

SHAMELESS, FEARLESS LOVE

Psalm 71:1-7

I John 4 (selected verses)

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Sometime last year, Doug and I were looking for a new TV show to watch and we stumbled onto the show called Suits, which we had never watched when it was originally airing. Suits is a drama about a law firm in New York City. I don't think it's a top ten favorite for either of us, but it's entertaining, and some of the character development is quite interesting. A year later, we are still watching it. We're now on season 8 of 9, so we're committed to seeing it through to the end.

The other night we watched an episode featuring these three main male characters: Robert Zane, who just became managing partner of the law firm, Harvey Specter, the leading man on the show, and his law partner Louis Litt, the strange, goofy character who both makes you laugh and feel sorry for him at the same time.

In this episode, Louis is late for a meeting with Robert. He's rushing down a side street in New York, and he's robbed at gunpoint. Instead of heading to the restaurant where he was supposed to meet his new boss, he heads back to the office. His secretary finds out that he's been mugged, and he begs her to keep it quiet. He tells her he doesn't want the new boss to know that he's been a victim of a crime. "I don't want him to think I'm weak."

You know how plots go in 45-minute television shows. First, he's in more trouble for being late and for lying. Then his secret comes out, and there's a happy ending. His

two colleagues show him great compassion, and say to him - "You can tell us if something's wrong; we're family here."

What Louis displayed well in this episode is the experience of shame, which leads to secrecy. For Louis, shame and weakness went hand in hand, and that, according to the world's most prolific shame researcher, Brene Brown, is a common experience for men.

Both men and women experience shame as a result of unrealistic expectations. Women, generally speaking, feel that the world wants them to be a certain way, look a certain way, and those expectations are confusing and conflicting. They feel as if they're living in a straightjacket, because it's impossible to live up to the world's expectations. Men, generally speaking, experience shame as weakness. The world expects men to be strong and aggressive, not just **competitive** but actually **winning**. So any time a man does not feel like a winner, however that is defined, he feels ashamed and weak.

Brene Brown believes that shame is an epidemic in our world. Here's how she defines shame:

Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.

Shame is what you tell yourself when you think, "If that person really knew me, knew my thoughts and my mistakes and my failures, she wouldn't like me." We might feel ashamed because of appearance and body image, because of something about our

family, our parenting, or something related to money, work, health, addiction, sex, aging, our belief systems - all of what's important in life - any of it can bring feelings of shame.

Shame makes us feel alone in the world, but here's the truth. **Every single human being experiences shame.** To feel shame is to be human.

Here's why shame is so dangerous. Shame has been extensively researched in numerous scientific studies and the findings are that shame is highly correlated with addiction, depression, violence, aggression, bullying, suicide, and eating disorders.

Is there a benefit, though? Can shame ever do any good? Researchers say no. Here's where the difference comes in between shame and guilt.

Guilt is about behavior: "I *made* a mistake." Shame is about self: "I *am* a mistake."

People who feel badly about who they are cannot behave in healthy ways. They're always trying to keep their secrets safe, so they lie, they avoid vulnerable conversations, and in the worst cases their shame leads to acts of violent aggression.

Guilt isn't a fun emotion, but it at least does have an upside. Guilt can lead us to change our behavior for the better. It's easier for us to separate our SELVES from our BEHAVIOR when we feel guilty, so it's easier to change. There's less psychological baggage to remove out of the way.

Here's an example. Let's say I'm washing dishes and I break a dish that belonged to my husband's mother. If I say to myself, "I am so sorry I broke that dish. I feel just awful about it. I need to be more careful when I wash dishes." - that's a guilty

response. I'll tell my husband about it and the next time I wash dishes I'll focus more and daydream less. But a shame response would be me saying to myself, "I'm such a klutz, the clumsiest person ever. I hope he never finds out that I broke that dish. Maybe I can hide the other dishes in the back of the cupboard so he won't notice one is missing."

Guilt makes us feel badly temporarily, for a purpose. That discomfort leads us to decide to change. We don't like the feeling of guilt, but it doesn't go away right away, does it? It tugs at us and nags at us and forces us to face up to our habits and make changes. It can motivate us. Truly being sorry about a mistake is making a decision to behave differently in the future.

