



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God. Amen.

Someone once said that being Christian could be summarized as loving God and loving those who God loves. And just to be clear, who God loves includes everyone, no exceptions, no conditions, loving God and loving those who God loves. And if Eric Linder is in the house, I know it's probably whom God loves, but you get the idea.

But either way, I've always liked it as a kind of shorthand for the great commandment to love God, to love your neighbor as yourself. And tucked away in this idea, in that commandment is something that we can sometimes overlook, and that is loving those who God loves includes yourself. And to be clear, particularly in this season of Lent, loving ourselves doesn't mean loving every choice we've ever made or everything we've ever said, but it does mean treating ourselves with the same compassion, the same patience, the same mercy and grace that God does.

And loving yourself, by the way, is not a selfish thing. It's not a self-absorbed thing because loving ourselves unlocks our ability to love others. It kind of kicks the whole thing off. As Bishop Wright said in that first week of Lent, it's only when we get in touch with our identity as God's beloved that we can extend that same grace to others. And I of course, would add not just others, but the other, those that we find hard to love. Those who think differently, who believe differently, who vote differently. Those who we are so quick to judge and so slow to get to know.

And so, yes, the love that we are called to offer is big, but it begins with ourselves. Because it's hard to give away that which we don't have. It's been a topic of discussion in our Lenten series. And in some of the small groups, a frequent comment kept coming up and it goes something like this. Oh, you know, I know that God loves me. I've heard that all my life ever since I was a kid. The question I have is, if I know it so well, why don't I feel it more often?

It reminds me of those days when one of the kids would come home from school and something's happened. They're feeling bad. Somebody said something or did something, and you try to say anything you can to console them. Don't listen to them. They don't know what they're talking about. You're a beautiful, amazing person. You're compassionate. You bring joy wherever you go. And you give them

the inspirational speech of your life and they just kind of roll their eyes and say, well, duh. Of course you're going to say that. You're my dad. For whatever reason, those are the days when they're just not feeling it and nothing you say can seem to get through. It just sort of rolls right off.

We've all been there, have we not? We know that feeling. Why do you suppose that is? What keeps us from feeling God's love in those moments when we need it most? Is it fear? Fear of rejection, fear of being hurt? Is it our many insecurities? Is it jealousy? Is it envy? Are we constantly looking around wondering, why does everybody seem to have this incredible faith but me? Is it anxiety? Do we cut ourselves off because we're worried we won't fit in?

I imagine it's probably all of these and perhaps a lot more. They're all part of it. But researchers such as Brené Brown – and if you don't know who Brené Brown is, she is sort of the Episcopal church patron saint of vulnerability, and they suggest that of all these many negative emotions, they can perhaps be traced back to a common source. And that is shame. Because shame is not just a feeling, it's a belief system. It's a story that we tell ourselves about ourselves. It's a script that gets replayed over and over in our head that there is something about me that is so flawed that I am unworthy of being loved.

And it's not guilt. Guilt is, I made a mistake. Shame is, I am a mistake. Guilt is about behavior. It can lead us to say sorry, to make amends, to turn and repent, but shame, shame is like a wall because it hijacks our identity altogether. It becomes this kind of self-reinforcing loop. So when we do make a mistake, guilt can motivate us to change course, but shame, shame takes our mistakes and says, oh, see, I told you so. I told you you weren't good enough. And now everybody knows.

Even when we experience success, shame somehow manages to try to sabotage it, you know? Oh, you were just lucky. Right place, the right time. A lot of other people could have done that. In fact, they probably could have done it better. Even when somebody tries to lift us up and tries to encourage us, shame can go up like a shield. It doesn't let anything in. Oh, they don't mean it. They're just being nice. They're just saying that because they have to.

If the Devil tempts us away from our belovedness with the ifs of our life, then he comes to downright bury it with shame. And to be clear, it's not just some scarlet letter that a few people carry. Researchers tell us that everyone carries some degree of shame. It's part of being human. It's part of who we are. Think back to Genesis, the Garden of Eden. When they eat from the Tree of Knowledge, what's the first thing they experience? Shame. And what do they do? They cover up. They lie. They point fingers and they hide. They hide from one another and they hide from God.

And we're still hiding. Today we hide by looking good and having the perfect image. We hide by Photoshopping everything we do. We rack up achievements, hoping to cover up the parts of us that we'd rather not be seen. We people please, we say yes when we really should be saying no, hoping that our overachieving will somehow earn our worth.

Managing our shame can even cause us to withdraw, to isolate, to cut us off from people to protect ourselves, which is exactly what is happening in our gospel today. The woman at the well is there under the hot sun because she too is hiding. Women would normally go early in the morning when it was cool and they would go together. Because the well was a place of community and conversation, but she comes alone in the middle of the day because she doesn't want to be seen. She doesn't want to hear the whispers, she doesn't want to feel their stares. And it is there in the very place she goes to hide that Jesus waits to meet her. To be with her. To be with her in a way that even shame cannot withstand.

