

Defense Against the Dark Arts

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Rev. Andy Call

Luke 8:43-48 (NRSVUE)

⁴³ Now there was a woman who had been suffering from a flow of blood for twelve years, and though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her. ⁴⁴ She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, and immediately her flow of blood stopped. ⁴⁵ Then Jesus asked, “Who touched me?” When they all denied it, Peter said, “Master, the crowds are hemming you in and pressing against you.” ⁴⁶ But Jesus said, “Someone touched me, for I noticed that power had gone out from me.” ⁴⁷ When the woman realized that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling, and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him and how she had been immediately healed. ⁴⁸ He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.”

If we want to be fully engaged in life and connected to others, we have to be vulnerable. In order to be vulnerable, we have to develop resilience to shame. Shame is the topic of the message today, and it’s a big one. Church is an especially important place to talk about shame, because one of the most vital parts of our faith is the understanding that Jesus came to remove the power of sin and the sting of shame. And yet, the church too often has contributed to the problem of shame rather than working to dismantle it. We need to change that.

Brené Brown is a shame researcher, so it is no surprise that in her exploration of vulnerability she spends a significant amount of time on shame. In *Daring Greatly*, the book that serves as the inspiration for this worship series, the chapter titled “Understanding and Combating Shame” is the longest and most detailed. Besides being the focus of her research, there are other good reasons for that.

We all experience shame. It doesn’t matter how old you are, how much you have accomplished, how much therapy you have had; shame is common to all of us. I am a husband, a father of three terrific kids, the lead pastor of the largest church in our annual conference, and I hold several important leadership roles across our connection. I stand in front of you every week sharing the Good News of the Gospel and helping people discover God’s hope for their lives. And yet, one hurtful comment or minor lapse in judgment is all it takes to leave me feeling like a kid on the playground who’s being pointed at and laughed at by the other kids. And I’m willing to bet that every person in the room and online knows that same feeling.

Shame keeps us from being fully ourselves, from taking risks, from investing in our relationships with others. It diminishes our sense of self-worth. “A sense of worthiness inspires us to be vulnerable, share openly, and persevere. Shame keeps us small, resentful, and afraid.”¹

In our Gospel Lesson for today, we encounter a woman who was suffering from “a flow of blood.” She’d had continuous hemorrhaging for *twelve years*. She had tried everything, consulting multiple doctors and spending all she had to try to find relief, all to no avail. Hearing her story today, we understand her sense of desperation, but maybe not the depth of her shame.

Women's physical needs were not discussed in Jesus's time, much less in public. To have bleeding at all rendered a woman ritually unclean, so this woman had been barred from the temple or from making sacrifices for twelve years, likely also making her ostracized from her community even if they didn't know why. It is likely that she also experienced physical pain along with the bleeding, making everyday life even more difficult. It wasn't exactly an enlightened time for women's health; though we note we still have a long way to go on that front. We might imagine how the doctors in her time responded – doubting her story, underestimating her pain, accusing her of exaggerating her symptoms, blaming her for her condition. They didn't provide any relief, but they sure took her money, leaving her destitute as well as desperate. All of this she bore alone in silence.

It took tremendous courage for her to show up that day, even more to push through the crowd to get to Jesus. She didn't try to speak to him; how could she? What would she say? How would she bear the scorn of those nearby, witnessing her pathetic plea, repulsed by her symptoms. If she could only touch the hem of his robe, perhaps that would be enough.

Jesus, sensing the flow of power from him at the woman's touch, wanted to know who had touched him. Peter was incredulous. "Jesus, there are so many people in this crowd, it would be easier to identify who *didn't* touch you. How can you feel one person's touch in the middle of all these people?"

But the woman knew, and it was only a matter of time before they identified her through process of elimination. So she fell at Jesus's feet, trembling and sobbing, and told him everything. Did Jesus need to make an issue of this? He could have simply kept walking, undiminished by having shared this healing touch. And there is a good chance that he knew, even before she identified herself, who had touched him and why. But in their interaction, Jesus offered an opportunity for her to release her shame and experience relational as well as physical healing. He called her *daughter*. "Your faith has made you well. Be at peace."

In our language, we often use shame interchangeably with the words guilt, humiliation, and embarrassment. But they are not the same. *Guilt* is a response to behavior; shame is a response to identity. Guilt says, "I did something bad." Shame says, "I *am* bad." *Humiliation* is a feeling we experience in response to other people's opinions about us or our perception of those opinions. We typically do not feel that we deserve humiliation, but we may feel that we deserve shame. *Embarrassment* is usually a fleeting feeling in response to something relatively minor. It may even be funny, at least in retrospect.

Shame, by contrast, is internalized, a deep-seeded feeling of being unworthy of connection. Something we have done or failed to do, an ideal we haven't lived up to, or a goal we haven't accomplished, makes us believe that we are somehow less deserving of love and acceptance than if we had gotten it right... or if we had been a better person.

