My brothers and sisters in Christ, Let us pray. God of our Lenten bodies, minds, hearts, and Spirits, may the words of my mouth and meditations of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

University of Houston Professor Dr. Brene Brown’s book “The Power of Vulnerability” aired as a TED talk in 2010 when I was first beginning seminary, and it’s stayed with me ever since. But the words ‘power’ and ‘vulnerability’ do not seem to belong in the same sentence—they are usually quite opposite in our experience and in our world. We associate vulnerability with those who suffer without power to change their circumstances: kids who go hungry, refugees in crowded camps, civilians in war zones. These groups are the vulnerable because all three of these conditions—famine, alienation, and war—push us into spaces which sap our strength and will. Too often these same conditions can be fatal when no one’s looking if you’re suffering in one of these conditions. But who IS looking out for the vulnerable? We want to think that these folks are far away from us, and hence, not our problem here in New Hampshire. The resulting need to push vulnerability away from ourselves, however, puts it right back onto those who are profoundly endangered, and only magnifies their risk of real harm. These are our neighbors are they not?

Whether we admit it or not, whether we like it or not, we all are vulnerable. And I believe for most of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought us to the realization that there can be something in the world for which there was no magic fix, and which could lay us low no matter what our economic, social, political, racial, religious, or cultural position. We need to remember this year that we were all equally vulnerable.

 Vulnerability is about our weak places, the soft points where we are least protected and can most easily be hurt. I learned that one way to describe how the tragedy of incest can take hold is that some families have more points of vulnerability than others. Sexual abuse between relatives that would not otherwise be tolerated can happen in perfect storms of tenuous employment, untreated addiction, weak marital connections, and histories of abuse. And let’s be clear—just because we think we’re invincible, all persons and families, when exposed to enough suffering and circumstances, have soft places where sickness and evil can get inside. But incest and sexual abuse happens in about 25% of all families. I can testify personally that the after-effects are for a lifelong, and open many, many other vulnerabilities for me to deal with. Our vulnerability in sexual abuse is so core to our existence it opens up many more soft spots and pain for others to exploit.

Now, Dr. Brown has a Ph.D. in social work and focuses on human connection—that thing which most fundamentally determines a person’s ability to thrive. Her ground-breaking research at the time now give us something that seems obvious: in order to thrive, we need human connection. That seems just natural, and the COVID crisis has reinforced that lesson, too. Talking isn’t enough is it? We seek hugs. But Brown adds the scientifically crazy assertion that the key to successful human connection is the very thing most of us try to avoid: vulnerability.

Among her research subjects, those who were most in touch with the fact that they could be hurt—could lose, could get it wrong—but went ahead seeking connection anyway were more likely to be happier, a higher sense of self-worth, and more satisfying relationships. But when engaging in methods of self-protection—guarding against pain, choosing safe paths, choosing acceptance over authenticity, seeking certainty—we actually distance ourselves from sources of comfort, happiness, and belonging. Her conclusion? If vulnerability leaves us open to pain, shame, and rejection, it also leaves us open to love, acceptance, and belonging.

Now, we don’t always associate God with vulnerability. For most of the church year, in most of our worship songs and texts, A Mighty Fortress is our God, all powerful and all seeing and everywhere at once. But as Christmas approaches, we turn God into someone exceedingly human: a helpless baby, born in a barn, laid in a trough, wrapped in rags, and then quickly made to flee and live as a refugee in Egypt. Man, if we don’t see the Christmas Jesus as the poster child for vulnerability, we gotta talk. God in Jesus is God on the run, at the mercy of petty and jealous monarchs, bumbling parents, and dangerously capricious laws that protect neither unwed teenage mothers or infants.

But then we quickly baptize Jesus into adulthood and the calendar takes us quickly on to Lent and Holy Week. What images are Jesus’ life in Holy Week? He’s angry, challenged, distrusted, tormented, and unjustly arrested. Those who love him cannot protect him from what lies ahead. The Jesus that John shows us in this week’s Gospel text is not a religious robot, unemotionally prepared to end it all for the cause. This Jesus is struggling, distressed, wishing he could somehow take another road. He knows what he has been asked to do, but he sure doesn’t like it, not one bit. He sees the risks and feels them, but goes ahead anyway, letting things unfold as they will.

Would we say that our Holy Week Jesus is vulnerable? You bet. But it’s much easier to get our head around a big, powerful, invincible kind of deity. It’s clearly who the crowds are looking for, who the fans at Jesus’ Palm Sunday parade are hoping for. It’s probably who the Greeks in this week’s passage think they’re asking for—someone to rise up and rescue them from their own oppression, their own struggle, their own vulnerabilities, and the resulting acts of evil that come upon them. We always seem to think only the powerful can save the vulnerable and protect them once and for all, for all time, to live in a protected little cocoon of safety or suit of armor against the world.

But what if…what if…only a vulnerable God can love us? What if—what it takes to have a loving God, is to have a God who can be hurt? What if the God of protection we long for is only accessible if we not only admit our hurts, but recognize God’s hurts as well, and dwell in that common place of weakness?

Jesus is the one who says “I love you” to us first, who weeps over us, who trudges toward death knowing it’s the only way to get to the resurrection, who says “I forgive you” to the ones who hang him on the cross. Jesus came to dwell with us forever, reminding us of the prophet Jeremiah’s covenant fulfilled for all time: “I will put the law in your mind, and write it on your heart. I will be your God, and you my people…all will know God, from least to greatest. For I will forgive your transgressions, and remember your sins no more.” Love in this way, a vulnerable God accepting us as we are in our own vulnerabilities, becomes the ultimate covenant that binds our hearts to Jesus.

And our heroine social scientist, Dr. Brown, learns from her research the same lesson God has been trying to teach humanity forever. Ours is an omnipotent God, for sure, but one who doesn’t choose domination, but rather chooses vulnerability—covenants, forgiveness, love. But God is also one who will only be who she really is, not who we wish God would be. Therefore, God not only offers us authentic love but also shows us how it’s done. We too can take a risk, can be open, can present our actual selves for connection—and trust that real love will arrive in return.

Let me leave you with these final reflections.

Love does NOT means submitting to those who are bent on hurting us no matter who they are, family or not. I’m not asking the vulnerable to sign up to be victims of abuse at the hands of others. I know that path all too well. But I DO think Jesus’ task was to be exactly who God made him to be—God’s embodied love—even though we were hoping he’d be different. It’s about daring to be who we know ourselves to be and not who others expect—and yet still sharing our stories, feelings, experiences, and realities with others, expecting that we will be loved.

Some folks won’t be able to handle a minister who survives sexual molestation at the hands of his brother. But we accept that some things cannot be accepted by everyone because the vulnerability is too real, the history too parallel, the hurt too close, the relationship too risky. And yet, in God, we trust there are those who can receive us just as we are, with some strengths but many more soft spots and scars and vulnerabilities. That’s not a safe way to go through life, but it might be the only way to live today, to build the Kingdom of God, and enjoin in the promise of life everlasting, right here, right now. Vulnerabilities are hard to talk about and face, aren’t they?

And yet our Easter selves may be a bit disappointed, since most of us still hope the key to happiness is a little more predictability and control. I can’t say I disagree. I often think I would prefer a God rising up and taking out all my enemies, protecting me from pain and risk, making love safe. But if God protected herself the way I want to be protected, I’d never be safe enough for God to love me. The mercy of God, the salvation of my life, is God’s vulnerability. Any chance I have at joy requires going and doing likewise.

And for that opportunity, thanks be to God. Amen.