**Naming Our Fears: Vulnerability and Failure**

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**March 10, 2019 – Lent 1, NPMC**

*Scripture: 1 Kings 19:1-18, 1 John 4:7*

Good morning on this first Sunday of Lent, the season of journeying to the cross. As you may know, our Lenten worship services this year will focus on the somewhat unusual theme of “Naming Our Fears.” As we dive into this worship theme, I want to start with a story from Brené Brown, who is a researcher and speaker whose work revolves around courage, vulnerability, and shame. She tells the story of a time when her fears got the best of her. She was out for frozen yogurt with her daughter when she suddenly gets a phone call. The person on the other end asks her why she wasn’t on her flight, and Brené freezes in a panic: she had missed her flight to a speaking engagement the next day. And it was the last direct flight of the day. What was she going to do?! Well, someone from her staff ends up finding her an indirect flight later in the evening, and by some miracle, there’s a seat left. She’s going to make it to her speaking engagement after all. But Brené is full of anxiety because she can’t do her usual routine of setting things up for her family while she’s away. As a working mom, she has certain things she likes to leave in place for her husband, Steve, and their two kids: stocking the fridge with casseroles, laying out her daughter’s clothes for school, and so on. She’s telling Steve all of this in a panic in the car and he ends up confessing to her that they always go out to eat while she’s away for work, and actually, their daughter ends up wearing whatever she wants to school. Great! So now Brené feels like she can’t even be a proper mom and it seems to her like Steve is trying to sabotage her career….

Seems a little ridiculous, doesn’t it? And when Brené is recounting the story in her audiobook *Rising Strong as a Spiritual Practice*, she can laugh about it in hindsight.[[1]](#footnote-1) Of course her kids don’t think she’s less of a mom for not feeding and clothing them while she’s travelling for work. Of course her husband Steve isn’t trying to sabotage her career. But fear is a powerful thing, and when we’re facing a frightening situation and our thoughts and emotions are spiraling out of control, fear tends to take over the story we tell ourselves about what is happening. Our fears and insecurities and worst-case-scenarios can surface at this time and create a negative narrative that Brené Brown calls our “Stormy First Draft.” She encourages us to write down our Stormy First Drafts so that we can look at them critically, and determine which parts of them have merit (it’s stressful to miss a flight for a work thing) and which don’t (her family will fall apart if she is away for a couple of days, her very supportive husband is sabotaging her career).

I find it really interesting to look at the story about Elijah from today’s Scripture (1 Kings 19:1-18) and to see a very clear Stormy First Draft in his words to God! Granted, he is in quite a seriously stressful situation. Queen Jezebel has threatened to kill him, so “he fled for his life,” going out into the wilderness, sitting under a sad, lonely broom tree, and asks God to just let him die. “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” Exhausted and fearful, he tells himself that he just can’t go on, and that it would be better to die by divine smiting than at Queen Jezebel’s hand. But God doesn’t go along with Elijah’s Stormy First Draft. God knows it’s the fear talking. So God instead lets Elijah rest for a while in the wilderness, and tenderly cares for him, sending an angel to feed him with cake and water. (In other words, God lets him have a nap and a snack – very important no matter what your age and status!) Three times Elijah sleeps until he has enough strength to receive the word of God again. Not only that, but he has the chance to meet God, to have God pass by the mountain where he is standing. And then there is a fierce wind, which sounds more like a tornado than any ordinary wind, but God is not in the wind. And then there is an earthquake, but God is not in the earthquake. And then there is a fire, but God is not in the fire. And then there is “the sound of sheer silence” – or what the King James Version famously calls a “still small voice” – and that’s when Elijah knows it’s time to go meet God. And this voice asks him what he is doing there, and when Elijah answers that he’s been a “zealous” prophet whose life has been threatened, God gives him instructions for continuing to fulfill his role as prophet, anointing kings and anointing Elisha as his own successor. In other words, he is told to take courage and continue prophesying, despite the risks.

Now I find this story powerful on a number of levels. Not only does it show us an example of Brené Brown’s Stormy First Draft that predates her by several thousand years, but it’s also a fairly groundbreaking way of portraying an important figure in the history of Judaism and Christianity. Elijah is one of – if not the – most famous prophets in the Bible (remember last week, when Elijah appeared beside Jesus and Moses at the Transfiguration?). Our assumption would be that he should be portrayed as a powerful, respectable, maybe even fearless person, given his importance and closeness to God. This is a holy man, isn’t it? But the Hebrew Scriptures do nothing of the sort! Instead, they record and remember this story of when Elijah was extremely vulnerable and afraid, of when he had given up and thought he had failed, of when he would rather die than carry on in his prophetic task. That’s not just unexpected, it’s downright revolutionary. Here is Elijah, the great prophet, struggling in an oh-so-human way with vulnerability and failure.

