

“Our Guide”

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This passage is about Paul - who wants to be the guide for the Corinthian people – up against a big problem: the church there in Corinth has begun to listen to other “super” Apostles. What I mean by “super” Apostles is that they act like they are “perfect” Christians, and Paul has never claimed to be one. These “super” Christians follow all of the law of the Old Testament: they speak in tongues. They are even better than Jesus. You just have to ask them and they would tell you. They are like that preacher in the pulpit who can sing in that beautiful voice, is super tall, has 30 years of experience - at only age 28, looks handsome, tall and thin – everything that I am not. But, I am digressing. I’m sorry. [Laughter] I just got a little carried away there.

Paul is frustrated because he is none of those things, But what Paul is, is humble. He is weak. He is a thorn in the flesh, not impressive in any way, shape or form. Yet, he tells the truth. He shows the Gospel message that comes out of that weakness, and yet so many of them couldn’t hear. It is so interesting to think about what his argument is - when he is sitting down – against these perfect Christians. His argument is that it is not strength or power which brings you to a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ – it is your vulnerability. The vulnerable ones are to be your guides.

I think, “Oh, I don’t like that word ‘vulnerable.’” I was complaining about it to John Cook. John said, “Watch a TED Talk.” (If you ever want counseling from John Cook, his immediate response is: “Go watch a TED talk.”)

A TED Talk is one of those internet sites that is really cool. They have about 20-minute programs put on by some of the most influential people in the world on just about any subject. Just Google “TED Talk” and all of your questions about anything in this world will be answered – and they haven’t asked me yet. [Laughter]

When I looked at vulnerability – as John recommended – the Talk was called “The Power of Vulnerability,” by Dr. Rene Brown. You should be happy I’m up here, because she is feisty and goes after her therapist in that video. I will give you the crib notes’ version which is a little less feisty than hers.

Dr. Brown is a researcher. She started working on “connections” as a way of finding what makes them [people] fulfilled in their lives. She interviewed thousands of people and heard literally hundreds and hundreds of stories. She found out that “connection” is why people are on this earth. It is what gives them purpose and meaning. “It’s how we are neurobiologically wired,” she said. Connection is also what the Apostles and Paul were fighting over: who was going to make the connection with the Corinthians. They would be the ones to rule that church.

So, regularly, when Dr. Brown would perform her interviews she was shocked – very surprised – to find out that almost all of the interviews turned negative. She would ask people about love and they would tell her stories about heartbreak. She would ask them about belonging and they would give her excruciating moments about being excluded.

She would talk about connections, and they would tell her about all of the moments where they were disconnected from the people around them.

The same two things would come up, story after story: shame and fear. It shocked her - the fear of disconnection. She said: "Over and over again, people would say, 'Well, if people knew this or that about me, or this awful thing, I would not be worthy of connection with them.'"

So we start to hide, we pretend. We do all of these things so that no one knows that we are not enough. Yet, amidst the fear, the only way to connect is to allow ourselves to be seen – to be vulnerable.

Here is what Dr. Brown said: "It boils down to - there are two categories that the people focused on. There was a group that had a sense of worthiness and a strong sense of love and belonging. That was one group. The second group was those folks who struggled and never felt quite good enough. It didn't mean that one had a different set of values. It didn't mean some people had an easier life. It's how they looked at it."

Dr. Brown chose to study those people who had the strong sense of love, belonging and care: a sense of worthiness.

That's what Paul was trying to teach in that Scripture lesson from II Corinthians. It isn't about you being good enough, it isn't about you following the law well enough, and it isn't about anything other than God's love for you.

Charlotte [baby baptized during the worship service] is a wonderful baby. She is going to be a wonderful adolescent – most of the time. You know adolescents. And, she will be a wonderful adult because you have provided a great foundation for her. God loves her – not because of what *you* provide – but because *God* loves her, heals her and imparts grace upon her. That's what we need to be sharing.

The "super" Apostles – like in a whole lot of churches – had to be perfect. How come in so many churches you feel that you are never quite good enough? You don't act well enough; you don't follow the law well enough; you just aren't quite enough.

