

I. Advanced Organizer

A. Some of the scariest hours of my life thus far took place in a waiting room on a December day at a hospital in Iowa City, Iowa.

1. The day started calmly enough. It was the week after Christmas which meant it was snowy and cold in Iowa. We were holed up inside with a sick three year old who was vomiting and feverish. This is never fun with children, but it happens; we weren't alarmed. Still, after hours of a high fever that didn't seem to be breaking, Jason and I wondered if it was time to intervene. On the news people had been talking all about the H1N1, Swine Flu virus and we wondered if perhaps, under the circumstances, **we should take our little guy to the urgent care**, just in case this was something that needed more than rest and fluids. The urgent care clinic encourage us to visit the ER, a trip which at the time felt like an annoying abundance of caution that we'd been hoping to avoid. But after arriving at the ER and being shuffled from doctor to doctor, than enduring an ultrasound in which our little guy who was seemingly getting sicker by the hour was screaming and writhing in pain, we were told our three year old needed surgery immediately. While the doctors couldn't verify for sure because his anatomy was too small to show up on the ultrasound, they suspected Elliott had a ruptured appendix, something very rare for a kid this young. **But as anyone whose had appendicitis knows, a ruptured appendix is also very serious. It can be fatal if not addressed quickly.**
2. The **moments before the surgery were a blur**. A series of doctors came in to talk to us about the risk of surgery. An anesthesiologist asked me to sign a waver saying I understood the complications that could come up with giving a three year old general anesthesia. "And you should know m'am, we can't predict how children will respond. Some kids are fine coming out of the anesthesia. Others can be have quite strangely. He may be hysterical, he may be listless. He may not remember who you are. Please sign here."
3. So three or four hours after what we thought was a routine trip to an urgent care clinic, Jason and I found ourselves in that waiting room as one of the most **precious creatures in the world to me lay on an operating table. I was paralyzed with fear.**
4. This was just a few months after we'd left our family, our church, and a city we'd called home for years and relocated to Iowa of all places. At this point we knew a few people in the church I'd come to work for, but not really well. All of the folks we felt safest with, who we normally would have called in a heartbeat to sit with us, to watch with us, to wait, were hours away. And to make everything even more dramatic, **I was also 38 weeks pregnant with my second child, a little girl.**
 - a) While the doctors assured me that emergency appendectomies were fairly routine, it was also true that they were rarely performed on children this small. I'd seen enough episodes of *Grey's Anatomy* to know this could go badly. There were no guarantees.
 - b) As I sat in that waiting room, holding Jason's hand, **I felt the baby move inside of me and it made me sick.** As much as I longed to meet this little girl, I couldn't imagine what would happen to me if the little boy on the table didn't come back. If, God forbid, I lost my first baby, I was sure I'd be done for. How could I possibly receive another?
5. I felt totally helpless in those hours. There was nothing Jason or I could do but wait and pray. My mother has said to me more than once that **being a parent is like having your heart walk around outside your body.** That day that statement rung truthfully in a deeper way then I'd experienced before. My heart was on an operating table.

6. As I think you all know, my son survived that harrowing experience. (He's playing the drums for us this morning.) My daughter Junia was born two weeks later with an appendix-free older brother. But those hours in the waiting room reminded me **how vulnerable human life truly is**. The doctor's confirmed that his appendix had indeed burst that day. If we had even waited a few more hours, the outcome could have been very different. His body was vulnerable. My heart, in how tangled up it was with his little life, was vulnerable.
- B. What do I mean by vulnerable? **The word "vulnerable" comes to us from the Latin word *vulnus*, meaning "wound". To be vulnerable means to be exposed to wounding**. To be able to experience injury. To be open to hurt.
- C. **Thomas Reynolds** is a Biblical Scholar and Professor of Theology at the University of Toronto. He also is a **father to a child who has been diagnosed through the years with significant cognitive and behavioral disabilities**. His experience as a parent of a child with disabilities gave him a first hand look at the challenges that the church often has in understanding and practicing ministry with persons with disabilities. With his son he navigated churches that were uninformed, uncomfortable, unprepared to welcome and include families like his. As a theologian, he recognized that often the church's approaches were unwelcoming in part because the churches didn't know how to even think about chronic illness or disability.
1. In some contexts, the presence of persons who are chronically ill or living with disabilities, can feel threatening to people of faith's understanding of who God is and what God does in the world. It can cause people to wonder -
 - (1) Is God to blame for suffering? What do ongoing challenges say about the involvement of a good, loving God?
 - (2) If God has "power to heal", why aren't all disabilities or chronic illnesses miraculously eliminated? Do people just not have sufficient faith?