Brown says there are three things we need to know about shame: (1) we all have it; (2) we're all afraid to talk about it; and (3) the less we talk about shame, the more control it has over our lives. She defines shame as "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging."²

Though shame may have roots in a specific event or events that were traumatic, it does not only affect those who have experienced trauma. We cannot always point to a specific moment in time or experience or put-down that caused us shame. Over time, it simply becomes part of our identity. Brown quotes a friend who says, "Shame started as a two-person experience, but as I got older I learned how to do shame all by myself."³

Brown names twelve “shame categories” that have emerged from her research:

- *appearance and body image*
- *money and work*
- *motherhood/fatherhood*
- *family*
- *parenting*
- *mental and physical health*
- *addiction*
- *sex*
- *aging*
- *religion*
- *surviving trauma*
- *being stereotyped or labeled*

In her research, she asked people to name examples of shame they have experienced. A few of the responses are:

- Shame is getting laid off and having to tell my pregnant wife.
- Shame is having someone ask me, “When are you due?” when I’m not pregnant.
- Shame is hiding the fact that I’m in recovery.
- Shame is raging at my kids.
- Shame is my boss calling me an idiot in front of the client.
- Shame is my husband leaving me for my next-door neighbor.
- Shame is my DUI.
- Shame is infertility.
- Shame is my habit or addiction to internet pornography.
- Shame is hearing my parents fighting through the wall and wondering if I’m the only one who feels this afraid.

When shame takes over, our brains are almost always hijacked by the limbic system. We don’t function from our prefrontal cortex, the part of our brain responsible for thinking and analyzing and planning. Instead, our fight-flight-freeze instincts take over. We function as if we are literally fighting for survival. To the brain, we are. A 2011 study by the National Institute of Mental Health and the National Institute on Drug Abuse discovered that physical pain and intense experiences of social rejection are processed by the brain in the same way. To the brain, they are the same. *Shame is real pain.*

We’ve established the harmful effects of shame. But what do we do about it?

More than likely, you are familiar with the *Harry Potter* series of books and films. Harry is a boy who learns that he has magical gifts and soon discovers a whole world of wizardry of

which he is a part. But first he must be educated. One of the required subjects at Hogwarts School is *Defense Against the Dark Arts*, a course designed to help protect students from the actions of bad witches and wizards. One of the lessons they soon discover is that dark magic isn't always an external force but derives power by using their own fears against them.

Shame does the same thing. And combating shame is a little like learning Defense Against the Dark Arts. We need to learn how to push back against the shame that tells us that we are not worthy of love and belonging. One very important way to push back against the power shame holds over us is to remember what God says about us. "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). When we entrust our fears and our failings to God, grace is there to meet us. We need not be ashamed, because God has *already* cleansed us from *all* unrighteousness.

For by grace, you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast (*nor suffer shame, we might add*). For we are what (God) has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we may walk in them. (Ephesians 2:8-10)

Yet, shame is a social concept. And because it *happens* between people, it also *heals* best between people. Brown writes, "If we can share our story with someone who responds with empathy and understanding, shame can't survive." Shame thrives in the darkness but cannot survive in the light. For that reason, shame tries to keep us from talking about it. It tells us that we can't tell anyone else what we're feeling, that they will think less of us, that talking about it will make it worse. But the opposite is true. Remember: *we all have shame, we don't like to talk about it, but the less we talk about shame, the more control it has over us.*

We can never become *immune* from shame, because we are human. But we *can* learn to become shame-*resilient*. Brown offers four steps toward shame-resilience. Though they don't always happen in this order, these four steps lead to empathy and healing:

1. *Recognizing shame and understanding its triggers.* Shame is biology and biography. Can you physically recognize when you're in the grips of shame, feel your way through it, and figure out what messages and expectations triggered it?
2. *Practicing critical awareness.* Can you reality-check the messages and expectations that are driving your shame? Are they realistic? Are they attainable? Are those messages and expectations reflective of what you want to be, or are they things you think other people need or want from you?
3. *Reaching out.* Are you owning and sharing your story? We can't experience empathy if we don't connect with someone else. Who do you trust to hold this with you? When shame cycles on, are you reaching out to them?
4. *Speaking shame.* Are you talking about how you feel and asking for what you need when you feel shame? Shame hates being spoken, because speaking about it robs it of its power. A University of Texas psychologist studied people who had experienced traumatic events. He and his colleagues discovered that *not* discussing a traumatic event or confiding it to another person could be more damaging than the actual event.⁴

In the chapter of *Daring Greatly* that focuses on shame, Brown explores some of the ways men and women experience shame differently. I decided that is beyond the scope for the sermon today, but I commend it to you as one of the most insightful things I have ever read about gender and shame, and about men and women in general.

Shame-resilience is not simply a skill we acquire, but a practice we need to engage over and over. The more we practice it, the better we are at it. Remember – we all experience shame to some degree. Pay attention to your self-talk, monitor for signs that you are acting out of shame, and lean into your connections. And always remember that you are worthy of love and belonging not because you have earned it, but because God says you are. *Do not be ashamed*. You were created in God’s image and have the breath of God in you. From Psalm 25, “O God, in you I trust; let me never be put to shame.” And hear this assurance from Colossians:

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from (God’s) glorious power, so that you may have all endurance and patience, joyfully giving thanks to (God), who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Colossians 1:11-14)

Thanks be to God. Amen.



2537 Lee Rd., Cleveland Heights, OH, 44118 | 216-321-8880 | cotsumc.org