect them to climb the mountain, he came to meet them. He met them not only in the physical sense of their location, but also Jesus met them where they were spiritually and emotionally. He spoke to their vulnerabilities and their deep longings. He brought good news to the poor -- they are included in the Kingdom of God. To those who were hungry, he told them about a heavenly banquet, where all would be filled. He taught them about a joy so profound even exclusion, defilement, and persecution would not stop them from leaping for joy. Jesus also spoke about the rich and those who eat their fill every day. He warned them not to get too cozy with their wealth or their food because we’re all just a couple of paychecks away from being on the other side of the economic equation.

So, what does all this talk about being vulnerable and Jesus meeting us in our deepest need have to do with us on this All Saints Sunday? I think saints are those people who risk letting their vulnerability show. Saints are the ones who first recognize and acknowledge their vulnerability. Saints see things the way they are and don’t try to sugar coat it, numb it, or deny it. Saints instead turn to the only one who meets them in their vulnerability, the only one who gives us a way out of our human condition. The condition I’m referring to is Sin. We all know the wages we earn from our life of sin is death. Since we’re all vulnerable to sin, we all meet that great equalizer called death. All of this helps me make the connection between this passage and All Saints’, that day we remember those we have loved and who have moved on to be nearer to God. Because death and grief are one of those things that reminds us of our vulnerability and solidarity with all the living, everyone who has ever lived, and those yet to be born. No one is exempt from death, loss, or grief. As we say on Ash Wednesday, we are all dust, and All Saints’ Day invites us to recognize and give thanks for those who were important to us and who have returned to dust, caught up in the promise of the God who first created humanity from dust and continues to raise the dead to life in Christ.

Among the crowd who follow Jesus today, some are hungry and yes too many are poor, but we are all sinsick unto death and that’s the point of our greatest need. My best description of a saint is one who recognizes where his or her greatest need meets God’s radical gift of mercy. A saint is one who knows there’s no other way out of this messiness we call life than to turn to the author and perfecter of life itself. A saint isn’t a perfect person, but one who knows a perfect person and accepts the vulnerability of trusting in the mercy and grace of that perfect savior.

At our best, we try to put aside our numbing distractions and pray for mercy. At our best we look to the ultimate symbol of vulnerability, the man hanging on the cross dying for you. At our best, we try to love like Jesus loved. At our best, we stumble and fall again and again, but Jesus is there meeting us at our most vulnerable and telling us it’s okay to get up and try again.

May you put aside whatever is masking your vulnerability and turn to Jesus to set you free from the need to numb your feelings. May God’s radical grace give you the courage to step into your vulnerability and find the saint inside of you, amen.