

Practicing Availability and Vulnerability

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In the north of England is a dispersed Christian community whose community rule is availability and vulnerability. I have found these two words extremely helpful in guiding and shaping spiritual life and interactions with others. This month I want to work with how this is modeled in the life of Jesus and how we can practice availability and vulnerability as a spiritual discipline.

The mystery of the Trinity, a mutually submissive community each giving way to the other, is a helpful place to begin. The Trinity models relationships for us—a living example of Jesus' teachings of loving God and neighbor.

The Life of Jesus: Availability

I think it's important to assume that Jesus was intentional in what he did and how he spent his time. Why did he spend the bulk of his time on earth secluded from public life working with wood in what some would call the armpit of the Middle East? Why did he pour so much into twelve ordinary people of no social status? If we want to follow Jesus, tell his story and change our world, it's a helpful thing to look seriously at the way he chose to live his life.

If I were charged with bringing a message that would forever change the face of humanity, seeking to establish a kingdom on earth, bringing restoration to all civilization, and announcing a history-altering new reign of love, I would want to get right to work on it. I would go after the power structure, establish a formal organization, raise money, build buildings and schools, and spread the message to the largest possible audiences. I would dine with the people of great influence. I would join boards and committees. Instead, Jesus "wasted" thirty years and then spent three years camping with a group of ordinary people, yet the long-term results are staggering. Certainly Jesus spoke to large crowds, did public healings and exorcisms, but a good part of his ministry was, quite simply, spent offering his presence to a small ragtag group of twelve. The fact they still believed he was the Messiah after spending so much time with him may just be proof of his divinity. You spend a week camping with me and surely any allure of divinity will quickly fade away.

Jesus' example of temporary isolation from public life and his decision to focus on significant availability to a select few has much to teach us as we go about our ministries and daily lives. Staying in community for many years by its very nature lends itself to growing and cultivating significant relationships. I can only imagine the impact that many years of living a simple, "ordinary" life, most likely helping his father in the carpentry craft, had on those in his local community. It's also interesting that as Jesus began his public life he did not give significant time to everyone. Certainly some wanted more from him but he set boundaries. I understand the idea of seriously mentoring a group of people, but even after all

his efforts, the outcome seemed to be an utter failure. He even lost one to suicide. This is important for us to grasp. Not only does it show us the importance of focusing our efforts on a small number of people, it provides us an example of how we should set up our expectations of outcomes when we commit our efforts to be available to others. Seeing the results of Jesus' labors help me to let go of my agenda for how things should go. It enables me to let go of my need to see big results and my idea of success. This encourages me to learn to be with people and share my life with them.

In our working with others it is important to note that after his apprentices' failures, he didn't give a strong correction, or even try to micromanage them. Rather, he empowered them with love and forgiveness, modeling a seemingly absurd relational method of transformation. Yet out of the ashes of his disciples' failures, his message simmered and soaked. It was these broken people he charged with carrying the most important message the world would ever hear. His "being with" empowered them to carry his message and thus completely alter the social, religious, and governmental structures of the world.

Sadly, in modern times, following Jesus' model of discipleship is often secondary to imitating corporate methods.

The Life of Jesus: Vulnerability

In the Garden of Gethsemane we find Jesus pleading with his friends for help, to stay and pray with him. Asking for help requires vulnerability. When they let him down, Jesus confronted them not once, but twice. Confronting a friend requires significant vulnerability. Notice the love in his confrontation, that in extreme disappointment, Jesus displays a distinct other-centeredness saying to Peter, "... that you may not come into the time of trial, I know your spirit is willing but flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41). Even in Jesus' time of great suffering and disappointment he offered grace and thoughtfulness.

Probably the most profound picture of vulnerability is Jesus naked and nailed to the cross, raised on a stand, arms stretched out, bare for all to see, mocked for all his earthly efforts. It is a picture of giving, holding nothing back, openness, love, vulnerability, and submission to God and others. Then those haunting words, "Father, forgive them they know not what they do" (Luke 23:24). This is what loving those who persecute you looks like. To make a public declaration that a person doesn't know what they are doing could be made in such a way as to belittle. But, in this context we see it dripping with love. Jesus looked into the heart of his killers and saw their frailty. He saw their brokenness and foolishness. And in the middle of great agony he reached down with compassion, further opening himself to ridicule—an incredible act of vulnerability. I imagine Jesus understood that soon his tormenters would realize the significance of their actions and that it would wreak unimaginable havoc on the rest of their lives. The nightmares, the memories of the sounds of flesh tearing, the color of the

blood, and the look on his face, would be a burden impossible to carry. His vulnerable words of forgiveness would soon come to mean everything to them.

