

Activating Authentic Community

Vulnerability

Vulnerability has been defined as the quality or state of being exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, physically, emotionally, socially, environmentally or economically. One can end up in vulnerable situations by default or by choice. In essence, vulnerability has to do with risk. When you make yourself vulnerable you are placing yourself at risk; the risk of being rejected, the risk of being misunderstood, and the risk of being harmed emotionally, economically or physically. This is why many people avoid this state. Our behaviour is often influenced by the avoidance of specific emotional states that bring discomfort. Sadly, when we fail to make ourselves vulnerable, we also miss out on some of the greatest blessings of human relations. Someone once said that vulnerability opens us up for both wounding and pleasure. I believe that one of the biggest hindrances to activating authentic community is the failure to make ourselves vulnerable. What many have failed to realise is this: You cannot build emotional intimacy with another human being without some degree of vulnerability. Emotional intimacy is built one conversation at a time and in each conversation we can make a choice with regards to the degree of vulnerability. Emotional intimacy is a core pillar of relational trust which is a foundation of authentic community. In this message I will present a portrait of vulnerability with particular focus on the life of Christ. I will highlight some of the barriers to vulnerability and also unpack the consequences of the lack of vulnerability and some benefits of vulnerability. It is important for me to highlight that there are different types of vulnerability; physical, economic, environmental and social. For the purpose of this message our focus will be on psycho-social vulnerability. Embracing vulnerability is synonymous with maturity.

“When we were children, we used to think that when we were grown-up we would no longer be vulnerable. But to grow up is to accept vulnerability... To be alive is to be vulnerable.”— Madeleine L'Engle

There are many misbeliefs and barriers associated with the power of vulnerability and as a result, few people truly practise this capability. We often think that people want to see perfection in us as leaders, yet they are actually looking more for identification. If you study the science of likeability, you will note that people are more likely to like you if you are willing to demonstrate some degree of vulnerability. I know that it is typically human to only project an ideal image of ourselves to others. Our minds have been programmed to believe that acceptance comes from perfection. Many of us have had a couple of negative and mildly traumatic experiences of rejection due to errors. As a result of this we developed a perceptual distortion that globalizes such experiences into all aspects of our lives. This way of living is very stressful. We are haunted with the fear of being found out. We are bound by the constant anxiety associated with someone telling us, “Dude, you aint all that.” The best solution for this is to discipline ourselves to be emotionally honest and take the risk of vulnerability.

Vulnerability is a state that many people avoid yet it is also the place of receiving love, tenderness and mercy.

As we explore vulnerability let's remember the all important truth: We are social architects who are called to create environments that make it easier for people to make themselves vulnerable. It is not just about me being vulnerable, it is also about the culture I am creating. Are you doing things that make it difficult for people to open

up? When people share with you their weaknesses do you victimize them and use their mistakes against them? Do you keep reminding people of their imperfect past and use that as leverage in your relationship with them? Can your loved ones say to you with assurance, “I know that I am just as loved by you when I share with you my mistakes and setbacks as I am loved when I share with you my victories?”

Jesus made Himself vulnerable

Jesus was born in a state of economic, social and physical vulnerability. This was something He carried with Him for all of His life. Think of the circumstances of His conception and the potential to be misunderstood. Think of how He was born in a manger which would have come with physical danger. He was not from a renowned city, something He would have been reminded of throughout His life. It seems like part of God’s salvation plan was that the incarnation of Christ would be embedded in vulnerability.

Jesus was in touch with His emotions

John 11:32-35

³²When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” ³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴“Where have you laid him?” he asked. “Come and see, Lord,” they replied. ³⁵Jesus wept.

Jesus made Himself vulnerable by crying in front of people. In addition to this, He had also opened Himself up to being misunderstood by His friends due to His delay. He was willing to live authentically by obeying God despite what people might say. He was also willing to reveal His emotional state despite the cultural norm of the day. Many people don’t cry because they associate it with weakness.

And maybe that was love. Being so vulnerable and allowing someone else in so far they could hurt you, but they also give you everything.” — Christine Feehan, Water Bound

Gen 45:1-2

¹Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, “Have everyone leave my presence!” So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. ²And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh’s household heard about it.

We see how Joseph cried, and these were not silent tears. Sarah Wolf writes: *A powerful male political leader is perhaps an unusual role model for emotional honesty and vulnerability—but he also may serve as a role model precisely for those of us who, for reasons of gender, profession, or general personality, spend most of the time with a tight rein on our emotional self-expression. It is all the more striking that despite his ability to control himself most of the time, Joseph also lets go when he needs to, and it is only at this moment that he is able to become his best self and heal wounds that were created by long-ago interactions and family dynamics.*

I remember a couple of years ago when my friend Ps Taffy passed away and I broke down in tears as I told the congregation. One of my kids said, “Dad, we have never actually really seen you cry.” I have cried many times but must have hidden it from my children. I remember years ago when my Dad heard that my grandmother had passed away, I got to see him cry. The last time I remember him crying prior to that

was a couple of decades earlier when my grandfather had passed away. What makes you cry? What are the rules you have with regards to crying? Are these rules debilitating or empowering? I remember a gentleman in one of my seminars stating that his strategy when fighting with his wife is crying. He said if he starts crying it solves things for him. I am not talking about that type of crying. One of the masks of manhood is, "Cowboys don't cry." Remember that whatever you resist will persist in other ways. You can suppress the tears but your pain will come out in other ways.

