

Genesis 3:1-13
Consider the Birds: the Eagle
June 16, 2024
Rev. Kelley Becker

President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. The proclamation declared that “all slaves held in states in rebellion against the United States would be forever free.” Unlike today, news traveled slowly in those days and I can imagine some purposely spread this news at a snail’s pace. It took 2 ½ years for the news to finally reach the shores of Galveston, Texas, on June 19, 1865, where Union Army General Gordon Granger announced the proclamation. This date, known as Juneteenth, is celebrated as the end of the institution of slavery in the Confederate States. Although Juneteenth is a reason to celebrate the progress made in our nation, the holiday is also a time to reflect on how far we still have to go to eradicate racism and achieve equity for all citizens. There is much work to do.

DCC sponsored the Juneteenth celebration at the Westside Community Center yesterday and, thanks to members of our Outreach Commission, we had a booth where we gave away tattoos, stickers, candy, and information about the church, specifically about how we try to be inclusive. Westside Community Center has had a tough road the last few years but has had a change in leadership and seems to be zeroing in on a specific vision and mission. Westside is more than a place where young people can go after school. It is an institution of the Black community in Bartlesville where Black people have felt safe and welcome for 70 years. It provides more than programming, it provides belonging.

I am so glad Westside is starting fresh and I look forward to doing what we can to help because Black people and all people of color are vulnerable in our community and in our country. The playing field is not level, and while we did not build the playing field, we are maintaining it. I ran across a blog this week called “Modern Cedar.” The blogger writes about life as a person of color in the U.S. The post I read was about emotional safety, belonging, and vulnerability in the workplace. He wrote, “...there are places that just expect Black people to remove our armor without sufficient assurance or commitment to our safety. Let me give an example: person X is the “only Black person” in a room and then all of a sudden, they are deemed the race expert. They expect X to open up at every meeting or during every “tough conversation” about the Black experience or about racism. They want X to share their experience of microaggressions, and prejudice, and racism. But what about if X doesn’t want to be vulnerable? Especially if there is no guarantee of protection when X does share something they don’t want to hear. Forget the fear of reprisal; sometimes, people haven’t earned the right to our mind, thoughts, and opinions. So, to not guarantee any safety, yet expect a Black person to speak for all Black people is just wrong.”¹

¹ <http://www.themoderncedar.com/2023/06/a-juneteenth-post-how-dei-initiatives.html>, accessed, 6/12/24.

His point is that, while corporations have done a lot of work with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), workplaces and white people in general should not expect or ask people of color to be vulnerable in situations where their safety is not guaranteed. Being vulnerable is a good thing in spaces where a person feels safe. People of color, for good reason, do not feel safe in a lot of spaces. And the same is true for people in the Queer community. Several of you shared an obituary that was widely spread on social media this week. It was for Col. Edward Thomas Ryan of New York. Part of it was a message directly from the deceased, "I must tell you one more thing. I was gay all my life: thru grade school, thru High School, thru College, thru Life. I was in a loving and caring relationship with Paul Cavagnaro of North Greenbush. He was the love of my life. We had 25 great years together. Paul died in 1994 from a medical procedure gone wrong. I'll be buried next to Paul. I'm sorry for not having the courage to come out as gay. I was afraid of being ostracized: by Family, Friends, and Co-Workers. Seeing how people like me were treated, I just could not do it. Now that my secret is known, I'll forever Rest in Peace." If I were to read the whole obituary, you would find that not only was Col. Ryan in the military, he was a fireman, devoted uncle, and an active member of a church, In all those spaces, he did not feel safe to be vulnerable. How very, very sad.