b) But as Reynolds work as a theologian and a parent of a special needs child observes in his work - these questions and concerns aren't the most helpful starting place when it comes to thinking theologically about illness and disability.
 2. In his book, ***Vulnerable Communion***, Reynolds offers a different perspective. What if persons with chronic illnesses or disabilities aren't the exception to what it means to be human but what if that which is unique about them actually reveals what is most true about the human condition for all of us: that humanity is vulnerable? **Perhaps the most true thing we can say about the human experience is that it is vulnerable. To be human is to be vulnerable**. Humanity is subject to injury. To be human means to be exposed to wounding. To be contingent. To have need.
 3. Most of us spend much of our lives focusing on the ways we are strong, the ways we are gifted, the ways we are able. We try to resist the truth that even when we have much to offer, even when we have a wealth of abilities, we are also, in our very humanity, quite vulnerable.
 4. What if life isn't about being "able bodied", self sufficient, or "well"? **Isn't the reality that all of us are not first and foremost abled or disabled, but rather we are all as human beings vulnerable in a variety of ways at different times, and we all are in need of others in order to thrive?**
 - a) Reynolds suggests this, ***"personal wholeness is found not through ability but through an acknowledgement of vulnerability that is made concrete in relations of dependence upon others."*** So we become more in touch with our humanity when

we acknowledge the ways in which we need one another in order to thrive. **We need one another physically, we need one another emotionally, we do better in interdependent relationships than on our own.**

- D. Well I start with all of this because **we are preparing to enter the season of Lent**, a time when Christians have traditionally considered the journey of Jesus and the meaning of his earthly life, leading up to the climax of his death at Good Friday and his Resurrection on Easter. We consider the incarnation, the mind-bending assertion that in Jesus the Divine becomes mundane. God becomes human. And this Lent I thought it might be interesting to consider together this part of what it means that Jesus was human: specifically that **Jesus chose vulnerability. Jesus took on this contingency, this capacity to be wounded, that all of us share.** If that's true, that the Divine intentionally chose to reveal God's very self through becoming completely vulnerable, **what does that mean for our own understanding of who God is? What does it tell us about how we can experience God in the places where we feel most vulnerable?**
- E. Knowing that we only have a couple of Sunday in Lent proper to ponder these things, I thought I'd use today, technically the Sunday before Lent begins, to turn our focus onto this topic that we'll explore in different ways in the weeks to come.
- II. As we consider how this may be true that Jesus specifically chooses vulnerability, I want to look today at a very famous story. **Jesus in the Desert.**
- A. This is the story that **much of the practice of Lent is based on.** Jesus spends 40 days in the Wilderness praying and fasting. In the same way, the Jesus-follower is invited into a 40 Day season of fasting, prayer and other spiritual practices. It's an interesting passage that shows Jesus right at the very beginning of his ministry, right in the Season of initiation, right after receiving the blessing of the Divine at his baptism, when he rose out of the water and the skies parted and the spirit came to him like a dove and a voice boomed from the heavens, "You are my son with whom I am well-pleased", right after all of that super affirming, strengthening, celebrating, encouraging experience, Jesus experiences something very different.
- B. Then Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan River and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 2 where for forty days he endured temptations from the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and when they were completed, he was famished. 3 The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." 4 Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Man does not live by bread alone.'" 5 Then the devil led him up to a high place and showed him in a flash all the kingdoms of the world. 6 And he said to him, "To you I will grant this whole realm—and the glory that goes along with it, for it has been relinquished to me, and I can give it to anyone I wish. 7 So then, if you will worship me, all this will be yours." 8 Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'You are to worship the Lord your God and serve only him.'" 9 Then the devil brought him to Jerusalem, had him stand on the highest point of the temple, and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, 10 for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' 11 and 'with their hands they will lift you up, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" 12 Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'You are not to put the Lord your God to the test.'" 13 So when the devil had completed every temptation, he departed from him until a more opportune time.**

14 Then Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and news about him spread throughout the surrounding countryside. (Luke 4:1-14)

