

“ReLent: Shame”

Luke 19:1-10

February 28, 2021

Have you ever wished you could disappear? As one of the youngest students in my grade, I was also among the last to receive my driver’s license. It was the beginning of my junior year of high school, just one week into the new academic year when I was able to drive myself to school for the first time. The daughter of a church member who had died that summer graciously gave me a bargain deal on her father’s 1990 Ford Probe (the year was 1998); it was a red two-door and had pop-up headlights, which I loved even though I sometimes had to physically pull them up. Anyway, I spent an entire Sunday afternoon cleaning the car inside and out. When Monday morning finally arrived I drove myself to school—a little early so that I could hang out in the parking lot—then spent the whole day thinking about driving back home. When the bell rang at the end of the day, I practically ran out to the parking lot, where I stood outside my car for a few minutes making sure other students noticed me...and my car. Then, I got in the driver’s seat to head home. I’m sure I was watching everything except the oncoming traffic as I made a left turn onto Southeast School Road just in front of a woman driving a Ford Bronco. She was able to slow down enough to minimize the impact, but her front bumper met my driver’s side door. I was stunned and shaking as she jumped out of her car, made sure I was okay, and then began berating me. Finally, we pulled both cars onto the side of the road, less than fifty feet from the entrance to the high school student parking lot. As we waited for police and parents to arrive, a steady stream of cars driven by my older and more experienced classmates passed by the scene of the accident for what seemed like hours. My face bright red, all I could do was wave at each one and attempt to smile. Have you ever wished you could disappear?

The feeling that overcame me that afternoon could, I think, best be described as *shame*. I think the man we meet in this morning’s Scripture passage knew the feeling. Zacchaeus was a tax collector in the town of Jericho. That’s the only thing we know about him as this encounter begins—well, that and the facts that he was rich in resources and short in stature. Luke intends the phrase to describe the man’s physical height, but he could also have been referring to Zacchaeus’s reputation in the community. In the First Century, Jews who worked as tax collectors were despised as traitors to their people and almost universally corrupt in their practices. They were sell-outs, serving as instruments of the oppressive Roman regime, taking money from their fellow Jews to support the dominant and distant empire. And, they were able to become wealthy doing it, taking a cut of all the taxes they collected. So, the tragic irony of Zacchaeus’s life is this: he was a man of means and status, yet always ensnared in shame—a social outcast rejected by his own community.

This morning’s story begins with this man of substance and shame striving to see Jesus. In fact, I’m convinced that *everything* in this scriptural encounter centers on seeing. Check this out. The passage immediately preceding this one tells the story of Jesus healing a blind beggar. His affirming words connect the passages, “Receive your sight; your faith has saved you.” In this Jericho encounter, Jesus is interested in salvation and sight yet again.

Start with Zacchaeus. Now maybe he simply wanted a better view of Jesus, but I wonder if he also hoped to keep himself out of the view of the crowd. I wonder if that is why he ran ahead and climbed that sycamore tree. I wonder if he was ashamed to be seen. I wonder if *he* wanted to disappear.

Shift to ourselves. Of all the spiritual baggage that we carry into this season of Lent, I think shame might be the most difficult to name. Because it is the nature of shame to expose us, we have become quite adept at hiding, masking, avoiding, and concealing our shame. We are well-practiced in reciting the words, “Everything is fine,” rather than acknowledging the messiness of who we are. And yet, in this season of relenting, I wonder how powerful and healing it might be for us to face our shame so that we can let it go?

Brené Brown is a professor, author, and social worker in Houston who has become well-known for her work on vulnerability and courage and particularly for a powerful TED talk which has been viewed fifteen million times on YouTube. Brown believes that shame, which she calls the swampland of the soul, is an unacknowledged epidemic in our culture. She distinguishes between guilt and shame this way: guilt says, “I have done something bad,” shame says, “I am bad.” Guilt says, “I made a mistake,” shame says, “I am a mistake.”ⁱ

