

Birthday Suits

Rev. Andrew Harris · October 10, 2021

One of my preaching professors told me two things: not to use personal stories in sermons and not to ask rhetorical questions. But aren't rules meant to be broken?

Today is my son, Cooper's first birthday. The reason my professor told me not to use personal stories in sermons is because that first birthday means a whole lot to me, but not as much to most of you. We always imbue our own personal stories with a lot of extra meaning, and they don't always translate for others. But I found it hard to prepare for this sermon this week, a task which demands a lot of reflection, without thinking about this big moment in my life, my family's life, my son's life. Our scripture today tells us the Word of God is living and active. So, I decided I must listen to the Word that speaking through my life right now, the Word that I hear through this important moment. And I hear that word in verse 13 of the 4th chapter of Hebrews.

"Before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one whom we must render account." This image brings me back to the delivery room, a year ago today, when Cooper came into the world, naked and laid bare, but after a long, difficult, and quite scary labor, I felt as if I too were naked and laid bare.

In moments like this we take a great risk - the risk of love. The risk of loving with all our hearts and souls something so fragile and vulnerable. When we take that risk of love, we become vulnerable ourselves. I was as vulnerable as that tiny grayish colored baby, more limp than I thought he would be, unable to cry because of fluid in his lungs and throat.

A year later we know this story has a happy ending, but before the nurses worked their magic my entire being hung in the balance. As I recount this story, I'm thinking especially of all those people, perhaps some of you listening today, whose worlds were shattered in moments like this. This is the risk of love, naked and laid bare. It's a risk that God asks us to take. It's a risk that God takes, as well. In Jesus, God the One and Holy Creator of the universe, the divine one who formed the stars and galaxies from the chaotic stuff of the universe, the one who is the ground of all being, God becomes naked and laid bare.

Each Christmas we sing the hymn *Away in a Manger*. "The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes, but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes." I always thought this line was kind of stupid, as if Jesus crying as a baby somehow diminishes his greatness, his divinity. The important part of Jesus's birth, I thought, is that God becomes *human*, which any parent will tell you includes crying as a baby.

But then my son was born, and he was silent. I thought babies were supposed to cry the moment they were born. A pang of terror seized my heart. I felt like an anchor was pulling me through the floor. At the same time, I thought "What do I know about babies. Trust the nurses and let them do what they need to do." They carried him, naked and laid bare, to a table in the corner of the room and got to work. In that moment, Ally and I were raw nerves, naked and laid bare, open to the world in the deepest and truest sense. We were completely powerless, like a feather blowing on the breeze, or a seashell caught in an ocean current.

I don't remember the exact quantity of fluid they removed from his throat and lungs, but I remember that they were surprised at how much it was. Finally, he made a tiny noise, more of a whimper than a cry. And I'll never hear *Away in a Manger* the same way again.

The author of the hymn intended to show Jesus's greatness - that Jesus wasn't like every other baby; that Jesus wasn't weak and vulnerable, naked and laid bare. But now all I think is that maybe baby Jesus had fluid in his lungs. Maybe he was grayish, and limp, and alarmingly quiet, and God, along with Mary and Joseph, knew true vulnerability, naked and laid bare, having taken

the risk of love – a love that at any moment can pull our hearts down to the deepest depths of sorrow or lift us to the most sublime joys. We cannot truly love, like God loves, without making ourselves vulnerable.

God calls us to love, which requires us to be vulnerable. But the entire course of human history can be marked as long desperate drive to move from a state of vulnerability to one of invulnerability. Vulnerability is viewed not as a natural state of being, but a flaw, a bug in the system to be worked out, eliminated, eradicated.

We often have the false perception that humanity begins with the Neolithic revolution, the dawning of agriculture which led to surpluses, then cities, then civilizations, which led to history, and armies, and markets, and all the rest which we today find synonymous with humanity. The truth is that hundreds of thousands of years, the vast majority of human existence was spent in a state of perpetual vulnerability, in a literal wilderness surrounded by constant threats. Only for the last 12,000 years or so have we had the luxury of deceiving ourselves of our natural vulnerability, as we learned to mitigate our risk of famine, disease, or even wild animal attack. Some of our earliest biblical writers seem disproportionately concerned with being carried off by lions, but we forget that this was a distinct possibility and a serious threat.

To this day, our imaginations are captivated by dreams of invulnerability, from our natural desire to live longer lives to more radical possibilities that verge on science-fiction like interplanetary colonization and uploaded consciousness. We are in a never-ending flight from vulnerability, and despite all our progress we find ourselves still naked and laid bare, as powerless to control our futures and fates as a feather on the breeze.