1. A couple of observations from the top - **First, there is the resonance of the period of 40 Days.** 40 is a significant number in Israel's history, and Jesus' 40 day sojourn seems to be rooting itself in that tradition. Noah spent 40 days and nights in the ark while it rained. Moses spent 40 days on the mountainside with God, fasting and receiving the law. Elijah took a 40 day fast and sojourn to meet with God on a mountainside. And of course the people of God, after being delivered from slavery in Egypt spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness before they were brought to the Promised Land. All of this is important background for what Jesus is doing. And it might be worth noting, **all of these experiences were also experiences in which humans connected with the divine from vulnerable places.**
 2. Something else that might feel relevant from the beginning is **how we're supposed to understand this tempter, called here the devil. The Greek word used is "diabolos" which literally mean "the accuser".** How are we to understand this? For the purposes of our conversation I want to acknowledge that different people may see this differently. For some it feels really important and significant that we acknowledge the devil as a distinct created negative spiritual being. Others may feel differently, like the character in this story is a personification of evil but perhaps not a literal person. I'm not gonna make a call on that today one way or the other, not because I don't think it matters at all, but I don't think it's at the heart of why this story is important. However you understand the presence of *the diabolos*, what seems most relevant to me is that **Jesus in this story is struggling with something very real that is counter to faithfulness to God, and that struggle is meant to be instructive for us in our own spiritual struggles.**
 3. So how did the struggle specifically play out? Let's take a moment to look at these three temptations that Luke tells us about.
- C. The first challenge is to alleviate Jesus' very real hunger. ***"If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread."***
1. The challenge starts with a set up, "If you are the Son of God..." Why is that the setup? Remember, this comes just a few verses after God announced that Jesus was the son from the sky. So God's Spirit has just spoken this reality. Now the tempter is trying to provoke Jesus to **use it to his advantage.** He's trying to prompt him to lean into the strength of his position. "You've got power at your disposal. Use it." But Jesus refuses. **He is choosing in this moment not to lean into self-sufficiency but into dependency.**
 2. What do I mean by that? The key to understanding what Jesus is choosing counter to his temptation is in his response. He responds to each of these challenges with a quote from the Hebrew Bible, and he's not just google searching the text to find something relevant in the moment and pull it out of context. The quotes he chooses tell us something about the frame of mind he's embracing. This first quote comes from Deuteronomy 8. It was then and remains for observant Jewish people today a significant part of the Torah, that spoke to the Jewish people about how they were to live now that they were preparing to enter their own Promised Land. Here's where the quote comes from:
 - a) ***"You must keep carefully all these commandments I am giving you today so that you may live, increase in number, and go in and occupy the land that the Lord promised to your ancestors. 2 Remember the whole way by which he has brought you these forty years through the desert so that he might, by humbling you, test you to see if you have it within you to keep his commandments or not. 3 So he***

humbled you by making you hungry and then feeding you with unfamiliar manna. He did this to teach you that humankind cannot live by bread alone, but also by everything that comes from the Lord's mouth. 4 Your clothing did not wear out nor did your feet swell all these forty years. 5 Be keenly aware that just as a parent disciplines his child, the Lord your God disciplines you." (Deuteronomy 8:1-5)

- b) Jesus' enemy is challenging him to **use the power he's been given to satisfy his needs, to become strong**. But Jesus respond with Deuteronomy 8 as if to say, "yes, I am the Son of God. **That doesn't mean I'm entitled to power**, It means I'm dependent on my good parent. I need to submit to my parent's teaching. I need to stand in solidarity with the people of God, my heritage, my family. I need to be led by this parent who is lovingly shaping me by teaching me to lean into vulnerability in the same way God's people learned that in the desert." Jesus recognizes that **God did not want the Israelites to model the toxic self-sufficiency and dominance that had oppressed them in Egypt**. God wanted to help them learn that there was freedom in living simply in trust for their provision, leaning on one another and ultimately on God for their care. Jesus was submitting to that same tradition of trusting the guidance and provision of the Divine over what he could do himself.

D. So Jesus says no to satisfying his hunger. **He allows himself to hurt in that way**. So the accuser tries another tact, The satan takes Jesus to a mountain top and offers him power over all the kingdoms of the world. He can have control. He can have glory. He can exalt himself. But it's the classic Faustian bargain. To do so, Jesus needs to bow down and worship this Prince of Darkness. He needs to give himself over to the one who is counter to the Divine.