The pervasiveness of shame has a profound effect on our culture—it impacts the way we parent, the way we relate to coworkers, neighbors, friends, and family, the way we live together as a community of faith, even the way we see ourselves and others. True story. I’ve been avoiding neighbors in recent weeks because ours was the sidewalk that went un-shoveled following the big snow. Shame finds its way into our relationships and our internal monologues—whispering in our ears and escaping from our mouths. Anyone who has ever witnessed a public shaming knows how unsettling it can be, and how it can impact bystanders as well as the one in the spotlight. A parent calling a child stupid in the middle of the grocery store. Insults in the workplace are defended as “just teasing.” Humiliating a classmate or coworker because of who they are. Shame has permeated our lives so deeply that it often goes unnoticed. And yet, when you are the one who is being shamed, it is impossible to ignore.

No wonder feelings of shame are highly correlated with addiction, depression, suicide, and eating disorders—all behaviors that both lead to and come from a diminished sense of self-worth. Brown says that shame runs two tapes (those were the audio playback devices used in my Ford Probe for our younger worshippers). The first says, “You’re not good enough.” The second says “Who do you think you are?”

And it’s not just a problem in the world *out there*. The church has too often been a place of shame for too many; we have replaced our call to discipleship with fabricated commands to humiliate others or degrade ourselves. I wonder how powerful it would be for the church of Jesus Christ, or at least this congregation to say, “We’re not going to do that anymore.” What if Second Church was a “shame-free zone?” In the last year, we’ve had reason to explore the meaning of privilege in some new ways that have challenged us. Conversations around privilege are also difficult because they easily summon shame instead of agency for change. But in the church we can do this—we can have those hard conversations without resorting to shame—of ourselves or others. I know we can.

In his book, *Grace for Shame*, John Forrester describes it this way, “To feel shame is to feel *seen* in a painfully diminished sense.”ⁱⁱ This, I think, is what Zacchaeus hoped to avoid that day when Jesus was walking through Jericho. He had experienced plenty of shame, he’d be better off to go unseen. He wanted to disappear. And yet—and here’s the crucial thing—he showed up in the place Jesus was. His desire for connection was stronger than his fear of shame. He came because he wanted to see Jesus. Up in a tree, for height and perhaps cover, Zacchaeus does see Jesus. But what happens next is even more important. It’s more important because, in Brené Brown’s words, “Empathy is the antidote to shame.” Shame is overcome when we choose to see each other with love and compassion.

What happens next is that Jesus looks up.

When he does, he sees Zacchaeus. And then, Jesus goes one step further. He calls him by name: “Zacchaeus! Hurry and come on down. I need to stay at your house today.” And old Zacchaeus? Well, he practically falls out of the tree, so thrilled is he to welcome the guest of honor into his house. Let me pause here to say what may seem obvious, but is terribly important to understanding this story. The decision Jesus makes—to see, acknowledge, and invite himself to the home of a despised tax collector—is itself a risky act. In choosing it, he makes himself vulnerable to the judgment of the grumbling crowd. No rebuke...no criticism? Jesus, a guest of sinners! But something matters more than the adoration or approval of the crowd. His desire for connection is stronger than his fear of shame.

Jesus has a name for what happened that day in Jericho. He calls it salvation. Today, salvation has come to the house. Here then is a picture of salvation: restoration of the one who was isolated, liberation of the one who was captive, forgiveness of the one who had done wrong, honoring of the one who was shamed. In meeting the vulnerability of Zacchaeus with his own, Jesus opens the way for empathy, and shame is banished.

This burden of shame is such a heavy weight to bear. This swampland of the soul tells such compelling lies about ourselves and others: that we are worthless, that life is a zero-sum game, that we gain power by degrading others, that we are the labels we wear. Failure. Inadequate. Unlovable. Sinner. That’s what they called him.

Jesus had a new label for his friend Zacchaeus. Son of Abraham. Child of God. Part of the family. In that moment of seeing, salvation came. If we can relent the shame we have carried and the shame we have inflicted, salvation might just come to us as well. Amen.

ⁱ You can find video and transcripts of Brené Brown’s TED talks at https://www.ted.com/speakers/brene_brown

ⁱⁱ John A. Forrester, *Grace for Shame: The Forgotten Gospel*. Pastor’s Attic Press, 2010.