

# Vulnerable and Generous

Pastor Chuck Harris

February 20, 2020

---

Well, it is good to be here with you again, whether you are here in the sanctuary or are at home or somewhere out in this wonderful, wild world of ours, experiencing worship together through our live stream. It has been a difficult January and early February for the Harris household, but we are now moving forward again. And it feels really good to be back here with you. I wanna say it was a difficult family reunion. Have you ever experienced that? Getting together with family after a time away, and you found that all those resentments, all those trials and tribulations of the past, somehow just intensify as you gather around the table, maybe for a holiday like Thanksgiving or Christmas? Family reunions can be difficult. It was that way for Joseph and his brothers.

Joseph, now the Lord of Egypt after having been sold by his brothers into slavery. There in front of Joseph were the very ones who had wronged him, and our text puts it wonderfully. The brothers were dismayed that they came looking for life, and they found the one that they had sold into death. They were dismayed. Having sold Joseph into slavery, opened up (I bet) in their minds, all sorts of possibilities of the wrongs that were out there to be done to them. They were so dismayed at Joseph's presence, the text says, that the brothers could not even answer. His simple question: "Is my father still alive?" Sort of begins to open up the difference in mindset between Joseph and his brothers: they're worrying about death, and he's there concerned about life, the life of his father.

"Come closer to me," he says. I wonder how that made them feel, but as they move toward him Joseph begins to explain to them that—even though they don't see it this way—their actions were part of a larger plan, a bigger plan, that was God's. A plan to bring him first into a place, in a position where he would have the authority and the privilege to deal graciously with those who are part of his family. Now, Lord of Egypt, Joseph is in a position to be generous, to give life, to give wealth, to give a new start, to give his family the opportunity to begin over again. And, you know, not just being generous, but he's even in a position to be somewhat vulnerable. He kisses his brother. He lays upon them and weeps upon them, kisses them, generous and vulnerable. That was the position Joseph occupied. That was a place from which he could do those things.

How many of us, in our situations hosting the Thanksgiving or Christmas meal table, have been in a similar position to be gracious, to be generous, to be even a little bit vulnerable in the midst of family dynamics that are often, at least unpleasant, and, at most, really unhealthy? How many of us have been in that position and have chosen the lesser path? I know I have. Chosen to be the one that seeks revenge. The one who's chosen to close myself off to the possibility of reconciliation. The person who's been in a position to be vulnerable and gracious and turned my back on that opportunity and walked away. How many of us—even if somewhere deep in our hearts we know that the right thing is to turn a bad situation toward the possibility of the good—have turned our backs and walked away? Something about being human, that instead of operating out of a place of generosity and vulnerability, we turn in on ourselves to protect and turn away from reconciliation.

Well, as Anne read this morning, the Psalmist encourages us as followers of God, as part of God's people. The Psalmist encourages us to follow Joseph's path. "Commit your way to the Lord," the Psalmist says. "Put your trust in the Lord, see what God will do." That is, in and of itself, a really vulnerable-making stance to take. What, you mean my life and my relationships shouldn't be under my control? They should be in God's hands? No, thank you. Yet Psalmist is persistent. "Hey, don't be provoked by those who succeed in evil schemes. Don't follow their lead. Don't let it all anger. You set your rage aside. Don't be provoked because it can only lead to evil." And how many of us have experienced that around those same tables, that our desire to act cruelly or dismissively or selfishly just spirals the situation into worse and worse directions? The Psalmist just comes back to us. "Yeah, you can choose to go that way, but it will not prosper you. The Lord," the Psalmist says, "delivers you, the Lord prospers you. There's no need to be jealous, to be vengeful, to operate out of your sense of fear or anxiety, but out of trust that the Lord will deliver."

Now, I say these things out of the story from Genesis and Psalm 37, knowing that these are dangerous words to say, because there are many among us who have been in situations that are devastating to them. Situations of abuse, where for many years—untold years—have been told this, hang in there, let the Lord fix this. How many times have people been told that and found themselves crushed? I don't think that's what the scriptures are talking about here. For if we listen to the story of Joseph or from Psalm 37, what we're talking about is people *in a position* to be generous, to be vulnerable. **And I want to say this clearly, if you are not in that position to act in those**

**ways and your life is in danger, these words are not for you.**

Operating out of safety and wholeness is what the scriptures call us to do.

But back to that table with our families. Think about yourself as a host, the one who is in a position to act according to our better angels. There is a moment where we get to ask ourselves, "Am I going to let myself be defined because I'm against that person? Or is there a better path forward?"

I want to share a story about a moment in my early parish career, where these dynamics were front and center for me. One of the churches I served received a wonderful gift from the estate of a former member who had passed away. They had dedicated the money be given to the church for new paraments for the altar, all seasons. All the seasons of the church year, in all their multitude of colors...we'd be able to buy wonderful new paraments. When I heard of this gift from the state, I did go into the sanctuary and look and go, "Yeah, those are kind of old and ragged. Maybe it's time."

