

THE VULNERABILITY OF CARING

Jeremiah 8:18-9:10; Luke 19: 41-44

Maureen and Brenda were sisters. And even though they had many things in common, they couldn't be more different. Both of them grew up in a household with a father who was an abusive bully and a mother who was submissive. Both of them also had a history of broken relationships throughout their lives. But the way they developed in response to it all was very different. Maureen absorbed the abuse and was victimized by it again and again. After she left home, she got married and had children. Even though she despised her dad's yelling and her mom's submissiveness, she developed into another version of her mother. Her husband began to put her down and often in front of the children. In time her sons started treating her badly too and would call her names when she asked them to do something they didn't want to do.

And Maureen had no back bone in the face of it. She took it all and would go into her bedroom and just cry. She had been victimized and she was vulnerable to being victimized again and again. There was no buffer of protection in her, no strong sense of self-worth and self-respect that would say "no!" and "enough!" She thought of walking out but could never bring herself to it. After repeated affairs her husband left. Her sons took what they could get from their mom and now that they had gone on to their own adult lives rarely bothered to check in. Maureen was alone. She felt abandoned. She felt sorry for herself. But every time she looked in the mirror, she also felt that maybe she deserved it all... Very sad...

Brenda, on the other hand, was sickened by her sister's submissiveness and victimhood. She would never let herself be a victim after growing up in the household she had. She developed layers of toughness and refused to let herself get hurt in any relationship. But this also made it hard for Brenda to trust others and even harder to open up her heart. She would never let herself get hurt again.

Of course, this meant that she could never hang on to any relationship. And even as she did get pregnant once and have a child, unplanned as it was, she just had a hard time opening up her heart to her child. Eventually her daughter went to a foster home and in time, wanted nothing to do with her mother. No matter. Whatever Brenda could feel deep within, she refused to let herself feel it. Life was about being strong, being tough and protecting yourself from hurt. People couldn't be trusted and they would take advantage of you and abuse you if you let them. Her sister Maureen was a pathetic mess of a person. She let herself feel way too much, taking in the abuse until it decimated her and any self-respect she could have had. Brenda may have been alone, but at least she had her self-respect... But what about love?...

Sad isn't it? Sad how abuse in one generation gets passed on to another, creating victim after victim. Sad isn't it, that opening up your heart and being vulnerable can lead to people stepping all over you and crushing your heart. But is the answer to being vulnerable shutting off your feelings? Is being tough the answer if it means you refuse to open your heart because of the risk of hurt?

No, there is another way. There is a way to feel and to hurt, a way to heal and to love that is also strong and powerful, but strong and powerful in a whole other way... And in order to discover this other way, let us take a dive into our scripture readings in search of revelatory wisdom.

Our scriptures give us an image of God and the God Jesus reveals and embodies. Such an image also reflects what is in us humans. Our image of God and the ways we relate with others are connected. So what image of God do the scriptures reveal for us to inspire the shaping of our relationships?

Our first reading is a prophecy spoken by the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah lived in a challenging time for his people. The nation was in peril. Greater colonial powers (the Babylonians in particular) were circling, eager to devour Israel, take their land and generate revenue off it. Assimilate, get enslaved or die. All three would happen. At the same time, however, Jeremiah was upset with what he saw. When people are desperate and afraid, it is not often love that grows among them but everyone out for themselves to survive. Communities get destroyed. Families fall apart. Those most vulnerable are run down first. The people were doing this to each other even as larger powers were happy to divide and conquer. Just think of our indigenous communities, the intergenerational trauma and the abuse that turns violent and destructive of self and others...

And so, the prophecy Jeremiah is inspired to proclaim in the voice of God speaking to the people is one of profound sadness and anger. First of all, God is profoundly sad: "My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick... for the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me... O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!"... God is so sad and clearly God cannot just snap God's fingers and fix things. God is not in control or in charge that way. Relationships are hard and sometimes, if our heart is really in the relationship, we are vulnerable to suffering because those we love suffer. Their pain is our pain and their hurt is our hurt and sometimes we can do little to "fix" it because there's much we cannot control.

But there's more. God is not only sad. God is also angry and frustrated with the people. Why? "For they are all adulterers, a band of traitors. They bend their tongues... for falsehood, and not for truth; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, says the Lord. Beware of neighbours, and put no trust in any of your kin; for all your kin are supplanters, and every neighbour goes around like a slanderer. They all deceive their neighbours and no one speaks the truth... they commit iniquity and are too weary to repent. Oppression upon oppression and deceit upon deceit! They refuse to know me, says the Lord."

