

Pentecost 21A, St. Francis
Peace, Seattle
October 1, 2017
Ex 17:1-7, Phil 2:1-13, Matt 19:16-22

LEARNING FROM VULNERABILITY

I'd been invited, as a pastor serving among Native people, to join other leaders from Indian Country at a gathering in Phoenix to share strategies and models for ministry.

During my first year on the Redwood Coast, I worked hard to find language to convey what this new ministry I served was about; language that would help build bridges between the Lutheran congregations who sponsored my work and the Tribal communities for whom this region was home.

Along the way I crafted a series of images on poster board, (those were pre-PowerPoint days!); images that would help me interpret what this evolving ministry was about.

Now, two years in, I'd been invited to give a presentation on the first night of this Phoenix gathering, and I was as nervous as I'd ever been.

Taking stock of the room, I saw only two people I knew. I also saw that I was one of maybe two non-Indian people in attendance and I began asking myself why on earth I had agreed to do this.

What value could I, a novice, possibly bring to the table?

I began doubting myself, and doubting my right to stand in front of a room of Native people who'd had their fill of white men telling them which way was up.

When my turn came to talk, my throat was dry, my hands were shaky, and my courage faltering.

Part way through the presentation, this tall Indian man stands up and tells me in no uncertain terms why my ideas were wrong, and how they betrayed my ignorance of Native culture.

Feeling humbled and vulnerable, I wanted in the worst way to disappear!

But something happened later that night that changed the whole tenor of that weekend for me.

Our host, a UMC pastor and Native man named Henry, who'd worked for decades on bridging the gap between traditional Native practitioners and Christian Natives, had arranged for a visiting member of the Kiowa Tribe to lead a Sweat.

So later that night, in the back yard of the church Henry served in urban Phoenix, a dozen of us prepared to enter the Sweat Lodge.

The Lodge—its willow frame dug into the ground and lashed together in the shape of a dome was covered with layer upon layer of blankets. Inside it was black as pitch. As we stripped down, crawled in and found our places around the perimeter, cheek to jowl, you could feel the heat coming off the rocks at the center—rocks that had sat for hours in the fire outside.

When all of us were in and the flap was closed, our leader invoked a prayer and then ladled the first cups of the water on the rocks. A wave of hot steam enveloped us, taking my breath away.

Whatever attributes may have separated us outside that lodge; whatever made us different from one another, disappeared inside.

No longer were we Indian or non-Indian; dark skinned or light skinned; experienced or inexperienced. We were simply human beings who'd entered the womb of our Mother to be born again.

As the evening progressed, the entrance flap was opened three times, giving those who desired the opportunity to depart. And in each interval that followed, the lodge grew progressively hotter as fresh rocks and more water were brought in.

I'd been assured by one of the men that there was no shame in leaving the lodge when the door opened. This ceremony, after all, was not a competition. But I wanted to stay to the very end.

The prayers uttered during the Sweat were brief and humble. All pretensions had been stripped away.

When the door flap was closed for the final round, and the water hit those rocks, the wave of steam slammed into me like a wall. Weak and nauseous, I laid on my side, and in the darkness, the man next to me pressed something small and round into my hand.

THIS WILL HELP he said. I brought it my nose and slowly inhaled—it was a ball of sage. My stomach began to calm and I found relief.

When we arrived back at campus later that night, this same man let me know—with just a glance—that I had done all right in the sweatlodge; that I was all right.

This whole experience from 30 years ago came roaring back to me this past week when I was with my daughter while she was recovering from surgery.

Witnessing her ongoing struggles drove me to wits end. There was so precious little I could do to help her. I became hyper-aware of vulnerability—hers, most certainly; but also my own.

We find ourselves in circumstances at times where it becomes abundantly clear how little control we have—over our own bodies—much less our lives.

Most of the time we (let me say I) steer as far away from that kind of vulnerability as humanly possible. But sometimes circumstances conspire, and we find ourselves eyeball to eyeball with our limitations whether we like it or not.

**Is it possible to stay there, in that place, instead of fleeing from it?
To welcome it? Be taught by it?**

That's what Brother Francis did. He made vulnerability his habitus, his home.

Francis, imitating Jesus, goes to the edge of town and to the bottom of society; he kisses the leper, loves the poor, begs for daily bread. He wears patches on the outside of his robe so everyone will know what he's like on the inside. Instead of running from vulnerability Francis welcomes it as his teacher.¹

¹ Richard Rohr.

It didn't happen all at once. It was a process years in the making. But when he finally saw who was leading him there, he renounced all claims to his wealthy inheritance and took as his bride Lady Poverty.

To this day, 800 hundred years later, Francis is revered not only by Christians but by people of other faiths and of no faith around the world.

In our Exodus reading, God's people, liberated from the vulnerabilities that came with being slaves in Egypt, find themselves newly vulnerable in a forbidding desert wasteland.

WHY DID YOU BRING US OUT OF EGYPT, TO KILL US AND OUR CHILDREN AND ANIMALS WITH THIRST?! Was this, they wondered, God's plan for them?

That same question is on the minds of folks in Puerto Rico right now. HOW LONG, O LORD!

Trusting God when things are going right—that's easy.

Trusting God when you're thirsty, or when someone you love isn't getting better, or when you're feeling vulnerable—that's hard.

During his ministry, Paul spent plenty of time in prison. Talk about feeling vulnerable!

But rather than quashing hope, those experiences gave him new clarity about the kind of path he was called to follow and the kind of Lord who was calling him there.

Many scholars believe Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians while he was imprisoned in Rome—around the time Nero began tossing Christians to ravenous lions and burning them as torches to illuminate his banquets.²

But contrary to what we might expect, Paul's letters from prison aren't filled with complaints or WOE IS ME's, but rather trust and hope.

Look not to your own interests, but to the interest of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself taking the form of a slave...and being found in human form he humbled himself becoming obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

When the young man in our gospel comes to Jesus searching for the formula that leads to eternal life, Jesus points him to the commandments, and the young man says, I'VE DONE ALL THAT.

Then Jesus tells him, IF YOU WANT TO BE PERFECT, SELL WHAT YOU OWN, GIVE THE MONEY AWAY, AND COME, FOLLOW ME.

That word “perfect” doesn't mean what you think it means. The spiritual path to which Jesus calls us isn't about getting things right; it isn't about avoiding mistakes, or never falling down, or living the perfect life.

The word here—teleios—means mature or complete. And the honest truth is, no one reaches maturity in this life, accept by learning from their woundings, their failures, their vulnerabilities.

² Introduction to Philippians in the Augsburg Student Bible. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990)

When I left my daughter's hospital room on Wednesday and returned to Seattle, there were a number of issues still unresolved and I was feeling scared. WHAT IF's crowded my mind.

Then, God sent a trusted friend who reached out to me, and gave me the permission to express those fears. And somehow, getting them out on the table brought me a measure of relief, and enabled me to grab hold of hope again.

Whatever journey we may be on individually, our Lord Jesus calls us to come together in community around this Table. To meet him in this Sacred Meal, so that, once fed, we can be Christ for one another.

It's not that our fears and vulnerabilities magically disappear. But in coming together we find ourselves buoyed up by the hope that comes from knowing that we are not alone.

Thanks be to God! We are not alone. For we have Christ, and we have each other.

Amen.