**Christmas Eve 2013**

In thirty three years of ministry, I have done quite a few baptisms of babies. I am proud to say, I have never dropped a single one. Maybe you take that as a given, but until last Easter I could also say that in thirty three years of ministry, I have never tipped over the communion pitcher during worship. Unfortunately, on that Easter morning, the edge of my robe caught the edge of the pitcher and over it went. Luckily, I moved a little quicker than I typically do when such things happen. My wife Michele will tell you that if something spills at home, it is like my mind goes into slow motion, “oh look, there is milk spilling out all over the floor,” while in the meantime Michele is running to get a rag. Last Easter, my mind jumped into action and I grabbed the pitcher, keeping at least enough of the juice so that we could still have communion. I also did not say anything over the mike that I might regret. I suppose, I could have gotten away with saying Jesus, with most folks thinking it was part of the liturgy. Instead, I kept my calm as did the communion servers who quickly helped clean up the mess and it all turned out O.K.

 Dropping babies is another thing and I do think about it when I do baptism. I hope in this admission, I haven’t dissuaded anyone who may be thinking about having a child baptized. We all know babies are vulnerable, which is what makes us worry about such things. When our son Aaron was born he had a tendency toward croup. One minute he was fine, but then he would start to cry and before you knew it he was gasping for air. His stomach looked like it was touching his back. For young parents, it was frightening. Down to the ER we went.

 Parents know how vulnerable babies are and the anxiety we feel about their vulnerability continues right on through grade school, high school, college and into adulthood. It never really stops. We are a long way from the time of Jesus birth. Much has changed since Mary and Joseph laid Jesus in a manger, but one thing that has not changed is the vulnerability of babies. They were vulnerable than and they are vulnerable now. The other thing that has not changed is the vulnerability of parents. We focus on the vulnerability of babies as if that is the end of the story and they are the only ones for whom the uncertainty and precariousness of life is a reality. But, any parents who are being even half honest with themselves will tell you just how vulnerable they feel. How many ways can you possibly mess this up?

You are barely out of the hospital and you have to figure out a car seat, hoping that you have it installed correctly, that you are properly putting this precious child into the car. You feel vulnerable. There are so many new and uncertain questions. Should you let your baby cry? How long should you let your baby cry? Why is your baby crying in the first place? Is it a poopy diaper? Is she hungry? Is she sick? How do you know these things? You feel vulnerable. Your child grows and wants to go outside and play. When do you let her play on her own? When do you let him ride his bike around the corner by himself? When do you let her cross the street on her own? You feel vulnerable. Before you know it you are saying goodbye to your child who is off for college or some other adventure. Guess what, you still feel vulnerable, like life is out of your control, things can happen that you have no ability to keep from happening.

We are getting a little ahead of the Mary and Joseph story, but rest assured, Mary and Joseph feel vulnerable. It is worth remembering that both Luke’s and Matthew’s story about Jesus is more theology than it is history. Numerous Biblical scholars have pointed out that from a historical point of view; Luke’s telling of the birth of Jesus has numerous factual errors. There was, for example, no empire wide census under Augustus. Quirinus did not become Governor of Syria until Jesus was around 6 years old. Luke and Matthew are unconcerned about the historical facts, including the virginity of Mary. They are concerned about the theology of the story. It is their intention for this story to tell us about who we are as human beings and who God is, this Emanuel, we proclaim. Theologically, this is a story about the vulnerability of Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus and because it is theology, it is also a story about our vulnerability, not just theirs.

Theologically, this is a universal story whose implications are worldwide. Emperor Augustus and Qurinius are the ones whose power and reach is, as Luke says, worldwide. Like Wal-Mart, McDonalds, Exxon Oil or any major international corporation, the Emperor and Quirinius see themselves having a global reach; every aspect of life comes under their sphere of influence. This is the theology of the story. There are powers at work for Joseph and Mary over which they have no control. These powers, economic and political can make decisions that dramatically impact their lives and there is nothing they can do about it. They are vulnerable as are we. Both Luke and Matthew, dramatize this vulnerability by making it clear that Mary and Joseph are among the poor. When Joseph is told there is no room for them in the Inn, it has nothing to do with Joseph having forgotten his visa card or having failed to make reservations in advance, it is Luke’s way of saying, the holy family is found where vulnerability is at its greatest.

