

I have often shared what I truly believe...That Pastor Diane and I have the best job in the world! What other career, do couples come and before consulting their family or friends they ask if we will join them in Marriage? Or when they have a new child in the family, before the grandparents, I am able to hold and carry the child? When they are a searcher, looking for who and what to believe in, I have the opportunity to have my faith tested and grow by walking with them. And when they have buried their spouse, their siblings and friends, I am able to hold their hand walking them over to Jesus, then lifting up their memory and life before the community. Most often this becomes a time to reflect upon their lives, confessing deep secrets, sharing what have been most important.

While cremation and columbarium make sense here in the desert, one thing I miss, are the Epitaphs on Headstones in Cemeteries...Beloved Mother, Rest in Peace,...Here lies an Atheist, All dressed up and nowhere to go.... I will not be right back after these messages...

If you knew you were about to die, what would you want to tell the people you love?

What cherished hope or dream would you share?

What urgent piece of advice would you offer?

The Gospel of John names Jesus' last instructions.

Here it is not telling Judas: "DO quickly what you must."

The blessing to his mother Mary and the disciple John "Woman here is your son, John here is Mother."

Or the words to God and the Universe: "My God, my God, Why have you forsaken me?"

No Parable, no pithy saying, no instruction about which Church to go to, or how to live a moral life...

Instead, A new Commandment, as important as Moses' 10 Commandments, Jesus' deepest desire for those who followed: "Love one another, just as I have loved you. Others will know you by your love."

What is staggering, is to recognize that we have violated this Commandment more frequently than Murder, Adultery, Lying, or Keeping Sabbath! This new Command is so simple a toddler can recite, yet so profound most believers are embarrassed how poorly we understand or apply it, even forgetting that it is a Commandment. This is not a suggestion. Not a sermon illustration. These are Jesus' Final Command!

There are reasons why we fail to obey Jesus' Dying Wish: Love makes us Vulnerable. Love requires trust; and we have been trained by experience to be suspicious.

Love spills over margins, boundaries and affects everything else in our lives, and we like our borders.

Love takes effort, and time, discipline and often requires our transformation, and as much as we want to believe in God, that's a lot of work.

While preachers often name differing kinds of LOVE, I have often thought there are two different kinds of COURAGE. One is immediate and situational, a person who in a moment of extreme need summons the courage to overcome danger. When a by-stander rushes into oncoming traffic to save someone, a veteran who acts with valor. Ultimately this is not a spur of the moment action without thought, but display of character, beliefs, relationships and patterns of behavior.

There is a second kind of courage, the COURAGE TO LOVE that is not merely displayed in a sudden moment or act, but is anticipating a daunting, frightening challenge and not turning away, choosing to meet life head on. It is this second kind of courage that Jesus displays in our passage from LUKE. The Pharisees come warning, telling Jesus to run and save his life, and Jesus refuses. You have to wonder about those Pharisees... Were they like Nicodemus, Teachers of the Law who wanted to but did not understand? Were they sent by King Herod? Were the Pharisees covering all their bets by being close to Herod and also trying

to protect Jesus? Instead, Jesus keeps on the road to his goal: Jerusalem known as the City of David, of Solomon's Temple, is also remembered for the death of Prophets, and so many wars.

Decades ago there was a book by a French Author made into a movie called "The Last Temptation of Christ" that really was not very good, it amassed a number of people going to see it because of protests and hype about it. The author's idea was that Jesus had the power to climb down off of the Cross and choose to not die. What that story violated, was the Steadfast Courage, what used to be called: FIDELITY of Jesus, in moving relentlessly forward to Jerusalem, knowing it was to his Cross on behalf of the world he loved so much.

To anticipate challenge and suffering and NOT look away is by definition to make oneself vulnerable for the sake of others. What Jesus displays is that VULNERABILITY is essential to courage in the Christian life, challenging us to discover the peculiar strength of being open to the needs of those around us.

At this time of year we have a brood of quail that come out of their nest, and the mother hen definitely displays the image Jesus describes. She leads the way, but regularly stops to bring the whole brood under her wings. Perhaps REALITY is harder to believe than Fiction, but I wonder if Luke is giving us a double reminder of who Herod is? First, like Jesus, Herod was descended from David and Solomon! Like so many of the Kings of Israel, he was a BAD SHEPHERD. Like his father the King Herod when Jesus was born, he was threatened by Jesus, who sought to have him killed. In contrast to King Herod whom Jesus calls "THAT FOX", Jesus describes himself as being like a Hen protecting her chicks.

Comparing God and himself to a Mother Hen is a provocative image of unparalleled VULNERABILITY. Becoming a Parent I discovered the moment our eldest child was born, is to be held captive to fate and to their destiny. You never stop being a parent, worrying and trusting. There is no way to protect your children from all the threats life presents, nor should you. Which only leaves parents profoundly vulnerable, promising a level of suffering no one would endure if we had not bound ourselves so fully by blood and experience to your child. As a friend once said: A Parent is only as happy as their least happy child; now that is vulnerability.

It is this characteristic, the COURAGE TO LOVE that helps us to understand God's choice to become one with us, and to identify with all the suffering of all the people of the world by the Incarnation. At the same time, that it is our vulnerability that spurs our courage and nourishes our strength, simply because you can and you choose you will act for those you love, even where you would never do the same for yourself. So Jesus continues on toward the Cross, NOT to make himself a Hero or Fearless; NOT to make a sacrifice for human sin to a judgmental God. Jesus marches toward Jerusalem because of his LOVE for the people around him, a Parent's Love that will stop at nothing to care for their children.

What would our community, our world look like, if individually and collectively we chose to live wholeheartedly with the COURAGE TO LOVE, naming our vulnerabilities in a CROSS-SHAPED CONFIDENCE that God is with us, and God has given us sufficient resources including one another. What is most awe-inspiring is that GOD MEETS US MOST RELIABLY IN PLACES OF OUR GREATEST VULNERABILITY! Where we are most Vulnerable, whether is our relationship of marriage, our children, grandchildren, our work, peer pressures: God is with us, and through God's grace by embracing our courage to love we may discover more of who we were Called to be. To choose to be VULNERABLE is a courageous thing.