But maybe it says more about us and our culture than about Elijah and the ancient Israelite culture that we assume important people are never afraid, that we assume that leadership and vulnerability and failure are incompatible somehow. Maybe we would sweep a story like this under the rug, but Elijah clearly shared it with others – otherwise, how could it have been recorded in salvation history? But of course, the fact that Elijah was afraid and had failed isn’t the whole story. What’s remarkable is how he responds and how God responds to him.

First of all, Elijah runs away from danger, and when he’s in a safe place, in the wilderness, he pours out his fears – his Stormy First Draft – to God. This is unbearable! I can’t go on! he prays. This is a prayer of unvarnished fear, like in many of the Psalms. And then he rests and God tends to his needs (the nap and the snack). And when he addresses God again, notice that he is no longer despairing. He seems to have sorted out what was just fear talking and what is the reality of his situation – yes, his life is in danger, but no, he isn’t ready to give up. And the difference was that he was able to name his fears before God, to speak them aloud and thus begin to undo their hold on him, their power over him. And when God responds, it is not in the powerful, violent, fearsome wind or earthquake or fire, but in that still small voice – in a vulnerable and gentle voice that encourages Elijah to carry on in his important prophetic task.

So what is it about vulnerability and failure that we find so difficult or threatening in our context? Why are we so afraid of these things? Well, according to Brené Brown, we have bought into the myth that “vulnerability is weakness.” This is how she puts it:

When we spend our lives pushing away and protecting ourselves from feeling vulnerable or from being perceived as too emotional, we feel contempt when others are less capable or willing to mask feelings, suck it up, and soldier on. We’ve come to the point where, rather than respecting and appreciating the courage and daring behind vulnerability, we let our fear and discomfort become judgment and criticism.[[2]](#footnote-2)

And unfortunately, even we in the church have to a great extent bought into this myth that emotional vulnerability is weakness, that we are meant for success, and if we haven’t achieved that yet, then we’d better fake it and put a shiny veneer of success and prosperity on everything we do and are. Rather than being a community of love that is a safe space in which to share our vulnerabilities and fears, we sometimes gloss over the hard things rather than opening up about them to each other and to God. But when we simply “mask feelings,” we are not being honest with ourselves, each other, or God. That would be like pretending that our true lives are only the most flattering pictures of ourselves that we share on social media. But for authentic community, we have to dig a little deeper than that. We have to be willing to share our fears and our failures, to be vulnerable, before God and each other. Coming back to Brené, this is because

Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path.[[3]](#footnote-3)

And this is what the first letter of John calls us to as well. It tells us that we as the church are above all to love one another, because God is love: “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. …No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and [God’s] love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:7, 12). And a little further on, the letter fleshes out that love and fear cannot coexist – where love is, there is no fear. “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love” (v. 18). Now again, in our success-driven culture that is allergic to vulnerability and failure, we can get stuck on the word “perfection.” But in the original Greek, it doesn’t have the same sense of flawlessness that we think of; rather, it’s more about completeness or maturity – so perfect love is love that is complete or mature. And that kind of love is able to hold our fears and cast them out, to strengthen us in its embrace of all that we are, of our full humanity.

To come back to Brené Brown (last time, I promise!), she says it this way:

“Love is uncertain. It’s incredibly risky. And loving someone leaves us emotionally exposed. Yes, it’s scary and yes, we’re open to being hurt, but can you imagine your life without loving or being loved?”[[4]](#footnote-4)

I want to leave you with two images of vulnerability and failure that I think help us to reframe them and see them in a new light.

1. The stump– I think this is a particularly poignant image of failure. We tend to see failure as a cutting off, as something permanent that defines us as failures. But if we take a step back from this stump, we can see that when one part is cut off, life finds another way. We can see the shoots beginning to grow elsewhere from roots that are still able to generate life. Much creativity and innovation involves trial and error – if we never fail, that means we are never trying anything new. As Elijah’s story teaches us, it’s not about avoiding failure at all costs, but about how we respond when we do encounter failure – we can rest, pray, regroup, and try again.
2. The mended bowl– there is a tradition in Japan called *Kintsugi*. This is the art of mending something – or even breaking it on purpose and then mending it – with gold. These gold seams or scars then make the item more beautiful than it was before. Yes, they reveal its vulnerability, its breakable quality. But they are not seen as permanent signs of brokenness, but of mending or even healing. Thus they come to symbolize resilience rather than fragility, and reaffirm that vulnerability takes courage and strength.

With these two images before us, let us continue into the season of Lent ready to face and name our fears together. Let us remember that vulnerability is a part of love, and that through God’s comforting Spirit, love casts out all fear. AMEN

1. Brené Brown, *Rising Strong as a Spiritual Practice*, available from: <https://www.audible.ca/pd/Rising-Strong-as-a-Spiritual-Practice-Audiobook/B071NGTG5Z> or through Saskatoon Public Library Hoopla. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York: Avery/Penguin Random House, 2012), 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Brown, *Daring Greatly*, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Brown, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)