

Holy Strength and Vulnerability
Lake Street Church of Evanston
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Let me tell you a story that takes place not far from here. It's 16th March 1897 in Chicago. Cue the scene – two people, one pointing a gun at the other. Everyone's watching these two polish immigrants, including the chief of police, investors, and a priest. It looked like an execution was in the making, and who knows maybe it was an honor duel.

The would-be executioner fires a shot, and the victim keels over as if dead, but miraculously gets back up again. We have here a demonstration of a bullet-proof vest. Can someone guess what it is made of?

You'll be forgiven for not knowing but it was made of silk only about a centimeter thick, that's right less than half an inch of silk had stopped a bullet. This property was discovered earlier in the century when a breast pocket handkerchief was shown to have slowed the impact of a bullet significantly in an autopsy.

And so the scene in the square was not what we thought – it was not an extrajudicial killing – it was a demonstration of the outstanding strength of silk, an important discovery for all the wars that would soon strike our world.

One might think that steel or some other thick metal would do a better job, but the key part is that silk, while appearing flimsy and

unable to do much is in fact flexible in just the right ways to stop bullets. It's strength cannot be overstated, and it led to the use of fibers to stop bullets, like Kevlar. It was strong but in ways that people didn't expect, unconventionally strong we might say.

And I think that's an introduction to how we might think about the divine in our lives. Because we read time and time again of the strength of the divine, we read that God is strong to save, that God will save with God's strong right hand, that God created everything, that the wicked will perish, the righteous prevail, that God is in control. And we look out into the world and we see chaos, we see the strong abuse the weak, we see a world on the brink. And so where is this strong God that we are seeking? Where is the holy, the divine, and how do we find that spirit in our world, when it seems so fractured.

I remember distinctly when the conventional images of strength wouldn't cut it anymore for me, with the holy. My first semester of college, my mom went into the hospital and stayed there with a heart condition for a long time. Where was that strong God then? I probably had my first truly deep realization about suffering in that moment – that miracles for some, leave most right where we found them, and the strength of God doesn't seem to appear in their story at all. And so I have always struggled with the characteristic strong God, in military terms, or kingly raiments. . In Jesus Christ the divine is made manifest amongst us to suffer, to die, to be murdered, to be humble, to proclaim that the true strength is to be the servant of all. You see Jesus' life and the life of the divine

subverts human understandings of strength and posits something different in its place. True strength is not what the world proclaims as strong.

Thanks be to the divine for our ancient witnesses this morning, which reveal a different sort of strength based on mutual vulnerability, honesty, love and openness. I want to make three points (I'm a Baptist minister, after all) about how we might identify and practice the sorts of holy strength that moves us to create a more abundant life, or at least the sort of strength that speaks to me from these passages.

First, we see that holy strength is always relational. The holy does not act unilaterally. Instead, we have a vision of the divine that depends on others to come into being. Take for example Jesus' calling of his disciples. I have a little joke about this that is one of my favorites. "What was Jesus' most significant miracle?" "He had 12 close friends in his 30s!" But it's true. It's so true. Jesus has friends, companions, and co-learners along the way. These are the people who are there to see him cry, teach, preach, and even are there when he says uncharacteristically harsh words, I like to say when he was caught with his compassion down. And they are not just side characters – why would Jesus need friends and partners? Why couldn't he just do it all himself? The answer I think is that the divine always needs friends in order to come into being.

Dorothee Solle, a feminist theologian in post-war Germany tells a story after the Holocaust of trying to think through where God was. She tells the story of being at a conference where one person said

that God must have willed the Holocaust because God is powerful, in control, and that is how this person understood God. You see, if we map our visions of strength onto God it can get us into trouble. But Dorothee Soelle said that she thought that the Divine was weak during the Holocaust because she had no friends through which she might have acted. There was no one to be the hands and feet of the spirit, no one to make manifest the strength of God. And thus it is, God's strength is never about the individual strong man on horseback, God's strength is shared and corporate, and communal.