"Courage starts with showing up and letting ourselves be seen." — Brené Brown, Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable

Jesus associated with the lowly, marginalised and obscure

Mt 19:13-15

¹³*Then some children were brought to Him so that He might lay His hands on them and pray; and the disciples rebuked them.* ¹⁴*But Jesus said, "Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."* ¹⁵*After laying His hands on them, He departed from there.*

Are you willing to connect with the weak or do you project a macho image of pseudo strength by association?

I remember being exhorted by my school friends not to associate with juniors. I was happy to interact with them and lead them to the Lord, but I was in an environment that prized seniority over authentic community.

With which young kids do you have a close relationship? Do you pretend that you had a perfect past or are you willing to have them learn from your mistakes?

Jesus exposed Himself to rejection when He called people to follow Him.

Matthew 4:18-20

¹⁸*As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.* ¹⁹*"Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people."* ²⁰*At once they left their nets and followed him.*

Imagine calling people to leave their businesses and follow you. You can definitely expect them to say something negative back to you. There were those that followed Jesus but others that didn't. This did not stop Jesus from calling them. Some of them already had a view of Jesus because of His background yet He still called them. Do you remember when Jesus called Nathaniel?

John 1:45-49

⁴⁵*Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."* ⁴⁶*"Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip.* ⁴⁷*When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."* ⁴⁸*"How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."* ⁴⁹*Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel."*

Jesus was able to see the treasure in Nathaniel and still pursue him, despite potential rejection. Sadly, many of us fail to activate community because we reject ourselves before we can be rejected. We play it safe when it comes to building relationally with

people. Jesus was so secure in the love of His Father that He was able to step out and call people to Himself.

Jesus made Himself vulnerable by not compromising His difficult teachings

John 6:60 – 66

⁶⁰On hearing it, many of his disciples said, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” ⁶¹Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, “Does this offend you? ⁶²Then what if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! ⁶³The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit ^[a] and life. ⁶⁴Yet there are some of you who do not believe.” For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. ⁶⁵He went on to say, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them.” ⁶⁶From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

Some of us have radical positions on certain moral and life issues. Sometimes we are misunderstood and rejected because of our positions. There is an element of vulnerability that we experience as a result of this. However, it also helps us to build trust amongst those that are like-minded. If we are going to build authentic community we need to be like-minded concerning the fear of the Lord, holiness, and the Christian mission. There is something special about doing life with people with whom you share the same convictions.

Jesus was able to express his needs to those around Him.

If you struggle to communicate your needs, you will either protest or become passive aggressive.

Look how many times Jesus demonstrates emotional self-awareness, candour and vulnerability in this passage.

Matthew 26:36-46

³⁶Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” ³⁷He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. ³⁸Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.” ³⁹Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” ⁴⁰Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter. ⁴¹“Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” ⁴²He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.” ⁴³When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. ⁴⁴So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing. ⁴⁵Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”

“The strongest love is the love that can demonstrate its fragility.” — Paulo Coelho, Eleven Minutes

What are the consequences of a lack of vulnerability?

Where there is no vulnerability, you are likely to find a number of the following:

- The absence of emotional intimacy
- Political games
- Unnecessary deadlocks
- Aggression
- Lack of authenticity
- No energy – pretending drains you
- Anxiety – the fear of being found out creates an anxiety gap
- Low trust levels
- Lack of chemistry and connection

“What happens when people open their hearts? They get better.” — Haruki Murakami.

I believe we need to learn to talk.

Vulnerability Assessment

1. Can you allow others, especially those you deem to be junior, to influence you to change your mind?
2. Can you graciously lose an argument?
3. Are you comfortable associating with the weak and marginalized at the risk of being unfavourably branded?
4. Can you easily articulate your gaps (Skills, Morally, etc)
5. Can you share with people your failures just as well as your successes? (Paul said I will boast of my weaknesses)
6. Can you express your fears and inadequacies without shame?
7. Are you able to confess your sins to relevant parties?
8. Are you free from having to be the hero of your own stories?
9. Have you uprooted the spirit of independence from your life?
10. Are you able to ask for forgiveness?
11. Do you apologize when you need to?
12. Are you able to talk about your imperfect past and the lessons you have learnt?
13. Are you able to show any form of perceived weakness, such as crying?
14. Are you able to articulate emotional self-awareness?

“Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy — the experiences that make us the most vulnerable.” Brene Brown

If we want to experience authentic community we must be willing to embrace vulnerability.