The bird we are considering today typically symbolizes the opposite of vulnerability. The eagle is a symbol of power. In her book *Consider the Birds*, Debbie Blue writes, "The vulture eats death---the eagle defies it."² In the sermon on vultures last week, I talked about how translators have inserted the word eagle in many places where vulture is a better translation of the original language. We would much rather have an eagle hanging around our theology than a vulture. But even if we take the eagle out of the Bible, it is still everywhere; on sports jerseys, Harley Davidson t-shirts, tattoos, flags, and company logos, to the point that, at times, the eagle symbolism seems overused and kind of watered down. They symbolize raw power, patriotism, loyalty, ferocity, and strength, so we can understand why they are such popular symbols. Who doesn't want their business associated with those things?

The bald eagle has been our national symbol since 1782. It was meant to convey an attitude of "we want peace, but we are always ready for a fight if necessary." The problem with that, according to Blue, is that is not how human beings operate. Being ready for a fight usually ensures there is a fight. Coincidentally, the eagle was also the symbol of the Roman Empire. Ben Franklin wanted our national symbol to be the wild turkey. He didn't think the eagle was a good choice because he thought it was a bird with a bad moral character because it bullies smaller birds and steals their food. I am not sure eagles have morals. I wonder if our nation would be any different if our symbol was a flamingo, panda, or even a wild turkey. Who could know?

² Blue, Debbie, *Consider the Birds: A Provocative Guide to Birds of the Bible*, (Abingdon Press: Minneapolis MN, 2013). 83.

Eagles do have power. They do send a strong message. Human beings, in general, don't want to be vulnerable. We don't feel safe and this isn't new. Way back in ancient times our ancestors told a story that eventually got written down as part of Genesis. It was a story made up to explain the beginnings of humankind. In the beginning, God created one human. God decided the human didn't like being alone, so God created a second human by splitting the first human in two. It wasn't until there were two that gender was even a thing. Anyway, everything was great until the couple did the thing God told them not to do. They ate from the wrong tree...and they got caught. This is Genesis 3:8-10.

⁸They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. ⁹But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" ¹⁰He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself."

"I was afraid because I was naked." I was afraid because I know you can see who I really am. I was afraid because I am vulnerable. It is brave to allow yourself to be seen. Adam and Eve were not feeling brave that day and that's okay. We each get to decide when to be brave and what brave is at any moment. We've all had those moments...some of us live in that space all the time, trying hard not to let people see who we really are because we are afraid; afraid of being kicked out, fired, hurt, killed, or not being loved. I am going to go out on a limb and say that in one way or another we have all been afraid to be seen for who we are. People of color and people in the Queer community know that feeling pretty well. As a female, progressive minister in northeast Oklahoma, I know what it feels like to be vulnerable and feel unsafe.

As we celebrate the important men in our lives, it is a good time to acknowledge that even though people, regardless of their gender identity or expression, struggle with vulnerability, men are known to have a more difficult time opening up. "There are myths around masculinity that present barriers to connection. Masculine identity is often associated with strength, competence, and autonomy. Help-seeking or displays of emotion are considered feminine behaviors (Bruder- Mattson & Havonitz, 1990). However, male or female, we are all biologically wired for and need connection (Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008)."³

A man planted firmly in the myth around what masculinity really is feels safe. The vulnerability comes when he steps outside society's made up rules of masculinity and allows himself to be seen for who he is: a trans man, a gay man, a man who doesn't like sportsball, a man who would rather be a stay-at-home parent than a corporate executive, a man who shares decision-making with his partner, or a man who sees what's happening in the world and has the courage to cry.

I will never forget President Obama's press conference following the school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, CT in 2012. He stood in front of the camera

³ <https://goodmenproject.com/guy-talk/vulnerability-the-heart-of-connection-cmtt/>, accessed 6/14/24.

and as he talked about the overwhelming grief he felt and the children who were killed and he cried. I remember thinking it took courage to show the nation how he was feeling. He chose to be vulnerable. Sadly, that would not be the last time he stood in front of America with sadness and tears, talking about a school shooting. And he was criticized. Critics called him “pathetic, weak, and dishonest.”⁴

I will also never forget Senator John McCain’s speech in 2017 as he accepted the National Constitution Center’s Liberty Medal. His voice was raspy with emotion when he said, “To fear the world we have organized and led for three-quarters of a century, to abandon the ideals we have advanced around the globe, to refuse the obligations of international leadership and our duty to remain ‘the last, best hope of earth’ for the sake of some half-baked, spurious nationalism cooked up by people who would rather find scapegoats than solve problems is as unpatriotic as an attachment to any other tired dogma of the past that Americans consigned to the ash heap of history.”