Building on that point, I would like to say that this relational God is not present in self-seeking vanity, but rather in openness, transparency, and mutual vulnerability. You may have been scratching your head wondering, "what is this reading from the Talmud even saying?" Well, let me help you out. What we have here is a story of two 2nd century rabbis. Now, the Talmud is a back-and-forth type of document that I'm quite fond of in Judaism, where argument and disagreement are part of the package. I love it, honestly. And these two rabbis meet, and they are immediately smart alek's to each other, but they sort of like each other too. And they fight. They fight nasty and hard and mean, but they still love each other. Because they are fully open, fully vulnerable in a way that men seem to be rarely able to do. Well, eventually they have a huge fight and one of the rabbis dies, and this is a record of him missing his friend and brother-rabbi, who he was a jerk to. But you see, the other rabbi challenged him, constantly gave him debate.

They disagreed and yet were entirely honest and open with each other. Such is the strength of the holy, that the holy is even present in disagreements when people are vulnerable, when they let their guard down enough to weep, and wail, at the loss of a true friend. How different it would be if we began to approach even difficulty, even disagreement, as a place where holy strength could be made manifest if we were but open enough, vulnerable enough, willing to full engage with others, and perhaps most importantly, willing to learn from others. When we are co-learners in a world drenched in the holy, then we become able to approach the vision of the beloved community laid out in our ancient texts.

I will leave you with an image of the greatest co-learning relationship that I ever had as a pastor. It was with someone, who I didn't expect to form a close bond with. He was in the hospital, off and on, from the moment that I started at my current pastorate, and I visited him. I got the vibe that I wasn't exactly wanted, but you see, I'm pretty stubborn sometimes, and I actually liked this gruff new-englander. So, whenever it'd been awhile, I'd add him to my visitation list. Eventually, he was moved to rehab and told that he wouldn't go home, so I visited him, and I learned he liked coffee. And so, as his body and mind failed him, and the topics of conversation constricted more and more, I was less minister and more presence, willing to listen and caffeinate. One time I brought him coffee, and sat down and he looked at me straight in the eyes and said, "You can go now." I don't think I've laughed that hard in a long time – it was good for me. I told him that I'd stay for a little

longer. He passed away, and I saw him on the day that he passed. I'm not sure what he thought of me – I like to think that I offered him a nonanxious presence, a place to share and to talk. I like to think I brought a little bit of the holy to that room. But he taught me a lot about life, about losing life, about looking back, about the core of who we were. And that could never have happened if he and I weren't open, if we didn't truly talk to each other, if we didn't learn from each other, if we weren't vulnerable. He was vulnerable in mind and body, but the way that I was present with him made me vulnerable – learning always is, because to learn we have to admit that we do not know it all. A tough thing to do, to be humble. And yet it is the only way that we can hear what the Hebrew Bible calls the still small voice that undergirds all things.

And that's the sort of relationship I'd like to have with you, one of co-learning, of mutual vulnerability, of silk that stops bullets, of a Jesus who has friends in his 30s. You see, if we are to do this thing together, I will invariably say things that delight you and things you disagree with, all in the same sermon. We must be bold enough to share, to be open with each other, to demonstrate the strength of relationality that plays out in scripture and in other traditions. That's my invitation to you as we begin something new together – to be open, to be real, to be honest, to be here. Because if you can't be open here, where can you? If you can't be real here, where can you? If we can't have the tough conversations and become equipped to bring Love into the world, where can we? Our task is to make a place where we can hear that still small voice, that

beating heart at the center of reality that is so easily drowned out by our busy, busy lives.

I invite you to be strong – not in the way that a tank or armor is strong, but in the subtle, small, holy ways that we have discussed today. I invite you to listen with open hearts. I invite you to be humble. All pretty counter-cultural advice, if you look out into the world. And yet it is the ancient path forward that is proclaimed in our texts this morning, that strength is not what we think it is, and that we might just have to rethink everything.

Thanks be to the Spirit who makes all things new, here in Evanston and throughout the universe.

Blessed be.