Difficult Gospel lesson today. This the point in the Gospel of John where people begin to turn away from Jesus. Up until this point he’s been drawing big crowds and having great success so to speak. But now it’s going to be more difficult. And the difficulty begins because Jesus says here that the bread that he will give for the life of the world is his flesh. People are offended and confused and a bit upended if you will by Jesus. The bead of life that Jesus will give will be his flesh.

It’s not his miracles. It’s not the teachings. It’s not his power. It’s not his control. It’s not his great talents and abilities. The bread will be his flesh. What makes it difficult of course is that Jesus flesh is the one part of him that is limited and weak. The Apostle Paul says, “My Grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. But that just doesn’t seem to sink in. We want a strong God, a powerful God, an omni-God, a God who can do anything God. And I assume that God has those qualities at some level. But that’s not the bread of life, a God who can do anything. A God who can snap his fingers and make things disappear. The bread of life revealed in Jesus Christ is a God who brings life through his flesh. God shows his power by sharing his weakness.

It’s not popular is it? In our politics today our President is constantly accused of being weak. Of not being the tough guy and throwing his weight around. The public seems yearning for strength. I remember at the beginning of the Iraq war, that’s been a while now, experiencing that tremendous desire on the part of the American public to show our strength and to exercise our power. Shock and Awe I think we called it. We are a superpower we say. And we continue to wrestle with evermore get tough policies to deal with whatever problem that we’re facing. This issue is very confusing for me personally. I get that sometimes you need to be tough and show your strength, I’m not saying that would never be appropriate. But still, the power of weakness never seems to be explored at all, or even considered. Because whether you are a president or a parent, the awareness that absolute power doesn’t work seems all too obvious.

Let’s say that I had absolute power here today. That what I am saying had no weaknesses and whatever I wanted you to do you had to do. There are many who want to deal with people in this fashion. Usually they deal in fear. They have the power to kill you, or send you to hell, or give you an F, or make you look stupid, or take my business elsewhere, and so they exercise complete control over their subjects. Let’s say that I stood before you today without any weaknesses. What kind of relationship would that foster between you and I? What kind of life would that bring to you? And yet there are many who seem to want to turn God’s power into just that. Absolute power and control. Who want their country to be just that. The policeman of the world. That’s why every country wants to make sure that they get God on their side. They’re looking for just that sort of power and control and mastery, and domination.

Isn’t this the definition of the “world” in a negative sense? Isn’t this exactly worldly power? When Satan came to Jesus in wilderness, he tempted him to turn stones into bread, to jump off a building and have the angels save him. To rule the world. These are the temptations of sin. Power and control and mastery over the world and people. And that’s exactly what most of the world seems to be after. Power and control and mastery, mostly through technology. Who wants the weakness of the flesh? We’re doing everything we can to overcome that. That’s what our machinery is about isn’t it?

So I guess I think that Jesus teaching might be just as offensive today as it was when he said it. The bread that I give for the life of the world is my flesh. The part of him that was weak, and died, and could get wounded and hurt and scarred. That’s the bread of lfe? Oh it is. It is the bread of life. Another way to say it would be that what Jesus gave that is the Bread of Life was his vulnerability. It’s a completely radical and challenging notion to our world today. The bread that Jesus gives for the life of the world is his flesh. His vulnerability. He shares that with us. And what we’re asked to consider is that this is more powerful and healing and life giving and life changing than all the rest of God’s power.

