

UUCSV Sermon, July 23, 2023
Rev. DC Fortune
“Your Armor Won’t Protect You”

Reading:

Our reading today is from vulnerability expert and educator Brene Brown, in her book “Dare to Lead: Brave Work, Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts.”

Brown writes:

“The armor of compliance and control is normally about fear and power. When we come from this place, we often engage in two armored behaviors: We reduce work to tasks and to-dos, then spend our time ensuring that people are doing exactly what we want, how we want it—and then constantly calling them out when they’re doing it wrong. The armor of compliance and control leads us to strip work of its nuance, context, and larger purpose, then push it down for task completion, all while using the fear of “getting caught” as motivation. Not only is this ineffective, it shuts down creative problem solving, the sharing of ideas, and the foundation of vulnerability. It also leaves people miserable, questioning their abilities, and even desperate to leave. The less people understand how their hard work adds value to bigger goals, the less engaged they are. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure and frustration.”

Sermon - “Your Armor Won’t Protect You”

There are times in ministry when I spin ideas like so much sparkling fairy dust into grand proclamations of TRUTH, put a title on it, and almost immediately regret it.

Not because the truth is not true, but because the title lands like a bumper-sticker-esque representation of something so complex and tender that it defies easy definition.

Spiritual growth does not fit easily onto a bumper sticker. To describe the concepts of necessary vulnerability in language that will fit on the cover of the Order of Service, or on our sign out front, with its limited space and limited letters, well, that does it all a deep injustice.

It seems to land in the middle of the thing as opposed to at the beginning, which, of course, is where we need to start.

In each of our lives, we carry with us various kinds of emotional armor. Some we develop as children to protect us from bullies or abusers or from other kinds of monsters that go bump in the night. As children, we develop complex rituals that, through magical thinking, will keep us safe. If I leap from the carpet into the bed without touching the

bare floor, the monster under the bed cannot touch me. If I pretend to be sleeping, perhaps my abuser will not bother me. If I eat quickly and don't say anything at dinner, maybe I won't get shouted at.

In school, as we get older, we develop different kinds of armor: we can align ourselves with others who share our experiences, or who look like us or play sports like us, or are smart like us. We find safety in numbers, if we are able, and we learn how to protect ourselves as a group from the dangers of the schoolyard.

And sometimes, we still leap into bed from the edge of the carpet. Because it is a small ritual that helps us get to sleep, even when we stopped believing in actual monsters under our bed.

We learn along the way that if others see a weakness in our personality, they will exploit it. We are teased for being different. We can get bullied for not fitting in. Even within the safety of our peer groups, there can be danger. Even among outcasts, conformity of a type is expected and enforced. If one of the college-bound kids develops a romantic interest in one of the voc-tech kids, both sets of peer groups will respond to bring the errant member back into compliance with the rules of the group. It is tribalism, and allows for survival within community, even as it stifles individuality.

We learn to shift ourselves in subtle ways to accommodate the requirements of each social situation we encounter. Sometimes, our survival requires us to compromise our values in ways small or perhaps not so small.

But we need our armor, so we do not get hurt.

As we move through life, we add new layers of armor. Some of the earliest ones we can let go: we don't need to leap into bed any more from the edge of the carpet. But we do need to conform in certain ways to survive and succeed in our workplaces and social areas.

The dreams we may have had as children of being free to do whatever we want, to soar and glide and move about without fear in all parts of our lives? Well, those get adjusted. Edited. Compressed, perhaps. Squashed down into something more realistic. Achievable. Smaller.

We contain ourselves into small boxes, or cages, that keep us safe from the hurts that fill the world around us. We dress in particular ways to keep ourselves safe: some to avoid unwanted sexual advances, some to appear professional, some to become invisible.

The nail that sticks up, of course, is the one that gets hammered down.

If we keep ourselves down – where the world says we should be – we reduce the risk of being hammered back into place.

At what cost comes this illusion of safety?

