

You can't live in Sarasota very long and not pay a visit to some circus in our area – the Sarasota Circus, the Sailor Circus, or at least a visit to the great Circus Museum up at the Ringling Complex. It's a great couple of hours of entertainment which these days we get to do on our TV's and computers – and not in person. All sorts of acts that thrill the audience – lion tamers, tight rope walkers, clowns, you name it – its great to be in the audience and watch these professionals do their thing to entertain us. It's entertainment, of course, when you are in the audience – it's not so entertaining when you are the one taming the lion or walking tightrope. I feel this way especially while watching the flying trapeze. Two, three, four people swinging wildly above – way, way above – and not just swinging, but casting themselves from their swings supported by nothing but thin air – those nanoseconds when having left the swing they await the arrival of another swing or another person. Now again these are professionals and they practice this art every day, at least they should be, and their timing of release and catch is not only precise but instinctive. Maybe they do this with some sense of fear – but because they do it everyday they do not allow fear to get in their way and they do not let fear keep them from facing into their vulnerability. And vulnerable they are. Anytime you are floating or somersaulting through midair 100 feet above ground unsupported you are vulnerable.

Now when you are the audience and your eyes are fixated above and you are watching these death defying acts of swinging and somersaulting and catching – you can for a moment suspend your memory and forget the fact that below these trapeze artists and these death defying routines – there is below them this huge, huge net. This huge, huge net. And the net is there, of course, to catch them. As vulnerable as they are up in the air – down below them is the NET. And, of course, the net allows them to deal with the vulnerability of the trapeze. The net allows them to leap and swing with more confidence and more daring.

You know life – your life and mine – is lived up in the air. It has always been that way. And it is that way today. We especially may feel that it is that way today. But life is always lived with a certain reality of vulnerability. We live life dependent upon a lot of things, a lot of people, a lot of coordination, a lot of hardware, a lot of software, a lot of technology to somehow keep us swinging through the air – despite the law of gravity wanting to pull us down. We count on so many things to work in our favor – and because we count on these things – we may convince ourselves that we are less vulnerable than we are.

Just a couple weeks ago I got a couple of new tires on my car. I dropped it off at the shop and a few hours later I came back and the guy pointed to the car in the parking lot with two new tires installed and said I was good to go. And I took his word for it. I had not met the technician who put the tires on my car, I did not ask to see whether this was the first time he had tried this or the thousandth time, I did not watch him as he put these new tires on my car. I just assumed I was good to go. And so out onto Bee Ridge Road I sped counting on the fact that the nameless, faceless technician had done a perfect job. I assumed my level on the vulnerability scale was low. And maybe it was – but because I had just sped myself onto the seven lane Indianapolis Speedway called Bee Ridge Road – I had increased my level of vulnerability to Medium/High! Yet I did not feel it. I felt as if I had things under control.

We like to feel like we have things under control. It is one of the ways that we move forward –when we work and practice and prepare for as many extenuating circumstances as possible. And we count on as many resources and people as possible to protect us from anything that might not be under our control. And we swing, and we float and we somersault and we have every hope that the awaiting arms and hands will grab us. The tire guy will change the tire right.

And the truth is it's almost always the case. We can count on others and almost always others come through. And even our bodies God has created are created to fend off viruses like these. And there is no reason to think that will not be the case even today.

But still we feel, understandably, vulnerable.

But the truth is we live life up in the air. And we are vulnerable to many things that are not under our control.

The Greeks understood this and thus told us the story of Achilles. And the story was that when Achilles was born his mother in order to make him invincible immersed him in the River Styx - -the mystically divine river full of protecting power – and it was the waters of the River Styx that were to make Achilles invulnerable to attack. And so Achilles became a great warrior – immune to the arrows of the enemy. Except for the fact that his mother when she dipped him in the river had to hold him by the heel. And so the heel was the one place where Achilles did not have the protection of the gods. And it was the heel where he was vulnerable to attack. And it was the heel where Paris' arrow struck and fell the great warrior. We all have an Achilles heel. A place where we are vulnerable.

And we feel all this vulnerability when we find ourselves in those moments and places where we know we are in less control than we thought we were.