Both Obama and McCain allowed themselves to be vulnerable because, I think, at some point, even when it’s scary, the consequences of not being real, of not showing the world who you really are and what you really believe is too great. We want to see vulnerability in other people, so of course we are willing to be vulnerable as well, right?

Brene Brown is a researcher and storyteller who has written entire books about vulnerability. She writes, “The difficult thing is that vulnerability is the first thing I look for in you and the last thing I’m willing to show you. In you, it’s courage and daring. In me, it’s weakness. It isn’t just men who don’t want to be perceived as weak. It’s all of us. The days of women wanting to be seen as damsels in distress are over. But the truth is, if we want a different world, we have to be different. We have to be willing to let go of our eagle persona and embrace vulnerability. And we have to create safe spaces to encourage our neighbors to let their eagle guard down as well.

Brown refers calls this “being all in.” In her book, *Daring Greatly*, she explained where this phrase came from, “The phrase Daring Greatly is from Theodore Roosevelt’s speech “Citizenship in a Republic.” The speech, sometimes referred to as “The Man in the Arena,” was delivered in Paris, France, on April 23, 1910. This is the passage that made the speech famous:

‘It’s not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly . . . who at best knows the triumph of high achievement and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly.’”

Brown writes, “The first time I read this quote, I thought, this is vulnerability. Everything I’ve learned from over a decade of research on vulnerability has taught me

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-35238309>, accessed, 6/16/24.

this exact lesson. Vulnerability is not knowing victory or defeat, it's understanding the necessity of both; it's engaging. It's being all in.⁵

Whether we like it or not, each of us will be vulnerable some time, even if we don't choose to be. In fact, when I was a child, even the eagle was vulnerable. "In Ben Franklin's day there were hundreds of thousands of bald eagles in America. By 1963 there were only 417 nesting pairs in all the lower 48 states combined. The emblem of our nation's strength was becoming weak."⁶ Synthetic pesticides like DDT were killing birds, including the eagle. In 1967, the eagle became a protected species, and in 1972 DDT was banned. This was the beginning of the modern environmental movement and a moment in which Americans came together for a common purpose. We could not allow our national symbol to become extinct. In addition to banning pesticides, the national wildlife refuge system provided habitats for nesting eagles and centers all over the nation began to breed eagles and release them into the wild. By 2007, the eagle population had recovered so much so that the federal government officially removed them from the endangered species list. Even the eagle needs help some times.

Maybe the eagle as our nation's symbol can be about more than flexing our muscles and power. Maybe the eagle can remind us of what we can do when we all work together. We can take care of the ones who are vulnerable, the ones who choose to be and the ones who are vulnerable because our society has made them that way. We can create safe space for everyone and everything to flourish. We must be willing to go all in though. We must be willing to be vulnerable ourselves. And it's scary for all of us, but we have some great role models...President Obama, Senator McCain, Mister Rogers, artists, musicians, and anyone willing to let the world see who they really are, sometimes at great risk to themselves. Let's not hide ourselves in the garden like Adam and Eve, assuming we aren't lovable. You are lovable. You are loved. You are brave. Show the world who you are and who you can be when you live into your truest self. And then, let others show you who they are. Amen.

⁵ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danschawbel/2013/04/21/brene-brown-how-vulnerability-can-make-our-lives-better/>, accessed 6/12/24.

⁶ Blue, 102.