1. Here again, **Jesus is being offered the opportunity not to be weak, but to be strong**. Not to be vulnerable, but to be powerful. It's a temptation that has allured humans it seems for time immemorial, this quest to be powerful, this desire to try to protect ourselves, to mask our capacity for wounding with the amassing of strength. But whenever we do that, **whenever we grasp for power to protect ourselves from our own vulnerable humanity, the consequences are bad**. We protect ourselves at the expense of others. We dominate, we oppress, we align ourselves with the Evil One who cares not for the flourishing of all creation but for control. Jesus' enemy is trying to play on Jesus' humanly desire for control, for security, for strength. He's baiting that desire by offering this power over earthly kingdoms, but at the same time this enemy's offer isn't really about granting anything to Jesus, it's really about controlling him. "All you have to do is bow down and worship me." All you have to do is let me possess you. Let me feed my own thirst for power by taking power over the Son of God.
2. Once again, Jesus resists. **He chooses not to grasp for power because he understands that the quest for power will ultimately control him**. Again Jesus reaches for Deuteronomy, only a couple chapters before his last passage.
 - a) **10 When the Lord your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you—a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, 11 houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant—then when you eat and are satisfied, 12 be careful that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. 13 Fear the Lord your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name. 14 Do**

not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you; 15 for the Lord your God, who is among you, is a jealous God. (Deuteronomy 6:10-15)

- b) Jesus is rooting himself in the reminder that God's people have spoken for hundreds of years to one another, that they are a people who have been provided for, have been cared for, they have great privilege, but it is not something they have achieved for themselves. All the good they've received comes from the God they have covenanted with. That God has called them into faithful relationship with God's self.
- c) Jesus says no to investing himself in something which might give him the illusion of security, but would require him to step away from honoring his dependence on the God he calls his Parent, and the Jewish people he has come to love and serve. Again, Jesus chooses to remain vulnerable.

E. So round 1 and round 2 go to Jesus and vulnerability. We move to round 3. ***Then the devil brought him to Jerusalem, had him stand on the highest point of the temple, and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, 10 for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' 11 and 'with their hands they will lift you up, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"***

1. I like how we see the **changing approach a bit here**. "I see you like your Bible, Jesus. You seem to be a big scripture quoter. Well, I also happen to know some scripture." **Here we get the battle of the Bible thumpers.**

- a) This time the enemy **seems to be tempting Jesus' pride, specifically his pride in his heavenly Father and his identity in him. He's provoking him to show off.** I kinda see him saying, "oh ok, I get it. You're all about the devotion to Yahweh. You're going all in with being the child of the divine. So let's see what this God can do. If this God of yours is so great, he'd keep you safe right? You could jump off the building and angels would grab you. After all, it says something like that in the Bible." And He quotes Psalm 91 to him.
- b) It's also notable that **he's bringing him now to Jerusalem, to the high point of the temple.** This temptation to prove the might of the Divine is in the context of the most sacred space on earth for observant Jewish people like Jesus. This is the place he's come to for festivals every year since he was a baby. And now the enemy is inviting him to this sacred place reveal this God's power. **Do something spectacular. Jump from the building. Make God show up in a fabulous way for everyone to see.**
- c) You could say that perhaps Jesus is playing it safe by not jumping. Wouldn't the vulnerable choice be to jump off the building? Wouldn't that demonstrate Jesus' dependence on the Divine? But Jesus understands this is a trap. **To jump in this scenario wouldn't ultimately be an act of surrender; it would be a challenge of trust.** Jesus would be challenging the Divine to show up in a spectacular way, testing the Divine, inviting God to bolster Jesus' image in front of everyone by showing that the Son of God gets perks like this. He again goes back to Deuteronomy 6, actually the verse after the last one we looked at.
- d) ***"Do not put the Lord your God to the test as you did at Massah." (Deuteronomy 6:16)***
- e) At Massah the Hebrews in the wilderness began to mistrust God's provision. They were thirsty and they doubted that God would quench their thirst. Jesus does not want to stand with those who smugly challenged God's care for them, he wants to stand with the people who recognize that they learned from that experience. They learned and they taught their children and grandchildren that just as God made water flow from

rocks at Massah, the Divine one cares for them and will meet their needs. **They do not need God to show off or prove God's trust-worthiness, God already has.**

- F. So here we see **three opportunities where Jesus was invited to lean into his own abilities, his status as the Son of God, to grasp control of power, to be spectacular in public, and yet each time Jesus demurs.** He leans into frailty. To dependence. To weakness. He chooses vulnerability. And this is what he comes to model for his followers.

