

March 22, 2015, Fifth Sunday in Lent: John 12:20-33

by [Ayanna Johnson Watkins](#) in the [March 18, 2015](#) issue

Brené Brown's essay "The Power of Vulnerability" has remained with me since it aired as a TED talk in 2010—probably because power and vulnerability do not seem to belong in the same sentence unless it also contains the word *versus*. We associate vulnerability with those who suffer without power: children in poverty, refugees in crowded camps, civilians in war zones. These are the vulnerable—directly in harm's way. We often feel the need to push vulnerability away from ourselves and onto those who are profoundly endangered.

Yet we all are vulnerable. Vulnerability is about our weak places, the soft points where we are least protected and can most easily be hurt. When I was in school for social work, I learned that one way of describing how the tragedy of incest can take hold is that some families have more points of vulnerability than others—perfect storms of tenuous employment, untreated addiction, weak marital connections, and histories of abuse. These are soft places where sickness and evil can get inside. A vulnerability is an opening.

Brown, a researcher and storyteller with a Ph.D. in social work, focuses on human connection—that thing which most fundamentally determines a person's ability to thrive. As the research has long since concluded, we need connection. Brown adds the scientifically crazy assertion that the key to successful connection is the very thing most of us try to avoid: vulnerability.

Among her research subjects, those who were most in touch with the fact that they could be hurt—could lose, could get it wrong—but went ahead seeking connection anyway were more likely to be happier, to have more satisfying relationships and a higher sense of self-worth. Conversely, Brown argues that by engaging in methods of self-protection—guarding against pain, choosing safer paths, seeking certainty, choosing acceptance over authenticity—we actually distance ourselves from sources of comfort, happiness, and belonging. Her conclusion? If vulnerability leaves us open to pain, shame, and rejection, it also leaves us open to love, acceptance, and belonging.

We don't always associate God with vulnerability. For most of the church year, in most of our worship songs and texts, God is all powerful and all seeing and everywhere at once. As Christmas approaches, however, we turn to God as exceedingly human: a helpless baby, born in a barn, laid in a trough, wrapped in rags, and then quickly made to flee and live as a refugee in Egypt. This is vulnerability. God in Jesus is on the run, at the mercy of clueless parents, jealous monarchs, and dangerously capricious laws.

Then the calendar takes us quickly on to Lent and Holy Week. This is Jesus tormented, tempted, challenged, distrusted, and unjustly arrested. Those who love him cannot protect him from what lies ahead. The Jesus that John shows us in this week's Gospel text is not a religious robot, unemotionally prepared to end it all for the cause. This Jesus is struggling, distressed, wishing he could take another road. He knows what he has been asked to do, but he doesn't like it. He sees the risks, feels them—and yet goes ahead anyway, letting things unfold as they will.

This too is vulnerability. It is much easier to get one's head around a big, powerful, invincible kind of deity. It's clearly who the crowds are looking for, who the fans at Jesus' Palm Sunday parade are hoping for. It's probably who the gentiles in this week's passage think they're asking for—someone to rise up and rescue them from oppression, struggle, evil. But what if only a vulnerable God can love us? What if what it takes to have a loving God is to have a God who can be hurt?

Jesus is the one who says "I love you" to us first, who weeps over us, who trudges toward death knowing it's the only way to get to the resurrection, who says "I forgive you" to the ones who hang him on the cross. I don't think love means submitting to those who are bent on hurting us. But I do think Jesus' task was to be exactly who God made him to be—God's embodied love—even though we were hoping he'd be different. It's about daring to be who you know yourself to be and not who others expect—and yet still sharing yourself with others, expecting that you will be loved. Not by everyone, perhaps, but by those who can receive you as you are. It's not a safe way to go through life, but it might be the only way to live.

The lesson Brown learns from her research is the same lesson God has been trying to teach humanity forever. Ours is an omnipotent God who chooses vulnerability—covenants, forgiveness, love. But God is also one who will only be who God really is, not who we wish God would be. Therefore, God not only offers us authentic love but also shows us how it's done. We too can take a risk, can be open,

can present our actual selves for connection—and trust that real love will arrive in return.

For Brown, it may honestly be a disappointing lesson. I think she was hoping for a key to happiness that delivered a little more predictability and control. I can't say I disagree. I often think I would prefer a God who rises up and takes out all my enemies, who protects me from pain and risk, who makes love safe. But if God protected Godself the way I want to be protected, I'd never be safe enough for God to love me. The mercy of God, the salvation of my life, is God's vulnerability. Any chance I have at joy requires going and doing likewise.