Availability and Vulnerability as a Spiritual Discipline

It's important to remember that we are asked to follow Jesus with lives. This can only be lived out in the middle of the places and spaces we inhabit. We begin in the midst of our relationships and the positions we hold. I like the way phrases Romans 12:1, "Take your everyday ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering." We bring before God who we are at this very moment, our personalities, habits, shortcomings, and giftings. Rest easy knowing that God accepts what we have to offer and that the Spirit is fully intent on the grace required for our transformation.

I may not be able to spend three years camping with twelve people, but in my remaining years I can intentionally make myself available to a few. Probably the best place to start practicing the discipline of availability is with the people God has already placed in our lives, for many of us this will be in our homes. Of course, few relationships are more challenging, intimidating, and intimate than with our loved ones; they know us all too well for us to hide behind the wall of pretense that can dominate so many of our human interactions. This is also the space where we learn to relinquish the habit of letting our agenda, our fears, and our need to control undergird our conversations. Of course, being truly available to others is, by its very nature, vulnerable; and choosing to make ourselves vulnerable is not an emasculated position of weakness, rather it is a movement toward strength, joy, and freedom.

I sometimes wonder how often we spend time with people free of agenda. While a variety of interactions are often needed, I've come to favor submitting my words and agenda to God. Without fail, when I simply seek to be present with people, it gives spaces for God to guide, bringing wonderfully honest conversations. We show up and simply offer the greatest gift we have to give, our time and presence. There is great freedom in laying before God our need to be important, noticed, or having something helpful to say. In relinquishing my desire to control, it gives space for God to work in other's lives through our exchanges. Generous listening can require great patience and effort, but it is a skill worth practicing that forms something deep within us. We are learning to listen and, if I cannot listen to my brother and sister, I certainly cannot listen to God. We bring who we are, thus the state of our heart. Our character formation then becomes of great importance. So often we can only take people as far as have been. My listening to God and my own apprenticeship to Jesus is what I have to give.

Building and cultivating relationships is slow and messy work. As with any discipline, we are doing our efforts before God as an act of submission. We start small, letting go of our obsessions with perfection, allowing our failures to become teachable moments that only push us further into the heart of God.

It is important to note that as with most service, we will often find we receive more than we give. God is good like that. Not only am I given the opportunity to learn from others, but when people open up to us and choose to share their lives it is quite possibly the highest honor they can bestow upon us.

Next month I want to continue working on this theme and offer some practical examples of practicing availability and vulnerability, potential challenges, and what this looks like in a ministry context.

I'd like to explore how we can practice these as a spiritual discipline, some potential challenges, and what these practices might look like in a ministry context.

Availability and vulnerability are not practices that one quickly or easily embarks on, particularly when we haven't seen them modeled in our relationships or communities. What is needed is intentionality, patience, and a willingness to enter into the messiness that seems indicative of human relationships. To love others means I will be hurt, but it is a movement that holds great eternal significance for our communities and individual formation.

Practice

I'm utterly convinced that if we move through each moment with an open and submitted heart before God, he is ever ready to open doors and guide our steps. Our task is to listen and obey. It is because of this I always hesitate to offer suggestions on how people should practice the disciplines; however, sometimes hearing how others have been guided to a specific practice can birth steps for us to follow. I trust the whisper of Jesus will direct you in your specific life and circumstances.

A few weeks ago I was out walking my dog and I noticed a neighbor I had never seen working in her yard. I felt a gentle nudge to go and say hello. Now this is not a prompt that I'm comfortable with—I'm an introvert and spend much of my working days with people. The time to walk the dog is "my time" and I wasn't eager to give it up for an uncomfortable and potentially awkward conversation. That day I smiled and jumped in by sheepishly complimenting her garden rocks. She lit up, eager to explain what she was working on. For the next 15 minutes we talked and she petted my dog. Nothing earth shattering came of the time, but I made a new friend and brought a smile to an older, single woman living in my neighborhood. As I walked home, I prayerfully processed my frequent reluctance to make myself available to others. Of course prayer is so often a simple conversation with God about what he and I are doing together. And so often the ordinariness of life teaches me to pray.