Brené Brown reminds us that shame needs secrecy and silence. It thrives in the darkness of our doubts, but it withers – it withers in the light of empathy, truth and connection. And that's why it's so hard to talk somebody out of their shame because it masquerades as our identity, but it can be ministered to, it can be healed. And in this gospel today, Jesus is showing us how. Notice the very first thing He did, the very way that it kicks off, He goes to Samaria. He goes to a place where He would be least expected, a region that Jews avoided because it was home to the people they despised. And He sits at a well that symbolizes all of it – their shared ancestry and their shared divisions. He shows up, in other words, in places of wounded memory, in the places we go to hide. Most importantly, He doesn't wait for an invitation.

I've learned this a long time ago in pastoral care that there are some people, there are some people who will never call for a pastoral visit no matter what they're going through. And if you call them, oh, they'll say something like, oh, you know, I'm okay. It's not that bad. There's others worse off than me. Yet, if I pop in with an excuse, well, I was just in the area, well, suddenly we're off and running. Shame keeps us from asking for help when we need it most, because remember, it tries to tell us we're not worthy. And so sometimes we need someone to just show up, someone who will climb down into the hole with us uninvited if need be, with no agenda to fix us or to solve us, but to just be with us at our well.

The second thing to notice is how Jesus shows up, how He does. He doesn't lead with His authority. He doesn't kick it off by announcing He's the Messiah. He doesn't even ask, how can I help? Did you notice what He does? He asks her for a drink of water. Think about that for a moment. The Son of God, who can raise the dead, who can feed 5,000 with a loaf of bread, asks her for a drink of water. A woman who, by the way is considered unclean, untouchable, someone He

shouldn't even be speaking to. He asks her for a drink, and with that simple little gesture, returns to her some agency and some dignity. This isn't going to be service provider and service recipient. Jesus instead comes alongside and He builds a relationship that begins with mutuality, not hierarchy.

I've been hearing some confessions lately, which is interesting for Episcopalians. Congratulations to those of you who have. It is a beautiful sacrament if you haven't tried it. But I'm struck by how the Book of Common Prayer, it honors that very same spirit because at the end of the Rite of Reconciliation, it ends with the priest asking the person who's just been absolved if they might now pray for me, me a sinner, just as well. Grace flows both ways. It's got to be mutual.

Finally, Jesus takes His time. Did you notice that from the length of the reading? This gospel is famously the longest conversation Jesus has with anyone. He spends more time talking to someone He isn't supposed to be talking to, more than anyone else in the entire Bible, because time matters. When you are really trying to see someone, if we are going to have any hope of cutting through shame, we have to put down our agenda and our schedule and our busyness. We have to take the time to get curious about them. And when we do that, when we take the time to build that kind of trust, the final piece of work can happen, which is to bring that part of ourselves that we've been trying so desperately to hide, to bring it into the light.

And to be fair, this woman at the well has been maligned over the years by many preachers. We don't really know her story. Women at that time had very little control over their lives, much less their marriages. She could have been widowed, abandoned, passed from one to another, forced into relationships simply to survive. We don't really know, but it doesn't really matter. What matters is, justified or not, Jesus offers a space. He creates safe space where her shame can be spoken aloud, where it can be brought out into the open where it begins to lose its hold.

And it's after all of that, after experience of the presence of love, empathy, and building connection, it's then and only then that she can leave her water jar behind. She doesn't need it anymore. She's tasted the living water of unconditional love. And you know she has, because it just sort of instantly springs up in her, doesn't it? It just starts overflowing just like Jesus said it would. She runs back to the village because she wants nothing more than to share it, and share it with the very people that once shunned her. Because having tasted it, she can now see them for who they really are. People who need love and acceptance, who are fearful and afraid just as she was. And she knows as well that her healing, her salvation will be bound up in theirs as well.

And it's the same for all of us. As we minister to shame, whether it's in ourselves or in our brothers and sisters, there will be days when we just don't feel it. There will be times when the old stories get loud again, the old scripts creep back, but the good news is that on those days, on those days, we have faith. Faith that even on the days we can't feel it, faith that we know that Jesus is waiting for us, waiting to meet us at our wells once more, no matter how lost we might be, no matter how down we might feel, always there in the places we go to hide, to love us, to see us, to be with us, to give us the living water we need.

And we have our faith community. People who can remind us when we forget, who can help hold us together when we falter. People who can show up uninvited, if need be, whenever we're in doubt because none of us heals alone. Do it together with Christ behind us and one another beside us so that the day would come when nothing, nothing would keep us from loving God and loving those who God loves.

Amen.