The Altar Guild chair in charge of these things said to me, in an absolute and commanding voice, "No, it won't happen." I didn't understand much about what was behind that and, being young in my career, I didn't really listen for that underneath story.

What I did was, at the next church council meeting, we had a conversation about utilizing the money. I encouraged the church council, and they agreed that we should move forward with the gift and by those new paraments. And so the day they arrived at the church, the Altar Guild chair resigned. She said that she would never step foot in the sacristy again, and she let me know in no uncertain terms that now that the paraments had arrived,

her new job at this church was to get rid of me as pastor. And her last word to me was, "I'll last here longer than you."

Now, over the years that followed, I tried to engage and be somewhat playful, to find some kind of connection with the former Altar Guild chair, but it was to no avail. Our relationship was cold, icy, and absolutely cut off. She lived into her purpose: staying, in order to get rid of me. And, you know, I tried (not very successfully) and—confession here—not very energetically. I tried to follow Jesus' words in relationship with her: "But I say to you who listen, love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you."

There are many times over the years where I hear these words and think about my non-relationship with the former Altar Guild chair. And I asked myself, "Well, okay, how Jesus? How am I to do this?" Then in my lesser moments, say, "Why Jesus? Why would I want to do this and just put myself more in relationship with those icy stares and hard heart?"

Well, I was young and stupid, and I didn't really realize at the time that to follow Jesus is to live among God's people as God lives among God's people, vulnerable and generous. Often times, to a degree deemed foolish by the world. People in the church, people who knew the situation would say, "Oh, Pastor, just forget about her. This is the way she is. Don't waste time or energy there. It's not going to change. It would be foolish to try." And I wasn't smart enough to realize that often what Jesus really calls us to do is those things deemed foolish by the world. *Just give her the cold shoulder. Isn't that what she's doing to you?*

The words from Luke, even to this day as I think back on that situation, continued to haunt me: "If someone strikes you on the cheek, give them the other. They take your coat, give them your shirt. They beg from you, give to them. If they take away your goods, let those goods go." Now, in certain situations, these prophetic words of Jesus are dangerous. But in my situation way back then they were like a knife cutting me open, forcing me to ask myself, "Well, how hard has your heart become, Chuck?"

There were times that I sank into a sort of rationale in my brain in relationship to her. *Well, I'll operate with her transactionally. If she were to do good to me, well, then I'll start to do good to her. If she were to show love for me, I'll start to show love for her. If she were to pay this debt to me that I think I'm owed, then I'll repay back to her.* And the only thing Jesus says is, "Well, Pastor Chuck, that's how sinners operate: purely transactional."

Love. Do good. Lend, expecting nothing. Be merciful. Be vulnerable, as God is. The call into this way of life needs to be followed wisely. For many people, it's dangerous. This is dangerous living. However, we can consider where and when in our lives it is appropriate for us to live this way. Vulnerable, being capable of being wounded, choosing to be open to attack, and maybe even some potential harm. To be generous, abundant in giving, marked by a kindly spirit. Truly, Luke says, we can only do these things because God has first chosen to live that way with us: to leave the confines of heaven; to walk this earth in and through this person, Jesus; to offer his own life on behalf of us. We could only live this way because God first approaches *us* in this way, vulnerable and generous so that we might have life.

It wasn't until I was about ready to leave that call, that the former Altar Guild chair came to speak with me. She heard that I had taken another call, and she came and sat in my office. The icy stare and the cold heart are pretty much still there, but she began to tell me a story: that her grandma had handcrafted the paraments that were previously on the altar. Her grandmother had hand-crafted them in Norway and brought them to the United States when she immigrated. For her, it was not a gift from the estate, like the church thought of it. No, that's not what was going on for her. That supposed gift was more like a knife that had the potential to cut her off from her past. She spoke about sitting in the pews and looking past the preacher at the altar. Seeing visions of her grandmother, late at night, stitching the impairments together.

Now, her disposition toward me wasn't any different, but she felt it important to share that story with me. One that I had wished I had listened for earlier, but what dawned on me—and I've carried with me over the years—is that in the midst of telling that story, she herself was actually acting generous and vulnerable. Not forgiving, in any manner, but still the seeds of a new relationship we're being sown. And you know what? Even without her intending it, her words to me, her story...it changed my heart toward her. And in spite of her continued disdain for me, she gave a gift: an unexpected gift of grace. One that changed my heart, not just toward her, but toward many of my parishioners in the years since. It taught me not to react. Not to act transactionally. Not to pay with what I had received. Not to love because I was loved. Not to give because I was given to. To remember *always* that generosity and vulnerability from God

comes to each of us in many ways. And it does change our hearts and allows us to behave the same with others.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.