

Sermon: “Shields Down”

The sermon title is from “Star Wars.” When the shields are up on the spaceship, it is protected from enemies. When the shields are down, the ship is vulnerable.

You and I live with our shields up most of the time. It is automatic; it is human nature. We are wired to survive in an era of lions and tigers and bears. Survival looks like hiding under cover. Not revealing all our cards. If we lower our shields, we might die.

Well, we don’t really think we’ll die; no, it could be worse. On the chart of worst fears, surveys have shown that death is the #2 fear. Public speaking is #1. No, if we come out of hiding, we could get our feelings badly hurt, be embarrassed, abandoned, look silly or reveal our ignorance. Yuck. We will do just about anything not to experience any of that. Shields up.

It is worth noting that Jesus is a puzzlement. He said things which he must have known would raise the ire of his listeners. He was frankly inflammatory much of his ministry. He didn’t seem to care whether he was in danger. The first time that Jesus, after a time of great spiritual trial, goes back to Nazareth and reveals himself to his homeboys and homegirls, it doesn’t go well. “Good news. I have something wonderful to contribute to you, my beloved townspeople. Life can be so much better than we have ever, ever imagined. These Isaiah scriptures have been fulfilled in your hearing.” We see the neighbors saying, “Isn’t this is Joe and Mary’s kid! We used to play baseball. Who does he think he is?” While maybe disappointed and even frightened at the mob reaction, Jesus does not armor up. He does not go there.

Perhaps when you are committed to a cause greater than yourself you don’t focus on protecting yourself. Doesn’t mean you are not scared. By the same token, sometimes when all your resources are used up, you have no recourse but to show up as yourself, undefended and visible.

I have two stories for you about discarding armor, one personal and one international.

It is June last year. I have decided to get a dog. After various arrangements have been made, I pick up Max from his foster mom on a Friday evening. He has been with her family for eight months and they cannot keep him. He spends one night at my house and then four hours in the car as I drive to Cape Cod for a week’s vacation. I had this idea that having a dog at this favorite vacation spot would be fun and had arranged with the owner to keep the dog on the screened-in porch.

I land at the cottage and that first night, the dog cries non-stop in his crate on the porch. I finally walk him at 2 a.m. and hang out with him. I am ready to get in the car and drive back home four hours and drop him off. I am out of my depth. I realize that I need sleep first, however. At 4 a.m., he is sleeping on the

couch on the porch and I do not put him back in his crate. I go back to bed. The next morning, I am feeling more kindly until I see that he has scratched the door between the porch and the house ruining the 6-inch horizontal bars between the panes of glass. There are claw marks in the door. There is so much more awful stuff that happens but I will get to the really bad part.

While jogging with him Saturday morning, my first full day on vacation, I trip and fall on the road which he thinks is great fun. Splat. Back at the house, I see I am bleeding from left knee, left hand, left wrist and left elbow. Do I have a chipped tooth? My (inexpensive) watch is shattered.

I look for the First Aid box and for the first time in 7 years of renting this house the First Aid kit is not hanging in the kitchen. Suddenly, I notice there is a tick just under the dog's left eye. He won't let me near his eyes. Covered with paper towels, I get in the car, my shields totally demolished and I drive with the dog until I see a woman walking her dog. I throw myself on her mercy. She recommends a preventive tick/flea product at an Agway a half hour away. The staff are a great help and remove the tick and sell me the product and I just about melt to the floor with relief. And I buy Band-Aids.

At church the next day, during prayers and concerns, I stand up and practically in tears, ask for prayers...and help. I have to have shields down to ask for help that openly.

Three people come up to me during Coffee Hour, offering solace and tips. I am surprised that I am feeling hopeful again. One person has a large fenced-in yard about five minutes from my house and invites me to bring the dog to play with her dogs.

During that coffee hour, I just love these people and they love me. I stay for Bible study. I had been in a free fall and somehow landed on a planet I was not expecting, filled with kindly, trustworthy folks. How many times have I struggled on my own rather than just asking for help? I spent the rest of my time open and available to whatever happened, learning about the dog and continuing to meet some very nice people. Interesting, how everyone showed up as so approachable and pleasant. I wonder if I had something to do with that.

Second story. 1999 and the second Liberian civil war was raging. The government of Charles Taylor was killing people. The rebels were killing people. There was death everywhere. "A group of Liberian women formed an organization called "Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace" and forced a meeting with President Charles Taylor, extracting a promise from him to attend peace talks in Ghana. A delegation of women organized nonviolence protests and continued to apply pressure on the warring factions during the peace process. They lined up wearing white for peace and would sit on the road for hours when they heard that the president was going to drive by. They staged a silent protest outside of the Presidential Palace, and were instrumental in bringing about an agreement during the stalled peace talks.

Now here's what had to happen first. The Muslim women and the Christian women had to stop arguing. They had to put away familiar village arguments and relocate themselves in a cause greater than their differences: being mothers whose children were dying every hour. "Working together, over 3,000 Christian and Muslim women mobilized their efforts, and as a result, the women were able to achieve peace in Liberia after a 14-year civil war and helped bring to power the country's first female president.

The story is told in the 2008 documentary film Pray the Devil Back to Hell. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is the first modern elected female head of state in Africa." (Wikipedia)

She has been president of Liberia since 2006. In 2011, she was one of three women Nobel Peace Prize winners in 2011.

Psalm 19: 7-8 ---- *The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes....*

Surely, the commandment, the law for living well, to love our brothers and sisters means lowering our defenses, yes? Surely, we have been promised (whether we have believed or not) that when we repent, we will be forgiven. Surely, we have been told that living under the Almighty God of heaven and earth is a worthy life. Surely, we need not fear because God is in charge.

Maybe the hot clue is to be really good at forgiving and dropping judgments and opinions and starting to communicate. Living a more public life, with shields down, who knows what is possible? Henri Nouwen wrote this:

Forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly. The hard truth is that all of us love poorly. We do not even know what we are doing when we hurt others. We need to forgive and be forgiven every day, every hour--unceasingly. That is the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family.

AMEN