

As you know, our theme for Lent is “Survival of the Weakest.” I have the honor and daunting task of kicking off this sermon series. It’s an honor because this has been an auspicious week in the life of our congregation. It’s daunting because the subject is fraught. Weakness is such a loaded term. There are many ways to consider weakness, and really, it’s all subjective. We might see weaknesses inside ourselves, a propensity for unhealthy behaviors, a temptation toward creature comforts or comfortable situations over risky ones. Or we think we will be perceived as weak if we show our vulnerability, which is, in reality, a heroic display of courage. We might understand weakness to be projected onto us by others whose fear eclipses our humanity. We might see that projected fear systematized in racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, or transphobia.

Here’s my own story of encountering weakness. As many of you know, I’ve always been big bodied. I’m back at the gym with some regularity for the first time in a while, and I have never encountered more fatphobia than I do at the gym. There is an assumption that I cannot lift as much as others in my weights class. When I met with my trainer for the first time, she put my leg press at a number lower than I’ve ever

done, like, an embarrassingly low number. And maybe she meant nothing by it. It's just that too often I've been given the gym side-eye. Can the biggest girl in the Zumba dance class keep up? (Yes, I definitely can. So there.) And after years of hard internal work I've come to understand that it's about them, not me: they project onto my body their own fear of being big (it's not so bad), or being seen as unfit or whatever. For a really long time, I let those projections define me; I believed that if others thought I was weak or slow, it was probably true. Then I shifted my mindset and thought, if that's true, and if the big girl can keep up, shouldn't they be dancing circles around me?

I've seen this same kind of projection in regard to racism and white supremacy. As you know, I come from the South, where racism is so overt that we never even consider that there is racism beyond the words and actions we witness on a regular basis. I grew up believing that the people in the KKK were racist, that people who said and did overtly racist things were clearly racist, and that since I didn't intentionally make overt displays of racism, it was impossible that I could be racist. The first time I was called racist it was like a slap in the face. It was in a class at BU School of Theology called Martin Luther

King Jr in His Context. The professors lined up the white students on one side of the large table in our classroom, and lined the students of color on the other side. Then they turned to us and said, You are racist. Whether or not you mean to be. You participate in and benefit from racist systems every single day. Inside I was screaming, “THAT’S IMPOSSIBLE FOR YOU TO SAY! YOU DON’T EVEN KNOW ME!” Then, to drive their point home, they lined all the female-identified students on one side and the male identified students on the other. They turned to the men and said, you are all sexist. Whether or not you mean to be. And I was like, HELL YEAH...oh wait a minute—if it’s easy to believe they’re all sexist, I should probably consider that I am, however inadvertently, racist. We did this exercise several times throughout the semester, and by the end, I began to know something about the way systems set up ideas of strong and weak, powerful and vulnerable.

Fortunately, however difficult it might be, we follow Jesus, who promised that the lowly would be raised up and the exalted would be humbled. Jesus, who cuts through the fog of projection to show us life as it actually is. There is no denying that there are vulnerable populations socially in terms of health and wealth and educational

disparities. Black men die of heart disease at twice the rate of white women (the demographic least likely to die of heart disease). In our city, wealth disparities are appalling. But lest we think vulnerability and weakness are synonymous, remember that reaction I had to being called racist? Dr. Robin DiAngelo calls that kind of reaction “white fragility.” DiAngelo says that white people, when we get pushback around issues of race, “we withdraw, defend, cry, argue, minimize, ignore, and in other ways push back to regain our racial position and equilibrium.” I’m totally guilty of displaying that kind of weakness. But in this congregation, we are trying to build strength in another way: we are working across race and class for equity, learning to lean into what we don’t know so that we can make space for everyone’s voice, most especially those who have been told their voices don’t matter. Those who have to shout to be heard when others need only whisper.

It’s appropriate that we begin Lent, as we always do, in the desert with Jesus being tempted by the devil. It is generally understood that the three temptations recorded in the gospel passage correlate to three common temptations humans experience: the temptation of worldly power, the temptation of creature comfort, and the temptation of pride.

