

Text: [Luke 5:1-11](#)
Date: September 20, 2020
Title: “The Silence of Shame”
Theme: The antidote to shame is vulnerability met with empathy.

1

Let me tell you about the worst sermon I ever preached. It was Easter Sunday 2002. I was an intern, still in seminary. And I was working for a pastor who liked me and trusted me. The deal we reached about Easter was that I would preach the early service. And he seemed genuinely happy about that. In fact, he was happy enough that he invited a whole bunch of friends to come, and at one point during breakfast I am pretty sure I heard him bragging on me a little bit: “Today you’re going to hear from my intern, Joe, he’s really doing a good job – I’m sure it’ll be a great message.” Well, that semester, I remember I was taking a pastoral care course. And so I was very much in the mindset of how to care for people. I imagine many of you know the usual gospel text for Easter, right? It’s John 20, with Mary Magdalene going to the tomb, then on finding it empty, going to get Peter and John before returning to the tomb herself. Before she sees the risen Jesus, she is there alone, weeping outside the tomb while the men are at home. THAT’S the detail I chose to focus on. NOT the Resurrection, not life or hope, but the fact that Peter and John left Mary weeping outside the tomb. I was about a third of the way through when I realized...this is not going well. Ain’t nobody looks happy, and it’s Easter Sunday morning. Maybe today, if I felt like I was bombing that badly, I’d drop everything and pivot...but then I couldn’t. I didn’t know how. So I just went on. And it was terrible. It was the most hopeless sermon you can imagine on what’s supposed to be the most hopeful day of the year. A complete failure. I felt awful. I’d let my senior pastor down, let myself down, but really I’d let Jesus down. It doesn’t get much worse than that. And to this day, every time I go to preach on Easter, every time I go to preach on Christmas, I think about that sermon. I read my message over and over again and even when I think it’s ok, in the back of my mind I wonder: is this going to be a repeat of that Easter Sunday? Because I thought for sure that one was pretty good too.

2

What I experience whenever I remember that incident is a profound feeling of shame. If we're going to talk about forgiving yourself, there's no way to avoid talking about shame. Shame is a powerful emotion – some researchers say maybe even more intense than either love or fear. And it can keep us trapped in our past by controlling our responses in the present. Shame is that voice in your head that says, "You're no good." That voice does so many harmful things to us: it robs us of our self-esteem, keeps us from being able to let go of our mistakes, prevents us from taking risks, gets in the way of opening up and being vulnerable with people. That voice is typically rooted in a memory of failing, of disappointing someone you care about, of being humiliated or making a fool of yourself. Shame is a different thing than guilt, which is based on a concrete action, something you messed up. Guilt says "I DID something bad." Shame says, "I AM bad." Guilt always points to an action. Shame points at the core of who we are, and then causes us to question who we are.

3

Which brings us to the scripture. Peter's response to the miraculous catch of fish is pretty surprising, at least to me. You would expect him to be like: "Thanks!" or "Dude, that's amazing! How'd you do that?" Instead, all he can say is, "Leave me, Lord! I'm a sinner!" Think Peter feels shame much? He's just witnessed perhaps the most amazing thing ever – the most compelling evidence for God that his eyes have ever seen. And his reaction is NOT to celebrate, NOT to be in awe or wonder or amazement. His reaction instead is to ponder all the ways his life has gone wrong. All the ways he's failed to measure up. Peter is pretty well convinced that if Jesus really is a prophet sent from God, this prophet has absolutely no business hanging out with fishermen from Galilee.

4

I am fascinated by how precisely this story parallels what we know about how shame works. You see in Peter's response how shame isolates us. When we are feeling like Peter feels, we are absolutely certain we're no good for anybody. So we just want to be by ourselves, because it feels like we'll do less damage that way. "Just leave me alone!" we say. Then we won't be able to screw anything up or hurt anyone. If no one else is relying on us, then we can't let anyone down, right? In that way, shame is a

profoundly isolating emotion. The scholar, speaker and author Brene Brown, who is an expert on the subject, says in a [classic TED talk](#) that shame thrives on three things: secrecy, silence, and judgment. How do we manage to keep the most shameful things about ourselves secret? We self-isolate. We keep them hidden by refusing to let anyone in. And we do that because we're frightened that if anyone gets too close, and sees the real us, then they'll run away. The tragedy of shame is that it feeds on itself by isolating us further, driving us deeper into secrecy. And the longer we keep a secret, the longer we try to hide, the scarier whatever it is we're hiding tends to become. That's where Peter is at. He's terrified that if Jesus gets close enough, he'll see Peter for who he really is, and run away screaming.

5

But Peter, being Peter, does something amazing here. Even though he has no idea what he's doing, he gets something exactly right – two things, actually. The man gives hope to all of us who know that sometimes we're far more lucky than we are smart. What I mean is this: Peter understands intuitively that the way out of his shame is to actually say something about it. That's what Brene Brown would tell us too – that the antidote to shame is vulnerability. What finally robs shame of its power is our willingness to talk about those things that hurt and frighten us the most – to talk about our deep wounds and regrets. I've told that story about my worst sermon to preaching classes before. But as far as I remember, I've never told it as part of a sermon in one of my churches. Now I might wonder: will people think about that every Easter Sunday, so long as I'm preaching here? Maybe. But it doesn't matter. Somehow you have to get your power back. A secret can only control you so long as it remains a secret. You get your power back when you are able to talk about the things you're AFRAID to talk about. Peter seems, in a moment, to grasp that truth, and so he confesses to Jesus, "I'm a sinful man!" Now, I said he gets two things right. The first one is to speak his shame out loud. The second one is to choose very carefully where and with whom he speaks his shame. Because breaking your silence is not quite enough. When you tell your story, that story has to be met with EMPATHY. The moment of sharing is a dangerous one. Because if your confession is met with empathy, you'll start down the path to healing. But if it's met with judgment, you'll only make the wound deeper. So let me ask you: what do you think happened next with Peter? Can't you imagine Jesus responding, "My friend, why do you say that?" And you can rest assured that everything Peter poured out in prayer to

Jesus after that was met, not with dismissal, condescension or judgment, but instead with grace and forgiveness and support. When we are wrestling with shame, we need to go to the places in our lives where we're sure to find empathy: whether that's with our spouse, family members, close friends, a counselor, a pastor. We just need to find it somewhere. I know it's not always easy. There are some times in our lives we feel like we just don't have safe places to bring what it is we're feeling. But what this point should drive home is the responsibility we bear for providing those spaces for the people we care about. It's how we witness to God's unconditional love. When someone is in that moment of vulnerability, opening up to us about their shame, how they've been hurt or how they've hurt others – we hold a tremendous power in our hands. We either can steer that person toward healing by listening with empathy and understanding, or we can do more harm by shutting ourselves off or responding with judgement rather than grace. We hold that power in our hands – a power given to us by God. How will we use it?

Shame is a powerful force in our lives. And our ability to overcome it determines everything about how deeply we'll go in our relationships with others and with God. Peter was ready to chase Jesus away in order to keep his secrets. But Jesus wouldn't let him. Instead, he heard Peter's failures and still challenged him to undertake the greatest mission of his life: to leave the lake behind and instead fish for people. If we're going to continue carrying on Jesus' mission, we need to learn not only to overcome our own shame, but to be places where others can experience the healing that happens when vulnerability is met with empathy. Jesus did this for Peter. Watch what happens when we are able to do this for each other.

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