



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Tuesday in Holy Week

#### Shame

[RCL]: **Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 71:1-14; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; John 12:20-36**

Brené Brown's TED talk, *The Power of Vulnerability*, has, as of this sermon, over 12 million views on a single recording on YouTube. That should tell us something. Part of what it tells us is how hungry we are to make connections with one another – and yet how much shame and fear stand in the way of those connections.

Brown's work around vulnerability and shame is prescient today because of the mention of shame in our collect for today. And again in our psalm. And again in our epistle reading. The work she has done is around human connection – her thesis is that we are hardwired for connection to one another. Shame is an obstacle for connection, and so it has become one of the focuses for her work. She says, "Shame is really easily understood as the fear of disconnection. Is there something about me, that if other people know it or see it, that I won't be worthy of connection?"

Shame shows up in our lectionary today in an interesting way. The collect for the day says that God "made an instrument of shameful death to be for us the means of life." Isn't that an interesting way to look at what happened on the cross? That it was intended as part of a shameful death is historical – crucifixion was a gruesome capital punishment, used to make an example of the one left hanging – in an attempt to dissuade witnesses from perpetrating similar crimes.

But, how interesting that this instrument of shameful death becomes for us the means of life. Jesus is well-known for turning things upside down. The last will be first, and the least will be great. The Son of Man wants little to do with the religious professionals but chooses to share meals with prostitutes and tax collectors. God is always showing up where we least expect and taking what we shy away from, or what scares us, or what makes us feel unworthy, and turning it into the means of life.

Shame keeps us from connection. Shame such that, if people saw our true selves, they wouldn't accept us. Perhaps you struggle with shame. Perhaps the Church, in particular, has made you feel shame about a certain thing. Maybe you're a member of the LGBTQ community. Maybe you're divorced. Maybe you've cheated on a partner. Maybe you've had an abortion. Maybe you think that for some reason you are not enough – or that God couldn't love you.

But here's the thing – the nexus of that shame, the place which feels the most tender and difficult to hide, the part which you are trying to numb – that is where God is working in you to create a means towards life. That part of you is a part which God loves unconditionally – a part being called into relationship and into connection with God.

Those of you who are part of often-marginalized communities know this well. Your gender doesn't keep you from God – but is an expression of God's image, which is bigger than a binary. Your color doesn't keep you from God – it is an expression of diversity and beauty, which is part of God's vision for the world. Your past actions don't keep you from God – they are parts of how you have come to know God and important parts of your story. Your wealth, or marital status, or job, or education level, don't matter to the one who knows each hair on your head – for the Holy One has named and claimed you, from the beginning of time itself.

Our Psalm talks about shame, too. The very first line says, "In you, O Lord, have I taken refuge; let me never be ashamed." In God, there is no shame, and we are made by God. Our life breath is the breath of God. Shame is something which comes not from God, but from fear – and in God, there is no fear. The fear of not being accepted manifests itself in shame, leading us to believe that we are not worthy of love and connection or that something is wrong with us.

Beloved, that fear where shame grows – that sense that something is wrong with you – it is a lie. God takes that and turns it on its head. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he says, "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?"

This is a necessary reminder – particularly now, as we get to the end of Lent. Lent is a season of self-examination, of repentance and renewal. But as we go into our self-examination, it can be easy to judge ourselves rather than showing ourselves compassion. When we take honest stock of ourselves and see the ways we have inevitably fallen short, there can be a strong sense of our own failure or our own darkness. Even this darkness, though, is a place we can come to know God. Even the cross was used for the glory of God, and it was a tool of empire and violence.

Shame is an obstacle for connection, and thereby an obstacle we put between ourselves and God. God is known through connection and through relationship. The way God reveals Godself in three persons is relationship itself. Blocking ourselves from this is none other than the tool of the devil. It keeps us from wholehearted living – from living in union with God.

How do we move past our shame? Brené Brown says we have to start believing that we are worthy of compassion, connection, and love. Undoing a belief and trying to recreate pathways in our brain to prove this worthiness to ourselves is daunting – and, of course, it will take time. Nothing is fixed overnight. But here in our scripture today, we hear again the promises and the vision God has for us – that the places of shame in our lives can become the pathways to real relationship and real life.

Our darkness and our shame are claimed by God. We have been claimed by Love. Amen.

*The Rev. Jazzy Bostock is a recently ordained kanaka maoli woman, serving her curacy at St Peter's Episcopal Church in Honolulu, Hawaii. She is thrilled to be back in the 'aina, the land, which raised her, and the waves of the Pacific Ocean. She loves the warm sun, gardening, cooking, laughing, and seeing God at work. She strives to love God more deeply, more fully, with every breath she takes.*