

5th March 2023 – PLYMOUTH

Being vulnerable – led by Rev Kate Whyman

1. **INTRO MUSIC** Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, Jazmine Sullivan
<https://youtu.be/eBN1ceSIPts>

2. **WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHT**

Welcome and good morning to you all, all here in this church in Plymouth, to those of you in Brighton Unitarian Church today, and all of you joining online from wherever you may be.

We gather here, as we do every Sunday, to remember once again who we truly are, to build loving community together, and to open our hearts and minds to the divine mystery in our lives, to the Source and Ground of all being.

But today is also St Piran's Day. St Piran, being the patron saint of Cornwall who was a 5th century Irish bishop but according to the legend was thrown into the sea by the jealous at Kings at the time, with a millstone round his neck. But Piran bucked the laws of nature by miraculously floating on this huge stone across the sea to a beach near Newquay, now called Perranporth in his honour. Although he did eventually die – so the story has it – when he fell down a well. But if he proved to be almost invulnerable – today's service is about us ordinary mortals – our theme is Being Vulnerable.

Let's begin our service, as is our custom, by lighting our chalice candle as a symbol of our free religious faith. (Do please light one with me if you are able to do so.)

LIGHT CHALICE

We light this flame this morning for our fragility, our insecurity, our fearfulness, our shame, in whatever way they show up in our lives. May this light give us courage to

breathe into our vulnerable corners and live from our inherent gentleness and compassion.

3. PRAYERS

Dawn Skjei (SHAY) Cooley

God of love and life

Because there have been times when shame has crushed our ability to be wholehearted

we let go of who we ought to be and embrace who we are.

Because we have not always had the courage to be imperfect

we let go of who we ought to be and embrace who we are.

Because we have struggled to have compassion for ourselves or others

we let go of who we ought to be and embrace who we are.

Because we have been afraid of our own vulnerability

we let go of who we ought to be and embrace who we are.

Because we are sometimes too scared to live authentically

we let go of who we ought to be and embrace who we are.

Because we want to be whole-hearted people, confident in our worthiness and our belonging

we let go of who we ought to be and embrace who we are.

4. FIRST HYMN 194 (P) We light the flame

I like this hymns but I want to say a few words about the last verse, which includes the line 'Forgive our sins, feed us with good bread daily, with strength resist temptation steadfastly,' which might jar with you. I would have preferred something like 'forgive our forgetfulness' and 'resist the distractions that don't serve us'. But I guess that wouldn't have scanned, so it's probably a good job I

don't write hymns.

We light the flame that kindles our devotions.
We lift our hearts in blessed community.
The mind has thoughts, the heart its true emotions,
we celebrate in worship, full and free.
Our faith transcends the boundaries of oceans.
All shall be granted worth and dignity.
So many ways to witness to the wonder,
so many dreams by day for us to dare.
Yet, reaching out, each way is made the grander,
and love made bold for dreamers everywhere.
Diversity will never cast asunder
our common weal, our bonds of mutual care.

Infinite Spirit, swell with us, we pray thee,
that we may share in life abundantly.
Forgive our sins, feed us with good bread daily,
with strength resist temptation steadfastly.
O God of life, sustain us now, and may we
with mindful hearts, be thankful constantly.

Music David Dawson, words © David Andrew Usher

5. **STORY** 'The Water of Life', by Kate Compston, from *100 wisdom stories from around the world*, by Margaret Silf.

Three people were searching for the water of life, hoping to drink from it and live forever. The first was a warrior: he reckoned the water of life would be very mighty – a torrent or a rapid – so he went in full armour, with all his weapons, believing he could force the water to yield to him.

The second was an enchantress: she reckoned the water of life would be very magical – perhaps a whirlpool or a geyser, something she would need to manipulate with spells – so she went in her long star-spangled robe, hoping to outwit the water.

The third was a trader: he reckoned the water of life would be very costly – a fountain of pearl-drops or diamonds, perhaps – so he loaded his clothes and purses with money, hoping to be able to buy the water.

When the travellers reached their destination, they found they had all been quite wrong about the water of life. It wasn't a torrent to be intimidated by force. It wasn't a whirlpool to be charmed by spells. And it wasn't a fountain of pearl-drops or diamonds to be bought for money. It was just a tiny, sparkling spring; its benefits were absolutely free – but, of course, you had to kneel to drink from it. This caused the seekers great consternation.