- Taking the risk with people – saying, “I love you” for the first time – vulnerable to the other person's response. Or standing and speaking in front of a group of people – a fear some count greater than death.
- Being rolled into an operating room and placing your hands under the care of the surgeon. I remember watching them roll a member of my family into major surgery and as they took her through those door all I could feel was vulnerability for her and for us.
- Watching on the news some weather system that appears to be coming our way – and we know there's nothing we can do to change its path.
- Or being at the mercy of some other person's forgiveness. We've let someone down, hurt someone – and we know there is nothing we can do to earn their forgiveness. They just have to give it and we have no control over whether they choose to give it.
- Psalm 51 is this long prayer of a once seemingly invulnerable king who has done a very displeasing thing in the eyes of God and with every deep sense of vulnerability he feels David throws himself at God's mercy and begs his forgiveness. Begging God to blot out his transgression and to create within him a clean heart. And David says something very interesting in his prayer – one I have always found curious – David prays this: “The sacrifice acceptable to thee, O God is a broken spirit, a

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The Place Where God Most Deeply Meets Us

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broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” Now we are careful not to read this as God wanting us to suffer somehow with guilt and shame – but rather it seems that David is putting his finger on one of the great spiritual truths – that when we feel most vulnerable (most broken, as it were, most at the mercy of another) is when we are most open to God’s abiding mercy and grace. When we feel most vulnerable is when we are most open to God’s abiding mercy and grace.

It makes me think of the story most of us know of the twelve men – disciples of Jesus – out on a boat together with Jesus on the Sea of Galilee -- some of these men experienced boatsmen – been on that Sea a thousand times – but they had not seen anything like this – the wind and the rain and the waves and the waves tossing them around like a garden salad – and there is just nothing they can do – no rowing, no shouting, no holding on – is going to change the circumstances. And it is then at their greatest vulnerability that they cry for their master. The master who has been with them all along. The master who is asleep in the back of the boat. The master who stands up and says, “Peace, be still.” When we feel the most vulnerable is when we are most open to the mercy and grace of God.

So maybe it explains when Paul writes to the Corinthians and he tells them about his thorn in the flesh. We don’t know really what that thorn was – it may have been a physical condition or a spiritual one, we don’t know. But Paul is transparent enough to tell us that three times he went before the good Lord and asked that somehow he be spared its effects – and three times the good Lord does nothing to change its course. And all of a sudden Paul realizes the deeper truth – just when he is the most vulnerable, just when he is faced with circumstances beyond his control – just then God says to the apostle, “My grace is sufficient. My grace is sufficient. My grace is sufficient. My power of

presence is found in your deepest vulnerability.” And isn’t that the truth – maybe the greatest truth of them all – that in times like these when we feel most at risk, most at the mercy of something greater, most vulnerable to circumstances beyond our control – that in times like these we are most open to God meeting us in those weakened places – and filling us with God’s grace and mercy and peace. That in the end we all fall into the gracious and loving hands of God.

And not only that but that we feel the resolve to face into our fears and our worries and live victoriously under the banner of God’s love and strength. God courageous love and strength.

It makes me think of our old friend Moses. Moses the great leader of the people of Israel. Weak little ol’ Moses who gets the moxy to confront mean old Pharaoh and demands he let his people go. Good ol’ Moses who confronts the wind and waves of the Red Sea and parts the waters. Good ol’ Moses who leads this people through famine and drought through the wilderness for forty years – and the question is: what gave him the courage, the strength, the attitude? Maybe it was when he remembered back to that day when his mother – when she had no where else to turn, nothing else to do – in order to make sure her little boy wouldn’t fall into the hands of those who threatened him – wrapped him in basket and set him upon the waters and sent him down the river into the hands of God, saying, God’s grace is sufficient, God’s grace is sufficient. God’s grace is sufficient.

How about that for a breath prayer? Breathe in with the words, “God’s grace”, Breathe out with the words “Is sufficient”. God’s grace ... is sufficient.

Which takes us, of course, back to our friends flying through the air from trapeze to trapeze – vulnerable to the laws of gravity and to the split-second miss – they swing and leap and somersault and tumble through the air with great courage – always aware

of one thing. The gracious net that stretches below. This gracious net that catches them when someone is not able to catch them. Which, of course, is why they climb the ladder and leap again. Which is why they fight their fears and swing and let go. Which is why they embrace their vulnerability – because they know of a sufficient grace. They got that net that is always going to catch them.

So, of course, we live in these uncertain times and all it takes is a few minutes in front of the TV or on our phones right now – to realize how vulnerable we might be. But of course it’s nothing new. We are always at risk in this world. There are more circumstances beyond our control than we could ever imagine. But there’s the net. There’s always been the net. The sufficient grace. The everlasting arms to catch us. To hold us. A vulnerable spirit is a pleasing gift, says the Lord. For my grace is sufficient. My grace is sufficient. My grace is sufficient.

Our God our Help in Ages Past, our hope for years to come. Our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.

And so we live. We live as God would have us live. Leaping with love and with technology connecting with whomever we can connect. Creating our own Kindness Contagion. Doing what Jesus would want us to do for neighbor near and far – in good times and in bad times. Because we always have the net. And God’s grace is always sufficient.

