

## *Vulnerable God*

Maundy Thursday, April 18, 2019  
The Church of the Ascension, Chicago  
The Very Rev. Patrick Raymond

Attendance was conspicuously low at one of our four Lenten programs this year. I should *never* have called that program, ‘*Shame, shame, shame.*’ What was I thinking? In giving the program that title, I was partly taking my cues from a 2014 TED Talk by a social scientist named Brené Brown. She called her talk *The Power of Vulnerability*. Using that title would likely not have increased our Lenten program attendance. But you’ve already chosen to be here tonight ...

The initial focus of Brené Brown’s research, now years ago, was the topic of connection. She says, “*connection is why we [humans] are here. It’s what gives purpose and meaning to our lives. This is what it’s all about.*”

Her research took an unexpected turn when she began to recognize how often connection is thwarted by shame. She says that shame can be “*really easily understood as the fear of disconnection: Is there something about me ... if other people know it or see it, that I won’t be worthy of connection?*”

Brown went on to focus part of her research on individuals who have and maintain a strong sense of connection: “*They fully embraced vulnerability ...*” she says. “*They didn’t talk about vulnerability being comfortable, nor did they really talk about it being excruciating ... They just talked about it being necessary. They talked about the willingness to say, ‘I love you’ first, the willingness to do something where there are no guarantees ... They’re willing to invest in a relationship that may or may not work out. They thought this was fundamental.*”

Brené Brown’s work may provide a worthwhile backdrop for examining the behavior and choices of Jesus and other players in this evening’s gospel drama. Another point of reference, in a different medium and form a different age, is the image on this evening’s bulletin cover. This 17<sup>th</sup> century painting of *Christ washing his disciples feet* is by the Dutch Golden Age painter Jan Lievens. It is presently in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago.

You’ll notice in the painting how the eye is naturally drawn to the brightest spot, near the center, the radiant light around the head and face of Jesus, emphasizing his divinity. His expression, however, cannot be described as beatific. In his face, he is recognizably human, absorbed with the task at hand, a mundane and vulnerable task, a manual act of care and service.

This dual representation is one great feature of this composition. We are invited to simultaneously gaze at both the divinity and the humanity of Jesus. We are invited to see what we’ve already heard in tonight’s gospel text. First, Christ’s intimate divine connection: he “*knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father.*” And then, immediately following, his equally intimate connection to those with whom he most meaningfully shared life on earth: “*Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.*”

I pray it is no offence to the living God, but contemplating this part of the text I feel led to wonder if the love of God the Son within the unity of the Trinity may be the same in quality and magnitude as the love with which God loves you or me. *Is the love of God the Son within the unity of the Trinity the same in quality and magnitude as the love with which God loves you or me?* If so, Wow! And maybe this is exactly what Jesus is yearning to share with his disciples, and with us, on this night before he died for us.





But this story is not just a love fest. We also hear that *“The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray Jesus.”* Looming in the background of the Jan Lievens painting, to the left, we see Judas Iscariot. He is completely in shadow, perhaps representing, at least in part, the shadowy parts of our selves or our own lives. The painting is excellently composed, but notice that if all of the figures stood, Judas would tower over all the others.

Notice as well that Judas is not the only character in the painting to pose a threat to the love and vulnerability of Jesus. In the background to the right are two disciples, also standing. They look as if they have been glancing back

and forth between Jesus and Judas, and they are clearly whispering. A third disciple is straining to listen to the other two, as we are. *“Can’t Jesus see what’s going on here? Doesn’t he know that he could get himself killed?”*

I mentioned earlier that only a few souls showed up for the one Lenten program. Those who did show up were engaged by the topic and eagerly discussed it. We all agreed about the challenges of being vulnerable, especially when there’s a Judas or other detractors in the picture. Bullies. Cynics. Those who question taking risks:

*‘Remember what happened last time?’*

*‘You’re not smart enough.’*

*‘It’s too dangerous.’*

Wouldn’t it just be better, as most people do, to play it safe, to just talk the talk instead of actually trying to walk the talk?

But *“knowing that he had come from God and was going to God, [Jesus] got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.”*

One final, character in the Jan Lievens painting is easy to overlook. He is the disciple seated to the right in the foreground. He initially seems inert, a prop. But notice his upright posture and where he is facing. He can see everyone and everything. He sees the tender vulnerability of Jesus. And the tortured, compromised heart of Judas. And the anxious sniggering of others.

I wonder if the painter hoped that you and I would imagine taking this disciple's seat in the painting. It's a front row seat from which we are invited to gaze upon the divine and the human nature and love of Jesus. It's also a vantage from which is laid bare all of the corresponding moments and choices of our own lives:

our own disconnections, or our own connections,  
our own shame, or our own vulnerability,  
our own fear-laden inaction, or our own action,  
our own decisions to betray or to gossip, or to love and to keep loving.

*Amen.*