The warrior was in full armour and couldn't possibly bend.

The enchantress had on her long magic robe, and she feared that if it became wet it would lose its power.

The trader was so loaded with money that if he did no more than incline his head a little, coins would start rolling away into corners and crevices.

All dressed up, the three could not lower themselves to drink from the spring of the water of life. There was only one solution.

So the warrior laid aside his armour.

The enchantress laid aside her magic robe.

And the trader laid aside the clothes he had stuffed with money.

And then each of them – naked – could kneel to drink from the water of life and receive its sweet, cool, startling benefits

6. READING From 'Daring Greatly', by Brené Brown, American author and researcher

As children we found ways to protect ourselves from vulnerability, from being hurt, diminished, and disappointed. We put on armour; we used our thoughts, emotions, and behaviours as weapons; and we learned how to make ourselves scarce, even to disappear. Now as adults we realize that to live with courage, purpose, and connection — to be the person whom we long to be — we must again be vulnerable. We must take off the armour, put down the weapons, show up, and let ourselves be seen.

Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy — the experiences that make us the most vulnerable.

Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light.

7. **SECOND HYMN 204 (P) When I am frightened**

When I am frightened, will you reassure me?

When I'm uncertain, will you hold my hand?

Will you be strong for me, sing to me quietly?

Will you share some of your stories with me?

If you will show me compassion,
then I may learn to care as you do,
then I may learn to care.

When I am angry, will you still embrace me?

When I am thoughtless, will you understand?

Will you believe in me, stand by me willingly?

Will you share some of your questions with me?

If you will show me acceptance,
then I may learn to give as you do,
then I may learn to give.

When I am troubled, will you listen to me?
When I am lonely, will you be my friend?
Will you be there for me, comfort me tenderly?
Will you share some of your feelings with me?
If you will show me commitment,
then I may learn to love as you do,
then I may learn to love.

Words and music © Shelley Jackson Denham (arranged by Jeannie Gagné)

8. **MEDITATION and Candle lighting**

I invite you now to come to a time of reflection.
To sit with your vulnerable self. Your beautiful broken frightened and hopeful being.
A place without need for defences or narratives.
A safe place within, simply to be and to breathe.
A space for you and the divine only, where nothing needs to be said, where all is
already known and accepted.

Today I invite you not to speak, but simply to light a candle for this living, loving
vulnerable you, if you would like to. You may do this during the silence as well as
during the music that follows.

Let us share silence together.

9. **SILENCE**

10. **INTERLUDE:** 'Blackbird', The Gray Havens

https://youtu.be/t_oGZg3s1SQ

11. **ADDRESS**

The word vulnerable can mean different things, but is often associated with weakness or fragility, perhaps with being in a particular state of mind, or body, or stage of life that leaves us open to danger, abuse, exploitation. Children are by definition vulnerable because they are dependent on adults to take care of them. Adults may be vulnerable too if they are unwell, or grieving or dying for example. And so all of us are vulnerable at least some of the time, to some extent or other. The implication of being vulnerable may be that we aren't entirely safe on our own. That we are at risk of hurt or harm and therefore need other people more than ever to walk alongside us, to listen to us, to watch out for us, to be kind, to help, to support.

But today I am thinking more about the kind of vulnerability that is universal, that we all share however young or old, well or unwell, happy or unhappy we may seem to be. This is the vulnerability that's simply at the heart of being human. And paradoxically it's the kind of vulnerability that is actually a strength.

Listening to the reading I was put in mind of the Biblical origin story of Adam and Eve. What is the first thing they discover in the Garden of Eden? That there are rules, and that when they break those rules they are punished, and what they feel as a result is shame. They learn very quickly how to be ashamed and their response, you will recall I'm sure, is to immediately cover themselves up. It's a harsh lesson. And whoever wrote that story surely knew a thing or two about the experience of being human.