1. Thomas Reynolds, the theologian and parent puts it this way: *"God's redemptive presence draws near unlike what we might expect, embedded as we are in systems of relationships that thrive on efficiency, strength, ability, and independence. The self-revelation of God traffics in vulnerability. First as a baby born scandalously out of wedlock, wrapped tightly in a manger outside during the cold night, later as a wandering preacher with no home, and finally as a crucified criminal, God in Christ is a margin dweller, a stranger in our midst."*

- G. Perhaps this is what the Apostle Paul was referring to when he wrote this to the church in Philippi:

**1. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:
Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:5-8)**

2. So what impact might Jesus' modeling of vulnerability make on us?

- H. Henry Nouwen was a writer and spiritual teacher I've spoken of before. He passed about 30 years ago. If you don't know his story, after pastoring, writing and teaching for many years, he accepted a call to serve in ministry at the L'Arche community in Canada, a community where folks with mental disabilities lived intentionally alongside folks without them. Here's his reflection on how that shaped him:

The first thing that struck me when I came to live in a house with mentally handicapped people was that their liking or disliking me had absolutely nothing to do with any of the many useful things I had done until then. Since nobody could read my books, the books could not impress anyone, and since most of them never went to school, my twenty years at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard did not provide a significant introduction...

Not being able to use any of the skills that had proved so practical in the past was a real source of anxiety. I was suddenly faced with my naked self, open for affirmations and rejections, hugs and punches, smiles and tears, all dependent simply on how I was perceived at the moment. In a way, it seemed as though I was starting my life all over again. Relationships, connections, reputations could no longer be counted on.

This experience was and, in many ways, is still the most important experience of my new life, because it forced me to rediscover my true identity. These broken, wounded, and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self—the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things—and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments.

- I. **I think this is the gift of our human vulnerability.** This is what I believe **Jesus was inviting us into by connecting with us through vulnerable humanity. Our vulnerability is not just an unfortunate consequence of our humanity, it is an invitation to cooperative life.** It is an invitation to living interdependently, connected to the created world we've been given, the community of vulnerable humans we are surrounded with, and the God who shows up in sacred connection, loving us in our places of need. **Vulnerability opens us to real love.**
- J. **When I was in that Iowa City waiting room, through some of the most terrifying hours of my life, I also encountered something divine.** Even in my terror, I didn't feel disconnected from a deeper truth, I felt held by a Holy Other that was with me in my paralyzing fear. As I cried out to God to save my baby boy, to carry us all through, I felt Divine presence surrounding me. We were not alone.
- K. I also saw **Jesus drawing near as I leaned into allowing people to care for me who I wasn't comfortable asking for care from.** I received texts and praying phone calls from people I barely knew. In the nights we remained in the hospital to monitor Elliott and get him the care he needed to fight infection, people brought us food, toys, movies, anything they could to show us love and care, not because we'd invested in them some way relationally and they felt they owed us, not because we had any relational equity to spend, simply because people saw we needed care. **Our vulnerability is our access point to the sacred.**
- L. This is what I'm inviting us to explore during this Lenten season. As we reflect in this season on the life of Jesus, where do we see his vulnerability making a way for connection with vulnerable humans? And how open are we to sharing our places of vulnerability with one another, that we might experience the sacred care of one another and the Divine in our midst?
- M. As we end I'd like you to consider a couple of ways that might look.
1. **Consider a fast this Lent that helps you connect with an area of vulnerability in your life.** Do you use certain kinds of foods or drink or social media practices to cover up your needs? What would it mean to take some time off from that? Or as we discussed two weeks ago, are there outside influences you recognizes that you are vulnerable to? What might it mean to take a break from those?
 2. **Consider sharing a vulnerability story.** Do you live with a disability that impacts your body, your mind, or your emotional self? Do you struggle with depression? Do you feel vulnerable in your relationships? **What might it mean for us as a community to be able to share some of those stories with one another as a way of deepening connection and affirming that each of us have needs and we as a community want to value and validate each other's needs.** I'm gonna be doing an extra email throughout the six weeks of Lent specifically to help us reflect on these issues of vulnerability. I may share some stories and reflections from outside our community that share that could be instructive and helpful, like Henry Nouwen's but I'd love to share stories from folks here too who are open to speaking the truth of their own places of vulnerability. We could share stories], even anonymously, if folks would like to and we have space for a few people to share for a bit on Sundays, all with the intention of making room to honor and learn from one another in vulnerability. So think about it, and let me know if you have a vulnerability story you're open to sharing.
 3. Why don't we end by inviting Jesus to be present with us and speak to us about both of those things. Pray with me....

Questions for Conversation and Reflection

1. Do you resonate with any of the temptations Jesus faced in the desert? Explain.
2. In what ways do you resist vulnerability?
3. How have you experienced love in places of vulnerability? Where have you seen the sacred?