

**Proper 9, Year A**

7/9/2017

[Zechariah 9:9-12](#)

[Psalm 145:8-15](#)

[Romans 7:15-25a](#)

[Matthew 11:16-19,25-30](#)

**Beating Ourselves Up**

“I am so stupid!” I said to myself as I walked back down the hallway. “Why did I do that? I’m such an idiot.” You’ve been in that place, right? Where you feel utterly embarrassed and start to move from the feeling of embarrassment to telling yourself what a horrible human being you are? That’s called shame, and it’s not a good place to be.

Moments before I had been in my general manager’s office meeting with the corporate executives of the new company that had just bought the group of radio stations I worked for in the early 2000s. One of the execs was a woman who was dressed in a very loose-fitting blouse that looked to me like maternity wear. Our first child had just been born a couple of months before, and I had baby on the brain. I looked at this woman and in my own joy thought, “Oh, how wonderful for her to be pregnant!” As we got up to leave what had been a productive meeting I stepped forward to shake her hand, introduced myself, and proceeded to place my foot directly into my mouth.

“Congratulations!” I said. “When are you due?” To her credit she kept her smile and said, “I’m not pregnant.” *Kill me. Just kill me right now*, I thought. My brain scrambling I tried my best to salvage the moment. “I’m so sorry,” I stuttered. “My wife just had our first child and she had a maternity blouse that looked very much like your shirt.” I don’t think that it really helped to *further* point out that the blouse made her look pregnant, but . . . .

I’m. So. Stupid. I’m. Such. An. Idiot. I slunk down the hall back to my office. My

GM followed me and proceeded to offer words to help me beat myself up with feelings of shame.

This incident was, of course, simply a mistake. It was not a sin. I did not do anything that intended or caused irreparable harm. Yet, look how I talked to myself: Stupid. Idiot. You have probably made similar mistakes, and then proceeded to shame yourself up one side and down the other. If we are willing to do this to ourselves over embarrassing mistakes, how much worse is the self-shaming we do when we actually do something that is *wrong*? Maybe you've found yourself, as I know I have, feeling a little like Paul sounds in this morning's reading from his letter to the Romans: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . . Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" Paul is talking about more than embarrassing mistakes here. He is speaking of the way that sin seems to overpower us, and how even though we want to do the right thing, more often than we would like we choose the things we know are wrong. In the process, Paul is battling with his feelings of guilt and shame.

The author, speaker, and Episcopalian Brené Brown is a shame-researcher. Yes, that's a real thing! Sounds fun, right? In her excellent book *Daring Greatly* she gets specific about what shame is. She points out that we usually use the words guilt, embarrassment, humiliation, and shame interchangeably. She believes, however, that understanding the difference is important.

Having guilt about something means saying "I did something bad." Having shame about something means saying "I am bad." What did I say after I made the simple mistake about the woman's blouse? *I am stupid. I am an idiot.* I was shaming myself. To

have said, *That was a stupid thing I did* would have been more about guilt, and would not have put such a judgment on myself, especially over a mistake. The truth is, though, I wasn't guilty because I hadn't done anything morally wrong, and I certainly didn't need to call myself a stupid idiot because this little incident in no way defined me as a person. What I felt could be more accurately described as embarrassment. It was "fleeting," is now funny to think about. What I felt when my boss came in to further bless me out was humiliated. Humiliation is different than shame. Shame is something I believe I deserve, but humiliation is what we feel when someone says things to us that we don't feel we deserve. I did something embarrassing and didn't deserve my boss's words. They said more about him than about me.<sup>1</sup>

In this passage from Romans Paul is talking in terms of guilt and shame over sin: actual moral failings. This language, for instance, is about guilt: "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me." He's talking about guilt because he's talking about the things he *does* that are bad, now who he *is* as a person. Guilt = "I did something bad," remember? I can relate to those words, and I'm sure you can to. They're also appropriate. There's nothing wrong with feeling a little guilt. Guilt is actually a good thing. Brown writes, "We feel guilty when we hold up something we've done or failed to do against our values and find they don't match up." Think of the words we will say in the confession in a little while: "Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone." We think of what we've done wrong, then we hold those things up to our values in the next line: "We have not loved

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<sup>1</sup> Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2012), 71-74.

you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.” It may not feel great to think of and name those things, but it’s not about shame. Brown goes on to explain, “[Guilt] is an uncomfortable feeling, but one that’s helpful. The psychological discomfort, something similar to cognitive dissonance, is what motivates meaningful change.”<sup>2</sup> That’s what the confession moves us toward in the next lines, “We are truly sorry, and we humbly repent.” We have held up the things for which we feel guilt, the things we’ve *done and left undone*, admit them, and say, “I seek meaningful change.”

