

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, the time is very soon upon us. It is time to journey toward the star and the miracle before us. The calling is there, and it beckons us to come to the stable, to the manger. We ask for the strength to follow and the wisdom to see the new thing happening among us. We ask to be surprised into seeing how the world absolutely changes before us when we behold the Christ child. He leads us in ways that we do not necessarily want to go, but we seek to heed the call that we may be forged, reformed into the most authentic and loving creatures that we may be. We lift up this prayer and all the prayers we've named aloud and in our hearts today. We lift up our vulnerability in our uncertainty, our questioning, and our true emotions to you, for you see, you nurture, and you love us.

Holy God, this week we recognize love in our waiting for the Christ Child. We hear so many messages about the goodness of love, which we fully appreciate, but we also hear a lot of messages about the ease of love. We cannot accept this message, God, for you lead us to recognize how utterly complicated and difficult true love is. It is a path that leads us to be just like Jesus, it leads us to be vulnerable, to realize that control is a mirage. Walk with us to claim this aspect of humanity faithfully, recognizing that we need it to be fully human and to fully live a life of love. We pray all these things in the name of the most vulnerable yet most powerful, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray as one, saying...

## SERMON

You know what? I LOVE Peyton Manning. I love everything he does for the Broncos. I love the season he's having. I love taking a trip down to Mile High and watching the Broncos live, even though I haven't been able to do that in a couple of years. I really hate that part. I love the success the Broncos are having, but I hate that they're having so much

success that we can't get tickets. You'd think we could in a stadium that size, but nowadays, everyone loves the Broncos. Because they're hot, everyone gets tickets. I hate that part.

Throughout that little piece, I said "love" six times and "hate" three times. And you know what? None of the times I said "love" or "hate" was the feeling fit to say those words. Language has become cheap, easily colloquialisms. We cheapen "love" to mild appreciation and "hate" to a simple inconvenience. Would I like to go to Mile High more often? Definitely yes. Does it inhibit my quality of life that I have to watch from my home? Nope. The language becomes cheap, and when the language is cheap, it can dramatically reduce the understanding of these concepts. The watered-down nature must be remedied.

Now, we reach week four of Advent, the week where we recognize love. Love is far more complex than we can tackle in one sermon, so I'll keep my focus narrow. I chose to reflect up on "Lo, How a Rose Ere Blooming" as a hymn on love. When we first hear "love," like so many other words in our vocabulary, we rest upon a certain set of assumptions spurned on by our culture. Love is wonderful, love is stress-free. Love leads to "happily ever after." Yeah, but most of that is...well...garbage. Most of that is too easy. Love is wonderful, but love is also far from stress-free. Love has a way of taking us to our deepest selves and to bring that out in ways that are highly intimate and defenseless, in all of love's forms. Let's explore love in the hymn "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming," as we see how the hymn presents vulnerability, discuss how we understand and can know vulnerability, and how we can recognize God's love in imperfection and the tension between.

I invite you to turn to page 174, as we look at the hymn "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming." This is not necessarily one of the more popular hymns of the season, but it has a unique way of encountering the miracle before us. It speaks of a rose blooming from the

line of Jesse. "It came a flower bright, amid the cold of winter, when half-gone was the night." We see just the beginning of tension here, as we talked about last week, when we think of a flower blooming in winter. Flowers don't bloom in winter. We have a lot of things that don't add up, but the image of a rose is poignant. I think, so often, there are very few images that reflect love well. The rose is the typical flower one gives to signify love. The flower is absolutely beautiful, yet incredibly vulnerable. With simply a strong touch, the petals of the bloom can be damaged or float away, leaving little behind. Nevertheless, a rose, like love, is not always fun and perfect. There are the rough parts, the thorns, that protect the vulnerability of the flower. In the same way, love has vulnerability and the need to protect ourselves. Our rose, Christ, showed that love: vulnerable and sometimes painful.

What is vulnerability? I asked this question in Bible Study, and not surprisingly, most answers had a negative slant. We think of vulnerability as foolishness or not being careful, asking for trouble. We associate it with weakness, not being strong. Indeed, it's become almost a virtue to live our lives without any sign of vulnerability. We love to tough things out and not let others know when we are hurting, especially for males. It almost seems like a badge of courage. That's one usage, but I think the dominance of that image can get in the way of how we should live our lives. Like love, we can cheapen this word to only a lack of strength or foolishness. On the other hand, I would submit that it takes more courage to be vulnerable. It's more faithful to the calling of God to be a vulnerable person in showing who we really are. In all fairness, we need to be wise about how we be vulnerable, but I think we stray too cautious most of the time. Lately, I listened to a radio show called "On Being" which discussed vulnerability. The host interviewed researcher Brene Brown on her study of vulnerability. It is what makes us human. We need

vulnerability to make us strong and well adjusted in life. It's a tension: vulnerability makes us strong. Here's the thing: it's a necessary component of living a life of well-rounded love. It helps us to love more fully when we aren't trying to control everything. Our concentration becomes loving more fully and seeking the other's benefit, not what we think the other's benefit is. Vulnerability shows who we are and hopes the other will honor it.

