

Once a year, usually the week before Holy Week, the clergy of the diocese meet together to renew our vows and to bless oil to be used for healing and blessing in the coming year. When we met last week, the Bishop shared a TED talk by academic and author, Brene Brown.

Brene has spent hours interviewing people about guilt and shame. She distinguishes between the two by suggesting that guilt is when you feel bad for something you did whereas shame is when you feel bad for who you are. She found that shame is endemic in our culture, that many of us don't feel that we're enough, and of course, when we don't feel that we're enough it makes everything more difficult. It makes us more reactive and less willing to be vulnerable. But Brown discovered that vulnerability is almost an antidote for shame. When we know that we are enough we can allow ourselves not to be perfect, not to always be in control, not to be cool. When we know that we enough we can allow ourselves to be authentic, which means being vulnerable and open about our imperfections. Shame separates us from other people; when we are ashamed we feel isolated. When we feel that there's nowhere that we belong, we feel shame.

So this morning I've been wondering about Jesus and shame.

I found these words from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian who dared to stand up against Hitler and the Nazi regime. Bonhoeffer said

It is immensely easier to suffer in obedience to a human command  
than to suffer in the freedom of one's own responsible deed.

It is immensely easier to suffer with others  
than to suffer alone.

It is immensely easier to suffer openly and honorably  
than apart and in shame.

It is immensely easier to suffer through commitment of the physical life

than in the spirit.

Christ suffered in freedom, alone, apart and in shame, in body and spirit,

and since then many Christians have so suffered with him.

“It is immensely easier to suffer openly and honorably than apart and in shame... Christ suffered in freedom, alone, apart and in shame.”

In Isaiah 50 we read, “I gave my back to smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair; I hid not my face from shame and spitting.”

These words, originally referring to the Suffering Servant, have been seen by the church over thousands of years to apply to Jesus. And it makes me wonder, what if the crucifixion, in somehow reconciling us with God, is more about shame than guilt.

If you're like me, you have grown up with the idea that Jesus frees us from guilt, the guilt that is a result of our sins. But Jesus lived in what has been called a shame and honor culture. In our society we tend to think of people who are wealthy as having more status. In Jesus' time it was all about family honor and so the value of an individual was measured by how much honor he brought to his family. Those who brought shame were marginalized. Crucifixion was the shameful death. You really couldn't get more shameful than to be strung up on a pole.

We often use the language “Jesus bore our sins”, but what if what he actually bore was our shame?

If you remember the story of the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve after they had eaten of the forbidden fruit, were ashamed. We're told that they realized they were naked. Self-consciousness set in and with it shame about the human body. Then they were cast out of the garden, and shame is about separation – being seen as different or experiencing oneself as not as good as others.

In suffering “ in freedom, alone, apart and in shame, in body and spirit.” Jesus bore the shame, the separation of the world. In his haunting cry, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” we hear the terror of separation, the despair of deep shame.

So perhaps we can paraphrase Paul and say “For as in Adam all are shamed, so in Christ will all be made enough.” (I Cor.15:22) I don't claim to understand the cross. I don't know how Jesus' death and resurrection reconcile us to God. I just know that they do.

And in that reconciliation comes the end to shame. That is why the early Christians were so energized. They knew that they were loved beyond measure. God so loved the cosmos, God so loved each one and the whole shebang, that he sent his only Son into the world, so that we might have life. (John 3:16) The early Christians really understood that nothing could separate them from the love of God.

Unfortunately, most of us have spent years thinking that we are not enough; that we are miserable sinners who are only made good enough because Jesus died a horrible death. Instead of understanding that it is precisely because we are good enough that God loved us enough to die in shame.

We belong. We belong to the daughters and sons of God. All that shame and separation went away through Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection.

So next time you find yourself thinking you're not enough or you don't belong – and those messages are as subtle as the serpent in the garden – remember that God loves you just as you are and is cheering for you to become who you can be. And please remind me of that too.