It's true, she [Dr. Brown] said. Those people get beyond the "what if, or I'm not good enough." She called – or labeled – [these people] "wholehearted," because they live their lives with "wholehearted" expectations. They don't shy away from problems; they don't even fear the difficulties that are just part of life. She found that with each of these wholehearted people there were three things they live their life expressing: courage, compassion and connection.

Courage, compassion and connection. The original definition of courage is from the Latin "cur," which means heart. In other words, to be courageous is to have a full heart that you are willing to share. That is courage.

Then there is compassion. Compassion kind of fits with connection and with courage. In order to be compassionate, you can't fear that you aren't going to get loved back. You do

it anyway. All of those whole-hearted people loved; even when they got hurt they loved again. They did it over and over again.

Finally, connection. That's the hard part. It results from living an authentic life. If you are fake - and you know who those people are - you never truly bond. You have to be who you are, and trust that others will accept you even with your mistakes and your weaknesses. And when you live openly like that, connection happens. She [Dr. Brown] found that those people who were so worried about connecting, so worried about not being enough, were the ones who never fully connected because they could never fully give themselves over. Ironically, they were the ones who were always trying and never quite making it. It's vital to connection that we are vulnerable. That was the truth: the happiness that each person brought.

And, that's what Paul was trying to explain to the Corinthians: It isn't your perfection that God wants - it's your vulnerability. In your vulnerability you will understand that God will fill that void, and all will see God through you in your weakness and your vulnerability.

God wants your vulnerability to be the guide. You don't have to be perfect parents. Charlotte's parents do not have to be perfect to raise her well. They have to be vulnerable enough to let God help them, to listen and be guided by others, and to love - fully vulnerable - because folks, when she is 13, you will be vulnerable [laughter] and you will *need* God. Yet, that is where the true joy is found.

There are a couple of things that I want to quickly say that get in the way of vulnerability. One is that we try to numb ourselves. We numb ourselves to avoid the horribly tough world in which we live. We are the most in debt, obese, addicted, medicated group in the history of the United States of America. The problem is, you can't selectively numb yourself. If you numb the bad - you will end up numbing the good.

You can't say, "I just don't want to feel the shame right now. I don't want to be vulnerable or fearful. Just give me three beers and a banana-nut muffin and I will be fine." But, we know that doesn't work, because when you have three beers and a banana-nut muffin, all of the sudden you are blocking all of the good things, too. You don't feel the love, the joy, the expressive moments. You just feel nothing - numb all over. When you are numb you can't feel what others need, and you can't be their guide.

The other thing we do to try to get rid of vulnerability is to make the uncertain certain, so religion has done that. We have gone from being a religion of faith and mystery, to a religion of I'm right and you are wrong. It makes us a very unfaithful people.

Politics is like that today. It isn't about discourse or conversation, or even compromise. There is just blank, and it is ruining our country. Dr. Brown says the other thing we do is: we "perfect." It doesn't work and it becomes incredibly dangerous when we try to do it to our children; when we attempt to perfect our children. "Boy, she had better be on the varsity tennis team when she is in ninth grade. He had better be the best quarterback in the state's history. She had better be the head cheerleader."

That perfection destroys. But, to be vulnerable means to love your children. To lift them up no matter who they are or what they want to be, or how they want to express themselves. Practicing gratitude means to lean into joy, to lean into the people you love, even amidst their weaknesses.

Dr. Brown challenges her readers and listeners to stop “catastrophizing,” (I love that word. She made it up – catastrophizing), to focus on gratitude long enough to appreciate what you have, to not care so much about what you don’t, and to trust God to help you through it.

Paul knew it. That’s why he could affirm and even celebrate his thorn of the flesh. He could say, “I’m enough. Even with my thorn, I’m enough for you Corinthians.” We are enough for each other. You and I are enough for God just the way we are.

There is no shame in being vulnerable. We have to accept this because God already has. This is one of the reasons we baptize infants. It isn’t that we get to choose God or that God determines whether we are perfect enough. Every baby is baptized because we are all good enough. Charlotte is enough for God. You – even me – are enough for God. So, don’t be embarrassed. Don’t beat yourself up. Enjoy being enough.