

I felt like a kid this week, with 2 snow days. How fun. On Thursday morning, when the sleet falling and the snow on the way, Sarah and Asher were sleeping in, as they should. I got up and with my coffee in hand, I picked up a book of poetry that I hadn't touched in a while. Now, I'm too impatient for most poetry, but I've come to love Hafiz, the great Sufi mystic from the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Here's a poem I discovered while waiting for the snow to fall.

Every  
Child  
Has Known God,  
Not the God of names,  
Not the God of don'ts,  
Not the God who ever does  
Anything weird,  
But the God who only knows four words  
And keeps repeating them, saying:  
"Come dance with Me."  
Come.  
Dance.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is inviting you to The Big Table, but you should need to know that there's not just feasting at The Big Table. You see, it's a party, which means there is also dancing, but some of us are too ashamed to dance. Jesus nonetheless summons us to dance. You've heard me preach for a year now, and this week I realized that I've yet to preach directly on the topic of shame. And that's a big oversight on my part, because how we handle our shame has profound implications for our relationship with God, our relationships to other people, and perhaps most significantly, our relationship to ourself.

So, what is, shame anyway? **Brene Brown**, the great shame and vulnerability researcher, defines **shame is a universal emotion or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging**. Shame makes us uncomfortable, and we are embarrassed to talk about, but the truth is, we all carry shame in our bodies and minds. It shows up when we look at our flaws and conclude that they somehow make us fundamentally bad. When we look at our scripture reading for today, can you see where shame shows up? Which character looks at their flaws and determines they make him unworthy of connection with Jesus? Peter, of course. Having witnessed the overwhelming abundance of the miraculous catch of fish, Peter falls to his knees and says to Jesus, **"Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"**

This may seem like a strange response. Why in the face of something so good, so unexpected, so abundant, and so generous would Peter's automatic response be, go away from me? You might think that in the face of such a gift, Peter would celebrate. Laughter, joy, an exuberant, "Thank you!" all make sense, but instead Peter reacts by saying he is unworthy of this gift. Peter's shame tells him that he could never deserve something so good. Why on earth would he feel this way? Well, he tells us, doesn't he? The reason he tells Jesus to go away is because, "I am a sinful man."

Sin is an important and wildly misunderstood concept in the Christian faith. I'm sure you've noticed that every week we do a corporate confession of sin, after which I speak to you words of love and forgiveness. Now, I work hard every week to make sure our confessions never involve shame. But historically, confessions are shame filled spiritual floggings. One of the regular confessions I grew up with said that I have sinned against God in thought word and deed, and I justly deserve your eternal wrath and punishment. That's pretty intense, isn't it? Looking back, I wonder what exactly did my little elementary school self think he had done, said, or thought that could possibly make him worthy of eternal wrath and punishment? To believe this about oneself is to have a relationship with God that is based on shame.

How we understand sin is how we understand the gospel. Christianity is supposed to be good news, which is what Jesus told us he's here to do, preach good news. So, is it good news to be told that you are a sinner who deserves God's wrath, but because of God's grace you will instead receive mercy? Is that good news? I don't think it is. Now, I think there's certainly worse news you could hear than that. You could be told that you are a sinner who deserves God's wrath, and that's what you'll receive. That would be worse news, right? But still, to be told that you are a sinner who deserves punishment but instead receives grace is the logic of an abuser, isn't it? An abuser says to their victim, you're lucky to have me. You deserve so much worse than me, and let me tell you, if you ever even think of leaving me, I'll make sure you get what you truly deserve. Put that way, this is not good news, and I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that's largely what the church has taught us these past 2000 years. We could have shared worse news, but our gospel still hasn't been good.

So, what's a better message than this? How can we land on a God who is more spacious and gracious than the one we've been given? I think we need is to make a clear distinction between guilt and shame. This too comes from Brene Brown, whose work is grounded in years of extensive social science research. Her research has consistently found that shame correlates with destructive and hurtful behaviors, which makes sense. What we believe about ourselves is how we treat others. If we think we are worthy of punishment, we inevitably punish ourselves and others. But if we learn to tell a guilt story about ourselves, that correlates with all kinds of positive outcomes. **Guilt says, I did something bad. Shame says, I am bad.** Do you hear the difference? Guilt is a story we tell about what we've done, but shame is a story we tell about who we are. Shame says, "I am flawed and therefore unworthy," while guilt says, "I am flawed, but I am still worthy of love and belonging." The gulf between guilt and shame is as wide as the Grand Canyon. On one side is wellbeing, while the other is misery.

Where shame leads us to isolation and destructive behaviors, guilt can actually strengthen our connections to each other through honesty and accountability. With guilt we own our mistakes and strive to make amends, but we don't grovel in self-hatred. With guilt, we always make a distinction between the bad choices we make and the fundamentally good person we are, and that distinction makes all the difference.

One of my favorite bands the past few years is the artist, *Sleeping at Last*. Their song "Three" captures this distinction well. The lyrics say:

I only want what's real  
I set aside the highlight reel  
And leave my greatest failures on display with an asterisk

## Worthy of love anyway

Do you believe that? Because that to me that is the good news. What if instead of hiding my flaws and pretending like I've got it all together, I could put my greatest failures on display for everyone to see, and still say, I'm worthy of love anyway? To live that way is to live courageously, honestly, and to assert your fundamental goodness that no amount of sin can ever take away from you.

You see, the problem isn't with the word "sin." The problem is what we mean by "sin" and what we think sin means for us. Peter thinks his sin disqualifies him from connection with Jesus. His shame story tells him he is unworthy, and so does ours. But Jesus' words to Peter tell us everything we need to know about how God treats us when we feel unworthy: "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." In defiance of Peter's shame, Jesus summons him to a life of meaning and connection, and God does the same for you as well. Peter's not wrong that he's a sinner. The rest of the story will simply confirm that's true. He is a sinner, and so am I, and so are you. But he's dead wrong that his sin makes him unworthy of love and belonging.

Jesus invites us to The Big Table, and he summons us to join him in welcoming others to discover a life of meaning and connection, to come to the table and enjoy the dance. We all make mistakes, but the good news is we all deserves love and belonging. When we learn to turn our shame stories to guilt stories, then we are free to answer Jesus' call to live a life of love. The good news is that you are worthy, no matter what anyone has told you, and more importantly what you have told yourself. Don't be afraid. God only knows four words, and keeps repeating them, saying: **"Come dance with Me." Come. Dance.**