The other day I was in the staff break room at the university heating up my lunch. I had great plans for my lunch break. There were to-do lists to wrestle

with and important junk to look at on eBay. At the table was a former student of mine and again the whisper, "Have a seat and say hi." I embraced my awkward reluctance and submitted. While I ate my lunch, we talked, and again nothing of great significance. As it turned out she really liked house-sitting for people and was willing to do it for free. Not surprisingly in that moment, sitting on my to-do list was the task to find a house sitter. Isn't that so like God? I often think of life with God as a very ordinary adventure, seldom wild and exciting, but good, filled with grace and little moments of his care.

Of course this discipline does go beyond an impromptu willingness to have our day interrupted.

My friend Fil is in the habit of practicing the ministry of availability. He simply carves out space in his schedule to make himself available. "I regularly meet with a few people. I have no agenda. I'm just with them," he recently shared with me. "And through the years, life happens; people get married, have kids, lose jobs and die. And I'm there embedded in their lives, able to speak goodness and grace. I am able to be incarnational."

He went on to recount how one of the people he's been available to recently died. "I think he was waiting until I was there to die," Fil said. "It was so rich and beautiful; we couldn't have had the conversations had we not connected for years. It was a great honor for me to be by his side in the hospital."

While giving of our time to others is a great gift, giving of our heart is the ultimate offering of availability and vulnerability. Many of us are in the habit of practicing guarded, shallow relationships. Certainly in many contexts it is not appropriate or safe to give deeper parts of ourselves. And wounds of the past make this practice nearly impossible for some. Probably all that's needed is entering relationships with courage and a willingness to be known.

For one reason or another, the books I've written are awkwardly transparent. I never intended for them to be, but I found my angst and tears spilled out on the pages. While it's horribly uncomfortable to have published my secrets and fears, something remarkable has come of it. In a sense, I think it's given others freedom to follow. Vulnerability is contagious. I've come to view it as leadership and a way to practice neighbor love.

And so we work this out in our words and lives. It can really be as simple as a text or random phone call to a friend, or having the space to stop to talk with those we encounter. Of course, some of the richest treasures are moving with intentionality in our long-term relationships.

Jesus gives us a good example of taking a few people and pouring himself into them. It is important to note that even with Jesus giving of himself, it was not without complications. He even lost one to suicide along the way. Notice that in

the midst of the disciples' great failures, Jesus empowered them, allowing his message to grow them into persons who were able to lead. It is so critical in being with others to surrender our need for achievement and results. We simply help lead others into a life with God, but the work is a work of God. I don't think he asks us to be successful, but to be faithful; we surrender the results to him. Certainly some lead in places of great influence with the masses, but we all are called to follow the Jesus model of helping pass on what we have learned and experienced.

Challenges

Probably the biggest hindrance to being available and vulnerable is our constant hurry and overcrowded schedules. There is one very simple solution to this problem: learning to say "No." You do realize that every time we say "yes" to something we are effectively saying "no" to something else. Usually that "no" is to the things that matter most to us—close friends, family, self-care, soul tending, and of course, being available. I'm relatively good at saying "no" to things that come up which I don't enjoy doing. It is the good things and the things I want to do that trip me up. It is at this point that I find having people who know me well enough to speak into my ultimate intentions and priorities to be a great asset.

A quote from my friend Robert speaks so strongly and deeply to my predicament: "Busyness is greed." By filling my life with events, activities, and responsibilities that far exceed the boundaries God has set for humans to function well, I am being greedy. Greedy for experiences and accomplishments that are unrealistic. Greedy for pleasing others and being acknowledged. In a very real sense I'm trying to escape my own mortality by trying to do more than God intended for me. Our culture constantly encourages us to lead lives of excess, assuring us that few things are beyond our reach if we only work hard enough and push the boundaries of human capability. This approach has destructively infiltrated our lives. We simply cannot do and be everything we want, even if it is good.

I have a friend that spent a year crafting a detailed rule of life. Yearly he sits down and orders his schedule based on the filter of the priorities of his commitments. He schedules time with his kids and family, time for rest, and solitude with God before he adds anything else. Here we see someone working against another strange hindrance to making ourselves availability and vulnerable to God and others: laziness.

So often the way I end up living my life is a consequence of choices—the choices I made months prior. It is lazy to fail in planning to live within the parameters of what is healthy. And I'm as guilty as anyone.