Just before this passage, we see Jesus baptized, claimed as God's beloved, and no doubt that identity carried him through some dark days in the desert. At the moment of his weakness, when Jesus might have been most likely to succumb to the sin of misusing his power, the sin of giving himself away for the sake of material goods, or the sin of ego, at these weakest of moments, Jesus leaned into the arms of the Divine. He leaned into the words of his tradition, the way we are leaning on the words of the Psalms this Lent.

When our banner was defaced, we could have been tempted to make an uproar about the banner itself. We could have made this about white indignation. But in our moment of temptation, when we felt weak at the knees being confronted with racism in our own driveway, we worked the muscle we have strengthened over time: we turned to God and to each other. We called each other, we gathered to listen and pray. We held our children. I say this not to pat ourselves on the back or to say we did everything exactly right. I say it to remind us that this is our commitment to racial justice in action; to remind us that aligning ourselves against systems of power and oppression can lead to stark consequences, of which a defaced banner is a mild example. That

banner is a symbol of a commitment not just to fight the powers that be but to stand in solidarity with our beloved community, most especially our people of African descent, to say we see you, your life matters, I see the divine light shining brightly in you.

Jesus could have succumbed to the temptation, to give up. The wilderness lends itself to hopelessness. We could say, this work of racial justice is too overwhelming, too scary, the stakes are too high. But the racial justice team met Friday, after Thursday's events, and we agreed that this is the reality of aligning ourselves with the arc of morality that bends toward justice. When we align ourselves with dismantling oppression, we are risking our comfort for the sake of solidarity—and that means we white folks open ourselves to experience on some small scale the pain and othering that people of color experience regularly in our country. So we redouble our commitment to racial justice, because all our lives depend on acknowledging that Black lives matter. So we stand stronger, together, because we know that this is the work to which God calls us: to claim belovedness in the face of fear, to lean into this beloved community and to lean on the strength of the Divine as we discern our next steps.

There are countless ways to understand ourselves as weak: physically weak, emotionally vulnerable, financially precarious, ostracized and oppressed, afraid of getting it wrong—be it with regard to gender, sexuality, or racial justice. There are countless temptations in the wilderness to accept the weakness, to feel how impossibly far from wholeness we are. But there are countless reasons to trust in the redemptive love of God, the love that casts out fear. I pray that we stand in that love together, that we bear witness to the experiences of others and find a strength together that we never could've imagined. I pray that we ask questions that will liberate us from paralyzing ignorance. If you want to know why we say Black Lives Matter, for example, instead of All Lives Matter—don't be afraid to ask one of the pastors. Don't be afraid to show up to the group of white people working for racial justice led by Barbara McQueen or to the affinity group for People of Color led by Nina Swift.

The wilderness of the desert can be a scary place with many pitfalls and opportunities for injury; our human frailty is very apparent when faced with the many potential dangers of a place like that. I spent time at the

US/Mexican border a couple of years ago, and even our guided hikes held the opportunity for us to get cacti in our shoes (I found needles in my socks and shoes for weeks afterward), snakes and other wild animals, rapid dehydration under the blazing sun. For migrants seeking to cross the desert, they needed to build muscles for walking far in harsh conditions. We need to do the same—build muscles to walk through the wilderness. The migrants come with minimal baggage, with sometimes not enough food and water or proper shoes, but they risk everything because their lives depend on it. Our time in the wilderness of Lent is designed to remind us of our humanity, glorious and troublesome as it is, and to remind us that whoever God is, we are not God. These forty days have already offered us temptation to throw in the towel; no doubt facing our weakness, our fragility, will require us to work muscles of trust that have long since atrophied. Ultimately, though, it is our identity as beloved that sustains us and drives us forward in the work that is ours to do. And still, we will follow this road toward Easter. We will walk together, risking all the unknowns the wilderness will throw at us, and along the way, we will learn things we didn't know. When we expose vulnerability for what it is, in ourselves, in others, in systems we create—that's the redemptive possibility. It

opens the possibility that weaknesses we perceive in ourselves might not be so weak after all. This Lent, as we risk leaning into vulnerability even in our brokenness, we will find, as Leonard Cohen says, that there is a crack in everything, and that is how the light gets in.