

To Be Vulnerable As God Is Vulnerable

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

Matthew 5:38-48

“You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.”
“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

What does it look like in time and space to be holy as God is holy, to be perfect as God is perfect? The short answer would be that it looks like Jesus. But before we go with the short answer, I want you to put on your ballet shoes because you and I are going to spend a few minutes this morning dancing on the head of a pin. That pin is the inner life of God—who God is within God’s self. My bet is that, if we are ever to understand the words Jesus says to us this morning and so to get our hearts around what it is to be perfectly human, we must begin with the inner life of the God in whose image we are made, a life that is perfect in its vulnerability.

As you might imagine, vulnerability is not the first attribute that comes to mind when the church speaks of God or when human beings randomly think about the Creator of the heavens and the earth. Rather we confess with the Scots that God is eternal, infinite, immeasurable, incomprehensible, and invisible; or with the classical theologians we say that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. The words lead us to imagine a God who is high and holy; a God who *is* God by virtue of being self-contained and absolute, all powerful and all knowing; a God who is all that we are not. But it seems to me that if we are to be perfect as *that* God is perfect, we will need another God to help us and love us and forgive us!

Help arrived in the fourth century by way of a theologian named Athanasius who did battle with the God of absolutes and won the day at Nicaea. What constitutes the essential mark of God’s divinity, God’s holiness, God’s perfection, according to Athanasius, is the love that is the eternal self-giving of the Father to the Son and the yielding all glory back to the Father of the Son. It is the bestowing love of the Father and the adoring love of the Son. It is the mutual dependence and so the absolute vulnerability within God’s self, he said, “...a relationship of *total and mutual self-giving*,” a communicating, a communion, and so a vulnerability.

Here you may begin to unlace your ballet slippers, for it is because self-giving love constitutes the essential mark of God’s divinity that God has made room in the love that God is for a creature to whom God is vulnerable, that God has made room in God’s love for us. We may beseech God for sun and rain, for help and health, for mercy and comfort. In other words, we may live in relation to this God who loves us and love God in return; but because this is a real relationship and God is a God whose essential mark is vulnerability, God made us also made capable of not loving in return. As theologian Nicolas Wolterstorff put it, “by bringing into existence creatures who were capable of wronging [God], God has made Godself vulnerable to being wronged.” As the story goes, God went so far as to risk choosing a people, entering into a relationship with a tribe, setting apart a nation whose life together and with God would bear witness in the world to the mutual self-giving that God is. Time and time again, God’s people did not yield back God’s glory but wronged God. So in the fullness of time, God risked God’s own self completely by sending the Son into the world, who emptied himself, who humbled himself and who became vulnerable to the point of death—even death on a cross.

You may now take off your ballet shoes, for we have returned to the mountain where Jesus is speaking and telling us to live in ways that would seem to put our lives at risk. At first we think he is suggesting a technique for disarming our enemy that later would be called nonviolent resistance; or maybe he is suggesting a new method of dealing with the beggar that would shock her into taking responsibility for her life. But no! As theologian Arthur McGill insists, “[Jesus] did not stand in the carpenter shop at Nazareth, surveying various human possibilities...until he came to the decision to adopt service [and self-giving] as his style. *He was what he was solely because of what God is*, for he was the presence of God in the midst of [God’s creatures]. His [turning the other cheek,] walking the second mile, giving all that he had..., laying down his life for his friends, were not merely human actions, but the actions of God.”

Jesus’ words on the mountain speak not only God’s vulnerability toward us but also the vulnerability that marks us as *this* God’s children. Here is where it begins to make all the difference in the world what you believe about the inner life of God. Creatures made in the image of the God who is high and holy, the God

who *is* God by virtue of being self-contained, absolute, and all powerful, tend to be creatures who laud independence, certainty, moral absolutes and the sort of power that tends toward the domination of the other. Creatures made in the image of the God whose mark of divinity is God's unlimited self-giving become perfectly themselves as they as they give themselves away to the other. He is telling us what it will be like to live as vulnerable creatures created in the image of a vulnerable God. And when he says at the end of our text that we must be perfect as God is perfect, Jesus is not interested in our being good or moral; he is not interested in our philanthropy or charity or the giving of our surplus wealth and time to the other. "On the contrary," McGill writes, we "only begin to love as Jesus commands when [we] give out of what is essential to [us]," when we give *ourselves* because we are children of *this* God.

This is why the short answer to what it looks like in time and space to be perfect as God is perfect, to be vulnerable as God is vulnerable is Jesus. If we read ahead in Matthew's Gospel, we begin to notice that Jesus gives himself to everyone who begs from him along the way; he turns the other cheek when his opponents verbally and later physically slap him; he walks the second mile even though the second mile leads to Golgotha and to the cross. Yet these acts of giving himself away are but prelude to what he does in the end: he hands his life over to his enemies [while we were yet enemies, he died for us] and, in so doing, hands his life over to God, whose love will prove stronger than hatred and death. That is what it looks like to love as God loves, to be perfect as God is perfect, to be holy because God is holy, to be vulnerable as God is vulnerable to us in Jesus Christ. It also happens to be what it looks like to be perfectly human.

This is the last Sunday in a season given to wrestling with what it means to follow Jesus, to be his disciple. The texts have been brutal for any preacher trying to sidestep the political consequences of hearing his call, leaving our boats, seeing as Jesus sees the sick and the broken, blessing the meek and merciful, refusing to use another as an object of our passing pleasure. Jesus' words this week are no different: to be vulnerable as God is vulnerable is to give my life to the one who is the other, the alien, the enemy and in this way to die to the life that I might live without him, without her. As my Uber driver said to me on the way to the airport in Nashville on Friday, when Jesus says love your enemy, maybe he means Russia. To be vulnerable as God is vulnerable is to "step out of the security of what I am in myself, and risk myself in the world that is...precisely the world between us. If we were to love," in this way, Robert Jenson writes, "it will be when we are freed from having to hold on to ourselves in order to survive." Not children of the self-contained, absolute God, but children of the God who emptied himself. Turning the other cheek, giving the cloak off our back to the one who is suing us, going the second mile, giving to everyone who begs, loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us--all involve letting go of ourselves, emerging from the security of ourselves, risking ourselves out there with all that is alien to us and against us. Being vulnerable as children of the God who is vulnerable.

What must be endearingly amusing and maddening to God is the way we talk about why we should not turn the other cheek or love the enemy or pray for those who persecute us. We excuse ourselves from Jesus' commands in language that has to do with what we think would *really* be best for the other: not letting the other get away with an insult by fighting back or not giving a hand-out because that would foster dependence or not aiding the other in being evil by keeping our distance. Speaking at least for myself, I say these things when, deep down, my motive is self-preservation. Or we protest that others will take advantage of us. "Of course," Arthur McGill imagines Jesus saying. "Of course, if you live in this way, you will be used up by others. Of course they will take everything you have. That is why you should expect this self-expenditure to lead sooner or later to your death." To make room in myself for the other, to make time and space in my one precious life for the other is to relinquish myself, to die to the self I had in mind without him, and to be reborn as the one who can only be perfectly myself with her.

Actually, come to think of it, to make time and space in my one precious life for Jesus is to relinquish myself, to die to the self I had in mind without him and to be reborn as the child of God who will only be perfectly myself with him. In these few infuriating verses, Jesus shows himself to be the enemy of the person and the community we would rather be without him. Perhaps that is why God, in God's providence, comes to us as the other, the alien, the enemy prowling around the door of our heart, the borders of our nation, the immigration office of our minds--just to give each of us another chance to be the person we would never perfectly be without him. Thanks be to God.