So guilt - in reasonable doses - is not incompatible with living a healthy life, living the way Jesus taught and lived. Shame, though? Shame and a healthy Christian life cannot co-exist.

Listen to these core teachings from our faith.

From the first book of the Bible, "God created humankind in God's image. God saw everything that had been created and indeed, it was very good."

People who are ashamed cannot see themselves as good.

From the story of Jesus' baptism: "A voice came from the heavens saying, 'you are my beloved child; in you I am well-pleased.'"

People who are ashamed cannot see themselves as beloved.

When Jesus is asked, "What is the most important law, of all the laws?, he says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your

neighbor as you love yourself.” People who live with shame do not know how to love themselves so they cannot truly love another.

Shame blocks us from experiencing God’s amazing grace, God’s unconditional love, God’s forgiveness, the abundant life for which we were created.

Psalm 71 says, “In you, O Lord, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame.” God’s people have been experiencing shame from the beginning - from the garden of Eden, in fact - but God’s love is an antidote to shame.

Remember how God talks to the woman at the well? She’s had a string of failed marriages and is now unmarried, but living with a man. Jesus knows everything about her, yet he *initiates* a conversation with her, singling her out for compassionate attention. And when he reveals that he knows everything, he simply continues the conversation without a single word of judgment or exhortation. He then implicitly tells her that the Gospel is for her, too and does her the great honor of revealing to her that he’s the Messiah. That is, Jesus is vulnerable *with her!* Jesus has made her vulnerable by outing her, but then he stoops to join in her vulnerability by outing himself, telling her who he really is.

Vulnerability causes shame to roll off of us; it is like shedding a skin we’ve been wanting to be rid of for so long, removing the straitjacket that constricts and restricts us.

And look at how Jesus treats the tax collector Zacchaeus. He was a total sell out. He betrayed his own people to line his pockets. And like the Samaritan woman, he is just full of shame. So Zacchaeus, in being so desperate to see Jesus that he does the undignified thing of climbing a tree, makes himself completely vulnerable. (Everybody

could see him up there!) But when Jesus sees him, he offers no rebuke, no listing of Zacchaeus's sins—just says, “I must stay at your house.” Jesus wants to *honor* this sinner's house with his presence. Again—another vulnerable move by Jesus, who opens himself up to all kinds of criticism. Jesus meets vulnerability with vulnerability. This is also called empathy, and it's the other way that shame is completely disarmed and left powerless.

One of my visions of Christian community, one of my hopes for **this** community, is that it be a place where we can learn to be vulnerable with one another. Now I'm not talking about church as one big group therapy session, where we sit in a circle and tell our deepest secrets. But I am talking about this being a place where we realize that none of us is perfect, that each of us has made mistakes. Each of us has experienced hurt, we all carry scars and wounds - even if they're not visible on the outside. So this is where we can trust one another. Where, in a small group, we can talk about how hard it is to be a parent of a nine-year-old, or a two-year-old, or a 17-year-old. Where we can talk about the ways in which our children are struggling. Where we can share our stories of grief and struggle. Because when we are honest, when we are vulnerable, we realize what we have in common with one another. We develop empathy. We gradually learn to see ourselves as accepted. We become more real.

There's a lot at stake in this inner work. It leads to us becoming more healthy and whole. It leads to more stable marriages and families. AND...it puts us in the posi-

tion to help heal this broken, beloved world. Healthy, empathetic people care about others and about the future of all of creation. And when we're healthy, we're able to join in God's work.

These words of I John are some of the most beautiful and significant in all of the New Testament. I invite you to say them with me so that they begin to find their way into your soul:

Beloved, let us love one another because love is of God. And friends, if God has loved us so, we must also have the same love for one another. No one has ever seen God. Yet if we love one another, God dwells in us, and God's love is brought to perfection in us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God in them. There is no fear in love, for perfect love drives out fear. To fear is to expect punishment, and anyone who is afraid is still imperfect in love. We love because God first loved us.

Amen.