As we seek to make conscious decisions about how we spend our time and order our schedules, it is important to bring a generosity to our boundaries, both in our time and emotions. Do not mistake the practice of always saying "yes" to

others as a form of service; quite the opposite can be true. Often our obsession with people-pleasing is rooted in selfishness. Many of us were conditioned from birth that our worth and identity is based on what we are doing, achieving, and ultimately what people think about us. When we set boundaries for our commitments, our motives for trying to do more than what is healthy begin to bubble up, thus revealing our underlying desires and insecurities. What a wonderful opportunity to continue that conversation with God about what we are working on together. It is here, in the presence of God's acceptance, that we question how we have committed our days, hours, and minutes and how this speaks to who we are and what we value. And, it is in this space that we must dive deep into the well of God's immense and immeasurable love for us.

In so doing we root our worth and identity in our belovedness as sons and daughters of God. From this place of knowing we may soon find an ability to make decisions about how to commit ourselves to be available and vulnerable to God and others. Secure in Jesus' complete acceptance, we find ourselves free to set limits and free to give to others, free to say "no" to the greed of wanting to do everything, and ultimately free to let go of the martyr complex that so many of us carry. When good boundaries are in place, we may find we are no longer bitter, angry, overtaxed, or overstressed at the commitments we have made.

Part of this is tending to our own souls with self-care. Please don't mistake self-care for selfishness. As a discipline before God, we carve out spaces to attend to our physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. We severely diminish our ability to be helpful to others when we live stretched and ragged lives. Boundaries to create space for self-care are a way that we love others well.

Ministry

So how do we create little pockets of communities marked by availability and vulnerability? Quite simply—it starts with us. I think of a leader as the person willing to jump off the high dive first. We lead by example. We model what we want for others, and in so doing, we are able to confidently announce, "The water is fine! You too can jump!"

Our worship communities have so many pressing compulsions: numerical growth, buildings, production, relevancy, and often our very survival. What does it look like for our gatherers to be bathed in a communal longing for availability and vulnerability before God and the natural transformation that flows out of this posture? What if we could suspend the inclinations of interacting with others as a means of manipulating, controlling, and using? What if we greeted our fellow congregants with the dignity and respect of a God-kissed creature made in his very image, holding before us the words of C.S. Lewis "... your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses?" What if we entered our greeting time, meals, and events free from agenda with a readiness to be available and vulnerable? If this was the case, we would certainly be known the world over for our love, a beacon of hope and healing. Sadly, we often trade the riches of the

Kingdom among us for rigid traditions, nice buildings, quality productions, and emotionally removed charismatic preaching.

Of course, it's always easy to offer critique from the outside. The challenge in being the Church we want and long to be has been a good source of tension for me these last months. I recently joined the pastoral staff in a small congregation, speaking once a month, helping with planning, structuring the Sunday service and meeting with people. Much to my surprise, it has become one of the most life-giving things I have done in years. Yet, I find there is so much I long for us to be as a worshiping community. We are small, simple, inner city, and poor. The church lacks programs, pretense, and resources. In a sense it's as good as it gets. Yet we are shy, introverted, and transient. We are discussing ideas of how to practice being vulnerable and available in this community. Give it five years and we'll see what happens. Growth in the spiritual life, as well as growth in God's other creations, the natural world and universe, takes time and so often what we would consider slow. This is not an issue for God; rather, it is his design and intention.

Action

We've come into an age, at least in America, where you'll be hard-pressed to find someone who doesn't know the Jesus story or have ready access to a Bible. Society is tired of our dogma, moral, and political fights. People have become skeptical and disillusioned with anything Christian. As all the glittery things we fill our lives with fail to satisfy, there is a deep longing and desperation to find another way to live than the shallow, lonely, and overwhelmed lives so many find themselves stuck in. What Christianity offers is so different: the easy burden of following Jesus, a life free of hurry and distraction, free from an obsession with having our own, self-condemnation, and the constant drive to do and achieve.

Our society is literally dying to cultivate something deep, meaningful, and true. What a wonderful time in history to practice Jesus' relational model of apprenticeship in availability and vulnerability. We have no right to selfishly keep all our time, locking up our hearts, and cheating the world. Being in the habit of walling ourselves off from others is not only a direct path to deep loneliness, but effectively deprives the world of the gifts and life God has so graciously given us. And, what better way to start than by simply making ourselves available in the midst of everyday, ordinary life.