

Mark 5:21-43

I'm going to ask you to do something. You'll have 10 seconds - I want you to turn to someone sitting near you, and tell them something about yourself. Anything at all. It could be what you had for breakfast or your favourite colour or what superpower you would choose - anything you like. Find a person, shuffle along a pew if you need to, and tell each other one thing. Ready? Your 10 seconds starts - now!

Now, I'm sure some of you learned something fun about the other person! But hopefully it wasn't too hard of a challenge. It was a fairly painless exchange.

But I'm going to ask you something else now, and instead of sharing with your neighbour, I want to know how this makes you feel - what would your gut reaction be if I asked you to turn and share something really personal? If I asked you to tell that person next to you what you are struggling with at the moment? To say what your wounds are? To admit what makes you cry? How would it make you feel to be deeply vulnerable? Why is that I wonder?

The phrases 'bikini body' and 'beach body' originated in a 1961 advertisement run by a weight loss company. A couple of decades later these phrases had entered common usage, and I think we are probably all familiar with them. The underlying idea is one that we find everywhere. On billboards, in commercials, on social media, in celebrities, magazines, even in each other. It's the goal of achieving perfection.

It's the idea that we can somehow achieve a photoshop-glossy ideal of someone who doesn't show any cracks, who appears to have it all together, who has sculpted muscles and perfect teeth and is doing just great, thank you very much. This fantasy is presented as being entirely real, and entirely achievable, if we just buy the right things and work hard. It's the illusion of strength being a supreme virtue.

To some extent we can't help it. It's ingrained in us from such a young age in so many ways - to admit weakness is seen as a shortcoming. Our culture is one that shies away from being open about vulnerabilities, because to admit you are struggling in some way is to admit failure. It shows wounds which people don't want to see or know about. This image of perfect strength

cannot bear vulnerability, because if the illusion cracks, it will fall to pieces.

But the catch, for us, is that Christianity is a faith rooted in vulnerability in relationships.

In our gospel reading, both people who approach Jesus for help are desperate. One is facing the death of a child, the other has lived with shame, indignity and suffering for years. They both fall at Jesus' feet, asking for help. They are both deeply vulnerable, and they show that vulnerability in front of a huge crowd. I'm sure it cost them both something. Perhaps pride, perhaps fear. But they couldn't pretend that everything was fine, and their need for healing, for that relational interaction with Jesus, overcame any reticence.

The saying is 'what doesn't kill you makes you ?'.
Stronger.

But is that really true? I think not. I think this saying that works its way into our hearts and minds, that we say to each other as a cliché when we're feeling awkward, is a lie that urges us to keep our wounds to ourselves, and to aspire to an isolated image of okay-ness.

In truth, we all know what it is to be scared. In truth, reality happens to all of us, and it is often painful. Instead of somehow being stronger, what doesn't kill us often leaves us with a lasting vulnerability, an injury that we carry for life. I know that to be true for myself. Wounds of all kinds can be deep and lasting. They can catch you by surprise and change how you move through the world.

But our model of what to do with this woundedness is Jesus.

On Easter morning, the Jesus who came out of the tomb wasn't healed and perfect-looking, but still carried his wounds. Open, touchable, real wounds. This is how he appeared to the disciples. This is how they knew who he was. This is our God who we are in relationship with, the creator and sustainer of our beings, marked and changed by his passage through life, but welcoming everyone in love who approaches him.

As much as we might like to, we can't control everything that happens to us. But our hurts and weaknesses can also be made into paths of relationship with Christ and each other. When pain comes, we have a God who transforms these wounds

from agony into experience, and through that experience, into possibilities of lasting and loving relationships. Because in vulnerability, we take all that we are to Christ and can experience being fully known. Jesus bares his wounds in his hands, and invites us to share our true selves unashamedly.

When the news arrives that his daughter is dead, Jairus is told by Jesus, 'Do not fear'. Is Jesus telling Jairus to 'man up', to 'be strong'? No. When Jesus says 'do not be afraid', he isn't asking for us to not be scared of anything - fear is a reasonable response in many circumstances. Instead Jesus is saying, 'do not let fear consume you', or 'don't let fear rule your actions or thoughts'. We will certainly feel fear, but the point is that God is always by our side, and is even able to transform our wounds into opportunities for loving connection.

For that perfect glossy image of a person you might aspire to be can't really be in relationship with others, because there is nothing there to build a connection with. But our real selves, our hurt, struggling, wounded selves, are able to give each other a love grounded in experience and compassion.

It is a significant challenge, especially today, to embrace vulnerability. To practise putting aside the desire to work towards, or pretend that we have, a perfect strength, and to instead accept our woundedness and see the gift of sharing our real selves with one another.

The first step is to be vulnerable with God. To fall at Jesus' feet and tell the whole truth like the woman who reached out and touched him. The second step is to be vulnerable with each other, and to know that both giving and receiving knowledge of the wounds which change us is holy work. It requires trust, it requires grace, it requires prayer, and it requires love.

But this is our path as Christians. It is even our path as Episcopalians. It is what gives meaning, and paves the way for being Christ to each other. So do not be afraid. Be brave to embrace your wounds, share your true selves, and find connection in the beautiful, vulnerable relationships that Christ offers us. For this is what the Kingdom of God is, is it not?

Amen.