It also reminded me of my own origin story. In my family there was a lot of shame and covering up. Some of you know that I had a younger brother who had complex problems and learning disabilities. He was never able to speak, though he understood a few words and phrases. He didn't go to school or do many of the things

that most children would take for granted. And there was a rule. I wasn't supposed to talk about this, I wasn't meant to tell anyone that I had a brother with these difficulties, and so I spent many years as a child, in the playground, trying to cover up the truth, either by avoiding the inevitable questions about siblings, or fudging my answers. I didn't want to lie. But apparently it wasn't OK to tell the truth. Which was difficult, and stressful, and (as I now see) completely misguided because there is of course nothing shameful about having a disabled brother, or being a disabled person, and there's no reason to keep it quiet. But my parents didn't know that, and I guess that's because society as a whole didn't know it either.

And so, like some of you, I'm sure, I picked up the idea that there was something 'wrong' with my family – and by extension, I suppose, with me – and that it wasn't OK to talk about it. No one else should know. I had to pretend that we were all fine when actually we weren't. I think I became quite good at that, at being the smiley child who always managed to seem happy, whatever was going on at home. If I felt confused, or lonely, or worried, which I definitely did, I certainly never said so to anyone, not until many years later. Now I wonder how many of those other children in the playground also had secrets they daren't tell, and how we might have supported each other if only we'd known.

It seems we are very good at learning to keep quiet and cover up. It's certainly a strategy that can work well in some ways, and may be essential at time to keep us safe, but nevertheless the price is always high. The cost of keeping our fears and vulnerabilities hidden is that we end up keeping our selves hidden, and shutting ourselves out of our own deepest truths.

Brene Brown says: 'What most of us fail to understand and what took me a decade of research to learn is that vulnerability is also the cradle of the emotions and experiences that we crave... Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability and authenticity.'

That feels true to me. Though the situations we find ourselves in life may be sad or painful, challenging or regrettable, or worse, it turns out they can also be crucibles for

healing, connection and belonging. The silver lining is that they have the potential to open up our hearts if we let them.

Fortunately when we speak of God here, it is not the Old Testament judge, that capricious purveyor of rewards and punishments. Here we envision instead a God – or a higher power, or the divine, if you prefer – who is a compassionate witness, a loving presence, the One who knows and accepts and understands us as we are, and from whom we don't have to hide. The Beloved, who sees our vulnerabilities and yearns for us not to be ashamed of them, but rather to value them as the gifts that make us human. The same gifts that allow us to offer a hand, or a kind word, or a smile to another. It is our vulnerability, not our heroics or our bravado, that enables us to connect more fully with others, and others to connect more deeply with us. It is our vulnerability that opens up space for meaningful relationship and which allows us to be genuine and generous in our actions.

So I say, treasure the fragile places in your being. Take good care of them, because far from being shameful, they are precious. Befriend them yourself, and then share them - wisely – when you're ready - with those who are willing to reciprocate. Our lost-ness, our confusion, our hurt – all give us empathy and insight we would never otherwise have, and have the potential to make us stronger in the end.

We only get one chance to live life on earth, as this person, in this body. And the invitation is always there to remove yet another layer of armour, so that we too can finally kneel down and drink more deeply from the nourishing spring of the water of life.

May it be so.

12. **THIRD HYMN 133 (G) How can I keep from singing?**

My life flows on in endless song
Above earth's lamentation:
I hear the real though far-off hymn

That hails a new creation.
Through all the tumult and the strife
I hear the music ringing:
It sounds an echo in my soul –
How can I keep from singing!

What though the tempest round me roar,
I know the truth, it liveth.
What though the darkness round me close,
Songs in the night it giveth.
No storm can shake my inmost calm
While to that rock I'm clinging:
Since love prevails in heaven and earth,
How can I keep from singing!
When tyrants tremble, sick with fear,
And hear their death-knells ringing;
When friends rejoice, both far and near,
How can I keep from singing!
To prison cell and dungeon vile
Our thoughts of love are winging:
When friends by shame are undefiled,
How can I keep from singing!

American Gospel Tune, Early Quaker Song

13. CLOSING WORDS *Rev Jane Johnson Lewis*

May we have the courage to open ourselves to the pleasures and wounds of life.
May we have the strength to be open and honest with ourselves and others even
when it is difficult.
May we have the wisdom to understand that when we travel through the mist of
uncertainty, openness and vulnerability make it more possible to find our way

through.

To be open and vulnerable is to be alive.

Extinguish chalice

14. **CLOSING VIDEO** 'Comfort', Deb Talon

<https://youtu.be/uWvhOzwULpA>