The Church sometimes gets a bad rap about making people feel guilty. The problem is that at times the Church has gone beyond guilt and made people feel *shame*. Shame, you’ll remember, means more than “I did something bad,” shame is about saying “I am bad.” And, sometimes, the Church hasn’t shamed us at all, but we hear the message about the reality of sin in our lives, and we feel guilt, and then we walk out going, “I’m a worthless, wretched sinner. I’m a terrible person. I’m a loser.” We experience guilt, and sometimes *we* turn it into shame. While guilt can lead to positive change, shame does not. “Shame,” explains Brown, “is highly correlated with addiction, violence, aggression, depression, eating disorders, and bullying. Researchers don’t find shame correlated with positive outcomes at all—there are no data to support that shame is helpful compass for good behavior. In fact, shame is much more likely to be the cause of destructive and hurtful behaviors than it is to be the solution.”<sup>3</sup> Whether others shame us or we shame ourselves, shame causes a loss in self-esteem, and never leads to positive outcomes.

I read about a study recently that addressed how our self-esteem affects the way we see and treat others. In the experiment a group of non-Jewish participants were asked

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<sup>2</sup> Brown, 72.

<sup>3</sup> Brown, 73.

to take an intelligence test. Half of the participants were told they scored very highly and showed high intelligence. The other half were told they did not perform well and were below average. After being given this bogus feedback all of the participants were asked to evaluate the personalities of someone like them (a non-Jewish, European-American woman), and someone not like them (a Jewish woman). Then the experimenters evaluated each participant's self-esteem.

What they found was this. The group who had received the positive feedback about the intelligence test felt good about themselves and evaluated both the Jewish and non-Jewish women equally. They thought they both had great personalities. The group who had received the negative feedback about their test results felt bad about themselves and evaluated the non-Jewish woman (the person most like them) positively, but evaluated the Jewish woman (the person most unlike them) negatively. In other words, the ones who felt good about themselves could see the positive in others. The ones who felt bad about themselves seemed to feel a need to denigrate someone unlike them in order to boost their own self-esteem.<sup>4</sup>

When we feel bad about ourselves, when we feel shame, it is easier for us to lash out at others in destructive ways, especially at people who are not like us. What does such an experiment say about the way shame can affect us, and how that shame can subsequently shape the way we see and interact with the people and the world around us? What does it say about the way we lash out at each other in today's culture? Does it say more about those who receive our negativity, or more about us?

I think Paul and Jesus have something to say about this in this morning's readings. Paul talked in Romans about how sin seems to control him, and laments with

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<sup>4</sup> Christena Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2013), 106.

real guilt his seeming lack of control over himself at time. I think any of us can relate to that. He then concludes his reflection with a shaming kind of statement: “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” Notice, however, the crucial follow-up sentence. Paul does not leave himself or us in this place of shame, but carries us over to grace: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” He takes us to a similar place that recovery programs like Alcoholics Anonymous takes people. The passage is a theological reflection on the struggle we all face with being imperfect people, and recognizes that sometimes our own sinfulness can seem to make our lives unmanageable. AA would say the only solution is to turn ourselves over to a power greater than ourselves. Paul would remind us that like you and me he lived in a culture that told people that they ought to be able, by their own power, to solve all their own problems, and overcome all their own personal struggles through sheer act of will. That they could and should be perfect.<sup>5</sup> And because today we still believe this lie we often wallow in a private kind of shame that tells us we do not measure up. As one writer put it, “We are heavily invested in perfection—or at least in the illusion of perfection. We invest wisely, dress appropriately, and worship discreetly. Our children, like our homes, are well-maintained and do us credit. Illness, failure, and loss are sources of shame and are therefore private experiences. [We embody the phrase] ‘Never let ‘em see you sweat’; but God knows the truth and so does Paul: we are all sweating.”<sup>6</sup> Paul is saying here, “Get over yourself! Of course you don’t measure up. There is a spiritual battle being waged every day in the background against forces with which we cannot contend alone; but

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<sup>5</sup> Christopher Bryan, *A Preface to Romans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 142-145.

<sup>6</sup> Shawntea Monroe, *Feasting on the Word (Kindle Edition)*, eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Year A, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season after Pentecost 1 (Proper 3-16)* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), Loc. 7477-7480.

Jesus Christ offers himself as a way to leave our shame behind, to allow our guilt to help motivate us to positive change, and to see ourselves as infinitely loved, valued, and supported in our struggles. We can't do it alone, and thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ, we don't have to! So lift your arms and let the world see those sweat stains!"

We beat ourselves up every day over even little things, while Jesus waits with open arms to lift us up. The world around, and we ourselves, lay heavy burdens of shame on our backs that will never and can never motivate us to be better. That heavy burden will only lead us to poor self-esteem and destructive outcomes. That's where Jesus' words in the gospel reading inviting us to shed our heavy burdens picks up right where Paul leaves off: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Thanks be to God, indeed.

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