It is hard, but it is also the way in which we get below the surface, beyond the small talk to our real humanity. As Brene Brown said, and it resounded with me, vulnerability is the first thing I look for in the next person and the last thing I want to show the next person. You know what? I cried many times at our wedding. The first time I saw Catherine in her wedding dress, I was so full of emotion that I cried unceasingly for a couple of minutes, hardly being able to get out telling her how beautiful I thought she was. I cried during the ceremony, far more than she did. OK, you may say, yeah, you can cry at your wedding. But what about something more simple? The Doctor Who Christmas Special will be this Wednesday night, and we are going to say Goodbye to the Eleventh Doctor, Matt Smith. When Matt Smith leaves, I'll probably be emotional, because you get a close connection with those characters. I know vulnerability every day when I say "goodbye" to my wife, for I recognize and name, however much I tell her to drive safely, that one does not know how everyone else will be driving. I seek to live the balance, as hard as it is, to love her enough to tell her to be careful but not to say it so much that I try to be controlling. Those are pieces of my vulnerability. These are just a few examples, and I often don't get it right. Sometimes I try really hard not to show my true feelings or I end up controlling to protect my feelings. In those times, I end up not being fully myself, and not really loving to myself or others. Maybe it's different for you. For some, it might mean that you send your

children out, and you have no control on how they go about their lives, knowing that true love means they find their own path. It may mean you share an opinion or observation that requires courage. Dating is vulnerability. All these mean we open our feelings because love isn't possible until we've shown who we really are. I've barely covered the gamut, but love requires vulnerability with each other and, frankly, ourselves.

We have quite the tension. God's love is quite vulnerable, when we really look at it. On the other hand, it is beyond our understanding of strength. I heard a great little tidbit on the podcast Sermon Brainwave I'd like to share. I didn't have Joan read it (or have y'all listen to it), but I'd like you to turn to the very beginning of Matthew, found on page 1496 of the pew bibles. Here you can see the genealogy of Jesus, as the writer understands it, from Abraham onwards. While there's a lot here that is difficult, it's worth noting a few of the characters here. If we want to think that this is a genealogy without problem, you'd be mistaken. There's some stuff along the way that we might consider downright wrong. Boaz and Ruth are mentioned. Their story is in the Book of Ruth. They have sexual relations before they are married. Go down a little further, and you have David. It says "David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah." Remember that story? David sees Bathsheba, lusts over her, kills her husband, then has children with her, among those King Solomon. Oops. There were a lot of Kings in the line of David that were considered to be sinful. The line here isn't exactly, shall we say, morally pure.

Today, we recognize that this leads to the perfect gift of love. Looking at this line, though, there was a lot to bring us to this point that was far from OK. There was adultery, murder, lying, and much more. Let me put it to you a different way. Have you messed up so badly you thought there was no remnant of forgiveness possible to you? We've all done

it; we've said and done things that still sting us today when we think about them. And yet, you are here. I've made mistakes, but they have made me a more complete and mature person. I hope many of you can say the same thing. We mess up, but that's not the end. We become better for it. So many of the people in this line have been, well, human. We can be vulnerable in negative ways. They've given into the worst inclinations from time to time. Nevertheless, the Savior was born. Jesus came to Earth despite all those things that could have stood in his way. The point here is this: love comes to fullness in the midst of imperfection. The love of God is perfect; we are imperfect. We expose our imperfection in our vulnerability, and we can be wounded and show our woundedness, but we grow into better people through it. We grasp the love's perfection when we are at our most imperfect. It's a strange tension, but then again, what in life isn't? Our lives require vulnerability just like that special Rose. Christ could not be more vulnerable in his coming as a newborn. And yet, we recognize it comes to be strength. The miracle has just begun.

Jesus Christ is before us. His incarnation and the utter vulnerability, like a rose, is how we will approach the manger this Christmas Eve. This is just one half of the discussion; we see Christ embodying love soon and how the Love of God is made perfect through our weakness. Until that time, contemplate love. It is not the mushy stuff we hear about on the radio or the way we describe our football team. It's more than that. It is wonderful, but it requires responsibility. It requires that we be in the position that we fear the most: we be vulnerable and open, but the experience strengthens us. It is the same with God; God opens God's self to vulnerability when God cares for each one of us, for true vulnerability in love may call but does not force to respond. Love becomes strong even in

the midst of our human failings. Until the coming, keep watch, living in the vulnerability of love while love becomes tangible in the form of a beloved child. Amen and Amen.