

Why Being Needy and Vulnerable Can Be a Good Thing

You can't fully experience the "what can be" aspect of the gospel by yourself. God works in your soul in real ways to heal and cleanse and make new. And the practical reality, then, is that you become much less afraid of other people—and thus more able to love and be loved.

The way you experience those fuller relationships, that setting aside of fear, though, is through an increased capacity for vulnerability. It's a bit of a paradox. The word "vulnerability" means "able to be wounded," as we mentioned earlier. But the beauty of the gospel is that over time, God builds a bottom floor into your soul. You belong to the God who made you and who has promised that He will never let you go (see Matt. 28:20). Not ever. So you can actually risk more with other people, because if someone fails you—or you fail them—it's not the last word. There's the hope of repair. But even more, a greater love covers you both. You can risk vulnerability—which means you can risk the probability that sooner or later, with someone, you'll feel hurt. And you'll cause hurt.

Vulnerability opens up the possibility of knowing (at least) a few people deeply—and being known by someone else. An older man once said to me, as he reflected on years of following Christ, "I am a wealthy man. My life has been rich with relationships." He realized he'd been able to go deep—to really enjoy people, because the gospel increased his capacity to love and be loved. That's the further goodness of what can be—the goodness God offers each of us through redemption.

The Secret Weapon God Offers

Vulnerability isn't easy, which is why it's often spoken of in terms of courage. When you're vulnerable, you share something of your life with someone—and you never know, really, how that will be received.

We don't want our weakness or sin to be discovered. We don't want to be found out. Shame blocks our path to the soul-liberating relationships we long for. And shame poisons the vulnerability that's necessary in order to even (remotely) love others well.

Into this terribly human mix, God offers a secret weapon. In biblical terms, it's called humility. Humility is such a powerful phenomenon that the apostle Peter says we should wrap ourselves in it like it's our favorite everyday dress:

"Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble'" (1 Pet. 5:5, ESV; see also Prov. 3:34).

In those places in your life where you fear exposure, as though someone would see you as you are and grimace, God offers a surprisingly durable covering. Humility covers the naked experience of shame and thus makes it possible to flesh out vulnerability. Humility forges a path. Or, to change the metaphor a bit, humility flies under the radar of shame.

This is why God ordains humility as the path to the sort of vulnerability that feels like weakness in the moment but actually becomes true strength. When you allow the simple, humble truth into the light, God pours in grace—a special power that is his alone, but shared with you.

We are all outside the garden, and we are all afraid of being discovered. So we don't tell the truth about our lives. Our selves. Not very easily, anyway. I think often of the way writer Frederick Buechner put this:

"[We] tell what costs [us] least to tell and what will gain

[us] most; and to tell the story of who we really are and of the battle between light and dark, between belief and unbelief, between sin and grace that is waged within us all costs plenty and may not gain us anything ,we're afraid, but an uneasy silence and a fishy stare" (Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons* [New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006], 84.)

If it's true—and it is true—that the love of God wraps us tightly and that he who loves us has pledged to love us to the end, then we can weather the uneasy silence and a whole bunch of fishy stares. God knows. And he will bring along some flesh-and-blood people, as he did for me, who will look us straight in the eye and say, "Oh my. That must be hard." Just as we will do for another weary soul who needs a word of understanding and whose shame we are no longer so scared to see.

Permission to Need

In this journey of vulnerability, one small inner shift is so huge that it's like a tiny movement in the earth's plates on the ocean floor. All the water above moves in response.

This will sound deceptively simple, but trust me, it's not: When a woman takes a deep breath with people who matter to her and begins a sentence with the words, "I think what I need here is ...," something huge shifts inside her.

Those words have been some of the hardest ones I've ever gotten out of my mouth. I have been schooled and coached and conditioned to meet needs—not have them myself. What if my request just hangs out there, glaring and unmet? What if, God forbid, I sound kind of ... needy?

Most women are fantastically attuned to meeting others' needs. And that's a wonderful thing. Vulnerability, though, opens us up to the other side of that equation. If we are living as a daughter of God, one for whom Christ died, then God invites us

into a life where we can work and serve and give—and we can play and rest and receive (David Seamands, *Healing Grace: Finding Freedom from the Performance Trap* [Indianapolis: Light and Life Communications, 1999]).

You can't receive, though, if you don't have a need. And stepping into something that feels like weakness—that opens the possibility of experiencing hurt—is a recurrent saving theme of the gospel as it's lived out with others.

That's part of what makes Christ's life so compelling. The Son of God could ask his friends to pray for him in the hour of his great need? How amazing. He knew what it was to lay himself bare with others. And he knew the solace of the Father when his friends could not touch the depth of what he was experiencing as he faced the cross.

This God who spoke the world into being came in the frailest human form. The one who leads the stars out at night, as Isaiah wrote, (Isa. 40:26, author's paraphrase) permitted himself to be crucified between two common thieves. He is called the "Lamb of God." What animal is more vulnerable than a lamb? And even in heaven, His wounds are still visible—and He is the "Lamb who conquers." Ultimately, it's the chosen vulnerability of our God that gives us courage.

I think this is why Jesus modeled something for us in his worst moments that he knew we would find utterly necessary in our own worst moments. Even if the flesh and blood around you sleep through your request, even if they don't quite understand, you will be more open to God and others if you don't just buck up and soldier on.

You are a finite woman living in a screwed-up world with broken people. How could you not have a need? Having a need is like a homing device that draws you to God—and to others—and in that way, opens the doors to what can be. {eo}

Paula Rinehart *has been speaking and writing for women for*

more than 25 years. Her books include the best-selling Strong Women, Soft Hearts. Paula and her husband are the parents of two children and four grandchildren. They make their home in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Connally Gilliam serves with the U.S. Navigators. As the author of *Revelations of a Single Woman: Loving the Life I Didn't Expect*, she is a frequent speaker on sexuality, gender, race and the unremitting goodness of God found in Jesus Christ. Connally has seven nieces and nephews and is a godmother to five. She lives in Charlottesville, Virginia.

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