We try to escape vulnerability through the pursuit of invulnerability. We seek comfort and happiness and security to try to avoid the pain of vulnerability. We try to mitigate risk, so as not to leave ourselves vulnerable to pain, sadness, difficulty, and suffering, but in doing so we also mitigate the risk of love. We harden our hearts to the suffering of others, to the pain and injustice of the world, to the deep and tangled web of hurt and regret that lies within us and in every single person we come across. We close ourselves off because to open our hearts in love to seven billion souls would be too much - a live wire, a raw nerve. This kind of vulnerable love, this God-love, seems like madness

This is why the people always thought the prophets were mad. Listen to the words of Amos, and you will hear the words of someone who has taken the risk of loving not just a child or a spouse or a family member or a friend, but all of God's people. To Amos, injustice isn't an unfortunate byproduct of a complex society, it's a direct and personal assault on a child of God.

Amos lived during a time of great strength and power for the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The people took pride in a golden age of art and architecture, with beautiful music and luxurious goods. Amos talks about beautiful beds of ivory, elegant couches, grand feasts, and fine wines and oils. Israel felt strong and the people, at least some of the people, were happy and comfortable and content, momentarily free from that nagging feeling of vulnerability.

But does Amos see this as a time to rejoice? A time that God has blessed the people with strength and power and riches? No! Amos rightly sees that this apparent time of strength and power is nothing more than a turn away from open-hearted vulnerability towards a hard-hearted dalliance with power, security, and denial. Amos sees that while the land is ostensibly flourishing, the poor are trampled and robbed and injustice and unrighteousness rule.

So here comes Amos, open-hearted and vulnerable, taking the risk of loving the people and paying the price for it. He's an angry poet, affronted and besieged by the horrible crimes he sees perpetrated against God's children by God's children.

The suffering he witnesses breaks his heart and he cannot keep silent, so he calls on the people to repent, to seek God and live, and by and large he is laughed off, disregarded, and disgraced. The nation courts the allure of invulnerability, pursuing power and comfort and security, and turning its back on the people in need. Why? Because that way is painful and unpleasant. The nation turns its back on God and embraces an easy idolatry that worships hedonism and happiness, comfort and security, wealth and power.

Well, there's a reason Amos is a prophet. He has vision and insight. And he speaks the truth. And before long, the rising Empire of Assyria shatters the illusion of invulnerability, destroying cities, villages, and temples, reducing the entire nation to rubble from which it would never return. This is how the northern kingdom of Israel, called Samaria, was destroyed once and for all.

This reveals the beautiful paradox at the heart of the Christian faith: only through an embrace of vulnerability, the risk of love that leads to the cross, will you achieve life everlasting. To court invulnerability leads to destruction. Seek the Lord and live, Amos says. Seek good and not evil that you may live.

If we want to live, if we really want to live the way God calls us to live and intends for us to live, if we really seek true Life in Christ, then we must take the risk of love, and we cannot do so without embracing an open-hearted vulnerability; a pathos that feels the suffering of the people, rages against injustice, and braves the depths of pain and sadness.

We live in a world that sees vulnerability as weakness, that sees our true selves, underneath it all, as shameful. But if we want to live, we must shed our armor, drop our defenses, and embrace our true vulnerability, naked and laid bare. We must put on our birthday suits. Brothers and sisters and siblings, these are the clothes God gave us because God loves us. We don't need to hide or cover up. Take off all your pads and all your armor, take off your makeup and your sunglasses, take it all off and approach the throne of grace with boldness, naked as we came, wearing our birthday suits proudly, and say, "Here I am God, in all my weakness, with all my faults. I'm here to receive mercy and find grace so that I can find new life in Christ and so I can really live."

Say, "I'm ready to take the great risk of love, knowing full well that it is not easy or comfortable, knowing full well that there will be pain and sorrow and fear and failure. I'm ready to take the risk of love trusting that you will be faithful to me as I am faithful to you, trusting that you will watch over my coming out and my going in, trusting that you will not let my foot be moved, trusting that in Jesus Christ you have given us a savior who, our reading from Hebrews says, is able to *sympathize* with our weakness, who has himself been tested, who has been naked and laid bare, who has suffered and died and who has triumphed in the glory of resurrection, testifying once and for all that an open hearted, vulnerable, naked love for all God's children is the gateway to true Life."

The risk of love is not a win-lose proposition. When we take the risk of love, when we make that leap of faith, we *will* find a deep abiding joy, a life of meaning and purpose, a path of redemption and reconciliation with our creator as well as with ourselves and with others.

So, this day, I pray that you go forth exposed, open-hearted, vulnerable. Go forth in your birthday suit and live like it's your birthday party. Embrace your vulnerability, take the risk of love, and find true life and deep joy. Amen.