

Copyright Geist Christian Church, April 14, 2024

Sermon Title: Keeping It Real: For A Time Such As This

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Text: [2 Corinthians 12:6-10 CEB](#)

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Many of you know that both Mary Michael and I grew up in Atlanta, Georgia. We grew up with the Coca-Cola company. In Atlanta, drinking Pepsi wasn't an option, especially if you were looking for a vending machine or something like that. My graduate degree is from a school within Emory University, named after the founder of Coca-Cola Asa Candler, who gave one million dollars in 1914 to start the school, Candler School of Theology.

So, in 1985, when New Coke was introduced to the market, replacing the formula that had been around for years, we lived for several months in Atlanta with uproar and dissatisfaction. The company received many letters, some addressed to the CEO as "Chief Dodo, the Coca-Cola Company." After three months, the original formula, which is what is sold today, came back as "Coca-Cola Classic." The marketing campaign that went along with the original formula was, "It's the real thing."

Today, we begin a new sermon series where we will be searching for the real thing. Calling it *Keeping it Real: The Power of Vulnerability*, we will look at the power in our lives that comes from being real. Real with ourselves, real with others, and real within the context of community. A key to being real is practicing vulnerability. This time, I believe, demands vulnerability from us in order to experience true human flourishing.

A lot of work has been done in this area by Brene Brown, and she describes vulnerability as "uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure." Vulnerability is putting ourselves out there, stepping out of our comfort zones and loosening the control we think we have over our lives.

A distinguished Duke professor was once asked the question, "What is the thing you are most afraid of?" and his answer was this: "I'm most afraid of being found out."

We have this instinct to hide. Hiding from what we don't want to see or what we don't want others to see. Vulnerability comes from the Latin word for wounded, and it is a willingness to let our weaknesses show, to be honest with ourselves and with one another.

And of all the human emotions, we are probably most uncomfortable with vulnerability. We believe we will get dinged, judged and rejected for being vulnerable, for being real.

And for us to flourish, for the Christian community to flourish, that must change. The Bible tells us that vulnerability is essential. We must practice vulnerability in order to follow Jesus and live the lives God has called us to.

Second Corinthians is a text in the Bible where the Apostle Paul wrestles with his own brokenness, with his ability to cope with that which was not easy or perfect in his life and ministry. There were those who were saying that Paul didn't have what it took to share and live the Good News, pointing out his shortcomings. One of the primary ones that might surprise you was that he was not a good public speaker. People were saying he was unqualified and ill-equipped to share Christ's Good News. This was happening a lot, some continuing to point out Paul's perceived weaknesses. And so Paul prays to God, and this is what he hears in that moment of prayer about these weaknesses:

Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me,⁹ but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.¹⁰ Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ, for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:8-10)

When we think of weakness, we think of something we don't want. Weakness is bad and something we don't want. Strength is something good that we want more of.

Think about this: In a job interview, when someone asks you about your strengths, we typically find it pretty easy to answer that question. But when someone asks us about weaknesses, we struggle. Some even say, "I have no weaknesses," which also typically means you are not getting that job.

But here is Paul testifying that when he found the courage to be vulnerable, to be real with himself and others, this was the place where the transforming power of faith in Jesus Christ shined most dramatically.

There is a correlation between weakness and spirituality. The more vulnerable we allow ourselves to be, the more open we become to God's presence. The more we try to control ourselves and others, the more disconnected we become from God's presence.

I read an article this week by Derek Thompson. The title grabbed my attention: "The True Cost of the Churchgoing Bust." Interestingly enough, Derek Thompson is an agnostic. He points out that nearly 25%

of Americans identify themselves as atheist, agnostic, or religiously unaffiliated. What was more striking is that in the past 25 years, 40 million Americans stopped going to church. It's the largest concentrated change in church attendance in American history.

And, this may also surprise you: He says this is a problem. The United States is also in the midst of a historically unprecedented decline in face-to-face socializing. That decline is steepest in those groups who are also opting out of church. For example, people 15 to 19 years old, who are less likely to attend religious services, are also the largest group of people who are spending time of their own.

In other words, many who have walked away from organized religion have by and large found no alternative method to build a sense of community.

Finding meaning in the world is hard. It gets even harder if we do not have a group of people with whom we can honestly explore meaning. Of those interviewed for the article, for their primary reasons for staying in a religious community, there were two overwhelming reasons:

1. Experiencing something in community
2. Instilling values in their children

I will add this: People lost interest in the church as a form of community because the church forced them to be something they were not; they could not fully be their authentic selves, could not ask questions, and could not be vulnerable with one another.

This makes no sense. The Church is built around someone in Jesus, who was willing to do the most vulnerable thing, give himself fully to God's way for this world, all the way to a cross. If there is anywhere in the world where we can be vulnerable, where we can be real, it should be the Church. That's part of the case Paul is making in being vulnerable with the church at Corinth, trusting in God, whom he recognizes this way: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

This is a time when the church must be a place where people can be vulnerable with each other and with God. I want to close with two quotes this morning and invite you back next week for part two of this series:

"Vulnerability is the birthplace of connection and the path to the feeling of worthiness. If it doesn't feel vulnerable, the sharing is probably not constructive" (Brene Brown).

"There can be no vulnerability without risk; there can be no community without vulnerability; there can be no peace, and ultimately no life, without community" (M Scott Peck).

Let us pray.