Theologically, Luke and Matthew also make clear that the standard, dominant response to vulnerability is to see it as something which must be overcome. At the time of Jesus birth, the Emperor has claimed for himself titles such as Savior of the world, Son of God, and Prince of Peace. All of these titles are claimed by and for the Emperor by virtue of the Emperor being the one who above all others is in control. The emperor brings peace through the violent victory of his military, by demonstrating he is in charge. There is no room in the theology of Empire for vulnerability, which is why Herod seeks to learn the identity of the baby Jesus, so that the vulnerability represented by this child can be stamped out.

Because this story is theology and not an effort to accurately record historical events we can begin to recognize that we too like the Emperor, like Quirinius, like Herod have our own resistance to vulnerability. Recently author Brene Brown was on the MPR hosted radio program On Being with Krista Tippit. Brene Brown is the author of the book “Courage to be Vulnerable.” Brene Brown pointed out that resistance to vulnerability effects men and women alike. For women, she says, resistance to vulnerability is often based on a desire to be perfect and for men resistance to vulnerability is located in the desire never to be seen as week. Both men and women, she says, can feel a deep level of shame if their imperfection and their weakness is exposed. Vulnerability, it is felt, must be avoided.

Yet, it is the avoidance of vulnerability that keeps a young child from raising her hand in class, even when she knows the answer. What if I am wrong or the teacher doesn’t call on me? It is the avoidance of vulnerability that keeps us from trying things that we have never done before and we may not be good at? It is the avoidance of vulnerability that makes us hesitant to simply sit with someone who is facing a loss for which there simply are no easy answers. It is the avoidance of vulnerability that often stands in the way of reaching across barriers of race, culture, gender identity, and gender. It is the avoidance of vulnerability that makes it so painfully difficult for those of us who are white to look at how something like skin color has been used to exploit and dominate. It is the avoidance of vulnerability that keeps Israel and the Palestinians at an impasse, members of the U.S. Senate reluctant to negotiate with Iran or any number of situations in our world where violence is seen as the only answer, because the uncertainty of vulnerability is weakness.

Brene Brown says that based on her research, she has come to the conclusion that vulnerability is the key for those who, as she sees it, live life wholeheartedly. These are people who at their core believe they are worthy of love. It is O.K. to make mistakes because you are loved. It is O.K. to fail because you are loved. It is O.K. to be wrong because you are loved and you know you belong. No matter what happens, being loved and a sense of belonging are non-negotiable. It is out of this deep sense of being loved and belonging that we are freed up to take chances, to live with uncertainty, to take risks without knowing the outcome.

Brene Brown said that “when she asks people what is vulnerability the answers were things like sitting with my wife who has Stage II breast cancer and trying to make plans for our child, my first date after my divorce, saying I love you first, asking for a raise, sending my child to school and being enthusiastic about his desire to be first chair in the orchestra, even though you know that probably isn’t going to happen.”

Brown goes on to say, vulnerability is courage, it is about the willingness to show up and be seen in our lives….I cannot find a single example of courage, moral courage, spiritual courage, leadership courage, relational courage….that was not born completely out of vulnerability.”

I would add that in recent weeks we have been celebrating the life of a man who has shown the world the tremendous strength of vulnerability, Nelson Mandela. Rather than turn to hatred for his persecutors, he embraced the vulnerability of love. Rather than turn to retribution for those who had caused so much suffering in South Africa, he embraced the vulnerability of forgiveness. Rather than rely on violence for his final victory, Mandela embraced the vulnerability of peace through compassion.

 The story of Jesus birth is a theological story intended to shed light on who we are and who God is for us and with us. In this story we have the Emperor who forsakes vulnerability for violence, claiming to be the Prince of Peace. In sharp contrast to the Emperor, Luke and Matthew give us a vulnerable family and a child, who Luke says is how God is present in this world, the True Prince of Peace, the Savior, the Child of God. This is a courageous family.

 There is no escaping the vulnerability inherent in baptism. There is, of course, the possibility the Pastor might accidently drop her. But, the real vulnerability comes from being brought up in a way of life where you are invited to show up, each and every day, with nothing guaranteed, other than the promise you are loved by God.