

Today I want to talk about shame. It's not a pretty topic. Brené Brown, an academic who researches shame tells a story of a talk she gave at a women's networking lunch. The organiser of the lunch confronted her when she arrived: "Here's how this is going to go: ...Do not mention the word *shame*. People will be eating...People want to be comfortable and joyful. That's all..."¹

Well, sorry. Because our scriptures today deal with the skin disease of leprosy, with all its disfigurement, and shame. The thing with leprosy – not just in Jesus' time but for centuries afterwards, is not just that it's a horrible condition to live with. Leprosy is an illness that usually caused the sufferer to be cast out. We can see from our OT reading that this wasn't always the case – Naaman was a great warrior, and favourite of the king. In fact, the word 'leprosy' is used as a kind of catch-all term in the Bible for various kinds of skin conditions, not just what we diagnose as leprosy today.

In most cases though, the leper would be shunned, declared unclean, and subject to rejection and isolation. This was partly to avoid contagion, but also because leprosy was considered a curse from God and associated with sin. When we read stories about lepers in the Bible, therefore, we are reading stories about shame. And when Jesus heals lepers in the gospels, he is not just responding to a physical disease, but to the whole experience of having been declared accursed, and banished from friends and neighbours.

Let's look at how Jesus responds. Firstly, when he sees the leper begging for healing, he is moved with pity. People would have walked past this guy every day, possibly with a shudder, possibly not even seeing him. But Jesus' heart is moved.

Then, and scandalously, he reaches out his hand to touch the leper. Risking contagion, risking the perception of contamination, and possibly even overcoming physical revulsion, he made flesh contact with someone whose flesh was unclean. He doesn't do his healing trick from a distance. His healing was all about touch, about skin to skin contact – about coming close with shared humanity.

Jesus voices his *choice* to heal this man. Under no obligation, duty or duress, Jesus chooses to heal, out of love and because it is his desire and joy to do so. And the man is healed. In fact he's so healed, and so ecstatic about it, that despite Jesus asking him not to, he heads out to tell everyone his incredible story.

1 Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, p34

If we remember what we pondered last Sunday, this healed man has not just been set free from a physical disease. He has also been set free from the whole system of shunning and shame. He now has dignity, a story to tell and the freedom to tell it.

We all know what it is to feel shame. Many of us come from families where shame is used as a weapon to control people's behaviour. You have to do this, or not do this, or give this, or achieve that, or people will know, and they'll disapprove, and your whole family will feel the humiliation of not living up to others' expectations.

Shame isn't the same as guilt. Guilt is acknowledgement that we have done wrong. We can confess it and be forgiven. Shame is being made to feel bad for things that often we have no control over, or that aren't wrong, just different, or not what other people wanted. Shame works through labels. You didn't just 'do' something bad – you 'are' bad.

I know a woman who is part of a close-knit church community where she's worshipped for decades. Her son is in prison. And nobody in the church knows it – she's kept it a secret for years because even though she is well loved in that place, she can't tolerate the idea that people might know or talk about or judge her or her son.

Sadly, the church hasn't always been good at offering freedom from shame – in fact, quite the reverse. People are shamed in the church because of their financial giving, or lack of it. People are shamed in the church if their marriage has ended. People are sometimes shamed for being poorly dressed, or for having noisy kids, or for not knowing what to do in worship. People are shamed for disability, or for mental illness. People are especially shamed in the church if they're gay, or lesbian, or transgender. And we don't really talk about it all that much, even though we know that experiencing shame in the church leads to suicide.

I think the reason that shame finds a foothold in the church is the same reason as lepers were shunned in biblical times. In our minds we associate misfortune, or difference, or anything outside what we believe is normal, with sin. And in our anxiety not to be contaminated with anyone else's sin, we judge, and we push people to the fringes of our community life.

Shame is a terrible thing. It paralyses and demoralises people to the point where they no longer value their own lives, where they no longer see themselves as having any worth. And when it happens in the church, it's worse, because the shame seems to be coming from God. If the God who made you is ashamed of you, why live? It's so utterly tragic because it should be the exact opposite way round.

The truth of our faith is the grace and mercy of God, the love of God, who continues to love us, seek us, welcome and delight in us no matter what we have done, or what has happened to us. The truth of our faith is that God's love and acceptance has nothing to do with us being 'good enough' and everything to do with God's invitation to us all. The church should be the place where we are safe to be honest and open about how things really are. But it's often the last place where this happens. Shame gets in the way of true community.

If you're someone who is living with shame, know that Jesus is moved with pity for you, that he wants to reach out to touch and heal you. Jesus calls you to come right into the centre of his community, where there is a table made ready for you. After communion I offer anointing for healing – perhaps today you'd like to receive the touch of God for a burden of shame you carry. Or, if that feels too hard, I invite you to come and see me privately and we can pray together.

As followers of Jesus, we also need to let him set the pattern for our dealings with others. So when we are with someone who feels like the church has rejected them – or will reject them if they knew the truth of their story – let's feel the pity of that in our own hearts. Instead of moving quickly on past, let us be the hands of Jesus to reach out and touch with compassion and healing, inviting people into our shared life and making them welcome. It's not for us to rule anyone in or out, when God is the host of the table and it is God who calls people to come in.

We might not know anyone with leprosy today. But we have probably all met someone who feels stigmatised or humiliated for who they are or what they have done or suffered. Instead of reinforcing that feeling in them, let's follow the example of Jesus, and offer healing touch and friendship. The grace of God and the peace of God be in all our hearts as we live into God's welcome and banish shame from among us.