To know God is to be committed to truthfulness, honesty and compassion for one another. Clearly under difficult times the people have turned on each other and betrayed one another. They have deceived each other and lied to survive and get ahead, even if it has meant stepping upon and destroying each other in the process. Fear turns to mistrust. Selfishness shuts down care and compassion. But God's vision as the prophet proclaims it is care for one another, and the greater the vulnerability and need, the more love and compassion are needed to overcome fear, mistrust and abuse.

But here's the thing. Love and compassion make you vulnerable. God's sadness and anger make God look weak. God is vulnerable to hurt because God cares. And because God cares, God is sad and God is angry. God weeps and God rages. If God didn't care or if God could just wave a magic wand and change people's hearts and situations like robots in a world God controlled, God would not weep or rage.

And this very same dynamic is also present in Jesus as he anticipates his fate in Jerusalem. Just outside the city he has a big cry. Why? "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes..." Why are they hidden? Because the people, fuelled by the authorities, are full of fear and hate. But they are also kept submissive by massive amounts of guilt and blame. The false narrative they are fed by the authorities is this: You as God's people are enslaved again to a great colonial empire (in this case: Rome) because God is punishing you. You have failed to fulfill your faithful adherence to God's laws as we have been telling you to do. You need to keep up with your taxes for the upkeep of the temple as part of your atonement for your sins and your faithfulness to God. We, your religious authorities and leaders are the only ones you can trust. That's what they're being told.

And what will all this do? Rather than seeking a way of peace and compassion for one another, they are ready to tear each other apart and their enemies too, whoever they are. And in their hunger to destroy their enemies, they too will be destroyed. As Jesus also says: "Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you... They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you..." Within a generation of these prophetic words, this is exactly what happens. Jews are slaughtered and crucified and the holy city Jerusalem with its great temple is burned to the ground by the Romans.

Jesus has tried to turn the people toward a different vision. Those destitute and down and out were hungry for a different vision. But those in power knew how to use guilt, fear and hate to crush compassionate and healing energies. The people are traumatized by generations of enslavement, exile and conquest. Their identities have been stripped and they have also been manipulated by leaders who are sold to the colonial powers for money and land of their own. The high priestly families running the temple were all sold to Caesar, as were his governors like Pilate and puppet kings like Herod. They were all rich while their people starved.

So what is Jesus to do? Get crucified for love? Doesn't that make him a victim like Maureen in our story? Should he not be a bit more like Brenda? Tough and ready to call down legions of angels to destroy enemies and set the world right? To defeat the Romans and corrupt authorities of your own people don't you need to use the same ruthless tactics?

But here's the thing. The God of the people Israel and the crucified and risen Christ shine a light on a different kind of power. Vulnerability can crush you, yes! Or, in the face of the pain and the hurt of an open heart you can rise up and reclaim love ever more fiercely. When I have been beaten down I reach out ever more compassionately to those who have been beaten down. Trauma felt within makes me more sensitive to all those who suffer trauma in the world around me. My heart needs to be open not

shut down for such healing compassion to shine forth. The hope in this world is not to become invulnerable to pain, but to open your heart ever more through it. It's not about becoming a victim. It's about becoming strong in love and that makes you tough without having to bury your heart in the process.

Some of the most loving and compassionate people I know are people who have known profound hurt and pain. Angel Power whose difficult memoir we will be discussing at our next literary society gathering in a few weeks, tells of horrific things she suffered as a vulnerable young woman. But rather than destroying her or making her hard of heart like Brenda, and rather than becoming revictimized again and again like Maureen, she has found a profound way to open her heart to her creator and to all those victims in need of compassionate healing...

And this is what the God revealed in the scriptures reveals and the Jesus of the gospels embodies. The Jesus betrayed and crucified in all his vulnerability to ruthless colonial powers is also the risen Christ whose love rises up again and again to transform people and create relationships of compassion and care. The kingdom of God is about relationships of love and care creating a ripple effect even in a world of violence and hate. Every time genuine love is shared and every time a heart is opened to receive it, a door to healing and transformation is opened and God comes alive. It's not about being revictimized. It's about loving ever more fiercely.

May we, each and everyone of us, whatever we may or may not have suffered, however we may be upset, sad or angry, may we never shut the door of our hearts. May love find a way to keep healing and transforming us. May we never be afraid of being vulnerable in our caring. And even as we will weep tears and rage at injustice, we will be truly alive to our purpose as human beings in a world that has yet to be reconciled to its creator.

Let us pray: Come to us, O God, flow through us as powerful, healing and transforming love. That's what we need most. That's what our world needs most... Amen.