I think one of the difficulties of the spiritual life for many is just this sense of vulnerability. When we pray together, sometimes that’s hard to do. And the reason is because we feel vulnerable yes? The power of Prayer can be twisted into a kind magic power that gets God to our bidding but in fact, prayer, rightly done is a form of vulnerability. Sometimes I have the priviledge of offering a prayer when people are very vulnerable. They’re going in for surgery, or maybe even facing death. It’s powerful, but it’s not the kind of power that people are comfortable with. Our second lesson talks about singing. It’s hard to sing sometimes because you’re more vulnerable. You have to give something up that you normally don’t have to do in order to sing. That’s really hard for a lot of people. You’re sitting there in car rockin out to your favorite song and you notice that the driver in the next car is looking at you. And you can feel kind of stupid for revealing how you feel. Sexuality is vulnerability, at least if it’s healthy. It’s hard to be vulnerable financially. It’s hard to ask for help sometimes. Because all of these things reveal our flesh. Yet our text says today that it is in this kind of vulnerability that we find the bread of life. Love.

The idea here is that while God might have all the power and ultimately hold all the cards, God gives up that kind of power and control, for love. This is the bread of life. That’s what the cross is all about. We have so many problems that we wish God would take away. If we’re struggling with a weakness, our prayer is usually for God to just take it away. Take away the pain. Take me away from the problem. Reach into my brain and take out all that stuff that makes me uncomfortable. Take away my anxiety, my stress, my anger. We praying to the God of power who will make this happen and pull this string and flip this switch. This is deep within our souls. We look to the God of power, with the power to force his way, to bulldoze evil into submission.

What God seems to offer is love. Love is patient. Love is kind. Love does not insist on its own way. Love bears all things. Believes all things. For years I struggled with anxiety, a deep and crushing kind of fear. And I remember prayers of desperation. God just take this away from me. I can’t take it anymore. I just want to be able to relax without having to worry about something. But it never happened. There was never any relief. And the reason I think that was true was because I kept looking for some kind of power to take it away. I kept fighting it. Trying to not worry. Try not to worry. It’s the application of power to your problem. And you can have a whole religion that’s built on this false and destructive desire for power. And you end up with a religion that deals with sin by trying not to. I”ll try to be nice. This effort, this strength, this will power, is going to be the answer. But it’s not. It just tightens the noose. The more you try not to be anxious, the more anxious you become. The more you deal with sin by trying not to, the more bound to sin you become.

The only thing I’ve found that works with worry is love, the power of the cross. Give up trying to control your worry, give up trying to force it away from you. Does’t work. The only thing that works with worry is love. Be patient with it. Be kind to that worry. Be with that worried, troubled person that you are. Stop fighting it. Confess it. I’m just worried today. Scared. Let it be. And after some time passes you might be very surprised at what happens. Worry begins to lose power. Stop trying so hard to fight whatever problem your facing. If your mean, stop trying to fight it. Really, that mean person just needs to be loved. That pain needs to be shared, not taken away.

It’s interesting what happens when we stop trying to force the world to be what we want it to be. It’s interesting what happens when we stop to force our children to be what we want them to be. It’s interesting to see what happens when we stop trying to force the church to be what we want it to be. When we become more patient with people, with ourselves. I can’t really describe it, or control it. But I think we begin to come more into the presence of God. The bread of life. Who gives up power to share with us the weakness of his love. Amen.

It’s really hard for the church at times. Because the church didn’t get big and huge and conquer Europe by being vulnerable. We struggle with this a lot. The church in so many ways in our past gave up vulnerability for power. Imagine if Christian missionaries had come to the Native Americans and offered 1 Corinthians 13. Love is patient, and kind, it’s not boastful, or arrogant or rude. Well, that’s not exactly the way that they often came. They came with power and took the kids away from their parents and sent them to boarding schools where they learned that what they’re parents taught them was all wrong and we have it right. It was as wrong and un Christ like as it could be. One group had the power and exercised it fully. The church has often given up vulnerability for power. Most of the big issues of the day, gay marriage, abortion, these things come up over and over and over again, are rarely explored, I’ll say never explored from a position of vulnerability. It’s all about certainty and absolutes. The church struggles with this teaching of Jesus as much as any other group might. Although we are becoming more vulnerable now. Weaker. And so stronger, at least in the way I think Jesus means it today. More open to the bread of life, that is Jesus.