Because safety is truly an illusion.

No matter how we conform, no matter how much armor we put on, the universe can send something our way that breaks through it all.

No idyllic suburban lifestyle is immune to grim medical news. No penthouse suite can protect someone from crushing loneliness. No position of political power can keep someone from feeling the heartbreak of losing someone they love.

Our armor will not protect us from life. Not all of it, anyway.

And when life sneaks in past all those layers of plate steel, all that chain maille, and stabs us hard, our armor does what it was meant to do: it prevents others from seeing our tender spots, from seeing where we are hurting, from seeing where we need healing and love.

I suppose there are good reasons why armor hides the hurt we feel. I mean, in battle, it is probably best if your opponent does not realize if you are injured and in a vulnerable state.

But the truth is this: we are very rarely in a battle with life and death consequences. Most of the time, the thing most likely to be injured by the world are our feelings, or our hearts.

Hiding our injury from those who love us deprives everyone of the connection that happens when we care for one another. It is in times like this that our armor becomes our prison. It keeps us separated from hurt, yes, but it also keeps us apart from love, and affection, and growth.

Any barrier that keeps pain from reaching our hearts also keeps love from reaching our hearts. Walls cannot tell friend from foe. They keep out all who approach.

Letting down our walls – our armor – feels very risky. After all, what will keep us safe? To which I ask this question: safe from what? What is it in our lives, here in 2023, in the United States, with so much technology and so many conveniences, what is it that we are so afraid of? We are not likely to be eaten by a saber toothed tiger.

We are most likely to be embarrassed. Hurt. To feel ashamed.

And then what? Will the world end? No.

Will we be uncomfortable? Oh yes. Yes, we will feel uncomfortable.

But will it kill us? No. we will just be uncomfortable.

And what might happen in that time? Our friends and loved ones will get a glimpse of our tender heart, seeking connection and love.

Chances are good they've got a tender heart hiding within their own armor as well, and yearn for connection in the same way we do.

Nobody is going to do this for us. We must be willing to take the first step toward becoming vulnerable. Brene Brown has made a cottage industry around accessing and becoming empowered by our own vulnerability.

I cannot tell you how to peel back the layers of your own armor in a way that works for you. I can only encourage you to do so. Start in a safe place, with someone you trust, and work from there. That's all I can offer.

This work is simple but not easy.

Like a marathon, learning to become appropriately vulnerable is simple: you run until you reach the finish line. It's simple, but certainly not easy.

There are so many metaphors available in this discussion. Our emotional and spiritual armor becomes like a cage – a fish tank that limits the growth potential of its fishy tenants, a pot that restricts the growth of a plant seeking to spread its roots deep and wide so it can grow and thrive.

I remember seeing an essay many years ago – I almost want to say I saw it in the UU World. It must have been in the 1990s, I think.

It was a story about a person confined to a jail cell for a number of years. He liked to collect bits of wire: little scraps left from the prison shop where he worked. He kept them in a glass bottle on a shelf in his cell. With each new wire, he'd squash it down into the bottle until the bottle was filled with what looked like a solid mass of tangled wires.

When he was released from prison, he took his bottle of wire with him and put it on the shelf in the room he rented. He worked hard to adapt to the outside world, but he struggled. He'd been in prison for so long, he had constructed layers upon layers of armor around his heart to keep himself safe from the horrors of incarceration. He could not connect with the world where he now found himself. He made the choice to end his life, as so many do who are faced with what feels like an impossible situation. He hung himself in that room. As he did, the bottle fell from the shelf and smashed on the floor. Shards of glass scattered everywhere. The wires, though, forced together for so long, retained the shape of the bottle that had contained them for so many years.

Armor and walls can keep us safe for a long time, but eventually they become like prisons, keeping us from growing beyond the space they contain.

I pray for each of you to embrace gently the work of opening up to spiritual growth and the connections that make life good.

Blessed be and amen.