

**Homily, St. Andrew's
Proper 26B, Sept 27, 2015
Mark 9:38-50**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Brene Brown is a speaker, writer and research professor in the Graduate College of Social Work at the University of Houston. Her work is around the themes of vulnerability, courage, worthiness and shame and while that might not sound very appealing, her 2010 TedTalk titled "The Power of Vulnerability" has been viewed over 19 million times. In the talk, Brown speaks of the backwards way in which she came to study shame, beginning instead with connection - it's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives. Connection is why we're here, she contends, but as she sought to study it - to measure and understand it - she found something confounding, in her words: "When you ask people about love, they tell you about heartbreak; when you ask people about belonging, they'll tell you their most excruciating experiences of being excluded; and when you ask people about connection, the stories are about disconnection."

As she collected stories as the raw data from which to draw insight, she quickly ran into an unnamed thing that unravelled connection... it turned out to be shame. "Shame is the fear of disconnection..." she describes, it's the fear that "there something about me that if other people know it or see it that I won't be worthy of connection." It's universal but "no one wants to talk about it and the less you talk about it, the more you have it." What underpinned this shame... the I'm not good enough (smart; funny; rich; educated; skinny...) enough... she discovered, was excruciating vulnerability. The idea is "that in order for connection to happen, we have to allow ourselves to be seen... really seen."

As Brown analyzed her data, she found that the one variable that divided those who have a strong sense of love and belonging and those who didn't was whether or not they believed they were worthy of love and belonging, of connection. It is a terrible and tragic irony that one thing that keeps us out of connection is our fear that we're not worthy of connection. Shame boils down to that sense of worthiness... am I worthy of connection? Brown researches and writes and speaks about human life and human relationships but I think her work can transfer into the realm of our spirituality and it can offer an interesting lens with which to consider our Gospel story today.

Today's Gospel passage continues the conversation that began last Sunday with the disciples' argument about who was the greatest and Jesus' teaching about the upside world that is the Kingdom of God: "Whoever want to be first must be last of all and servant of all." (9:35) Today we hear John "try again" as it were, to get validation from Jesus, by reporting some of the disciples' efforts on Jesus' behalf: "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." I imagine John saying it with such hopefulness that this effort will garner the praise, the acceptance, the proclamation that their work is worthy. The desire to please, the quest to "get it right" is a familiar and common one. The disciples had been working hard, trying to do what Jesus wanted and John's report sounds so much like wanting a pat on the back for demonstrating that they have Jesus' back, believing that

Jesus would want to be in control of his message and his power... to hold it close within the intimate group.

Jesus' response must have been so disheartening, for Jesus commands a direct contradiction to what the disciples had done: "Do not stop him," Jesus says, "for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able to soon afterward to speak evil of me." "Oh... so we didn't do the right thing. We got it wrong... again." Thankfully, Jesus doesn't specifically tell John he's done wrong and Jesus certainly does not respond that in any way implies that John is not worthy as a human being or as one of his disciples.

One of the great graces in our Gospel stories is how they reflect that making mistakes or misunderstanding, even flat out betrayal and desertion, does not disqualify those first disciples, or us, from being counted among God's beloved - from being connected to the source of all life. They just haven't yet understood Jesus' message of grace and love that doesn't fear vulnerability. Importantly, the disciples don't give up or disconnect. Instead, they keep doing what they think is best, what they think Jesus wants. And every failure only leads them to greater courage and deeper connection. Maybe it was in knowing that Jesus had seen them so fully and so completely in their calling to join him in the first place that it carried them through the difficulties, the uncertainty, the fear and the confusion that came along the way.

Jesus goes on to express even an even greater and broader connection than the disciples had imagined, saying: "Whoever is not against us is for us." The team is actually bigger than the disciples can see; the community is bigger than the immediate gathering of the closest friends; they need not fear outsiders who are nevertheless doing the work of God's kingdom. It is a good reminder to us as well that the good and gracious work of God can be done, is done, by many more than those who are part of our immediate family. Not only do we need not fear such outsiders, but we could even celebrate the ways we see the kingdom of God lived through others who are not part of "us".

Jesus' speech continues with sayings against the people who cause others to sin, and declaring harsh admonitions to maim oneself rather than doing wrong: "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; ... and if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off... and if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out..." The conclusion each time is that "it is better..." to be physically handicapped, to amputate the source of one's temptation or vice, than to turn away, to disconnect, from Jesus. It is better to be physically incomplete than to stay attached to your shame at the expense of connection to God.

In a 2009 talk for "The UP Experience," Brene Brown tells the story of a disastrous talk she had done 5 years earlier. When the woman responsible for the event discovered that Brown's research topic was shame, along with fear and vulnerability, she expressed confusion because she'd been told Brown had interviewed thousands of people about how to be joyful and beautiful and happy. Brown replied "no... I kinda study what gets in the way of being joyful and having meaningful lives." After a few thoughtful minutes, the organizer gave Brown instructions about how her talk was going to go: "You're not going to talk about the things that get in the way. You're going to talk about "how to"... tips... helpful hints... happier, joyful. You can't use the word "shame." And finally... People want to be comfortable and happy. Comfort and happiness... that is what people are looking for." Disconnected from the heart of her research and her insights, Brown's talk that day was an unhappy shadow of her work.

But 5 years later, Brown was able to tell her difficult story and reflect on how that “mean lady’s” injunctions were such an important reflection of our culture. That we don’t want to talk about the things that get in the way is the very thing that is tearing us apart. We want “how to” tips for living more joyful lives without looking at or facing into or talking about what’s getting in the way of being able to follow through. We know very well what we need to do to be thinner or healthier or richer, we just don’t do it. Our desire for comfort and happiness means that we’d rather pretend than risk the authenticity of letting go of who we think we should be in order to be who we are. And yet to truly connect requires authenticity. And that path to connection through authenticity goes through vulnerability. Through her research, Brown discovered that those who lived the most “whole-hearted” lives were those who embraced vulnerability as necessary... not comfortable nor excruciating, but necessary to authenticity and connection.

This is a terribly difficult message and in the church it is even more so. A common version of Christian faith involves expressing happiness at all times, even if you have to pretend through a time suffering; ending every story with how blessed you are, even when you’re hiding a broken heart or hustling for worthiness. It’s not that we can’t authentically feel joy and blessedness in hard times, just not without facing, admitting, talking about the things that are killing us. Modern church wisdom has long been that we need to be more relevant, meaning that we should provide a comfortable and happy experience, along with a few “how to” tips about how to be a good Christian. And yet today Jesus tells us to acknowledge the shame of our temptation and sin through physical maiming, so all can see just how imperfect we are! “If your hand [or foot, or eye] causes you to stumble, cut it off...” Better to be obviously imperfect than to live in the hell of disconnection.

This Gospel message is nothing that we want to hear and yet Brene Brown’s research into belonging and meaning and happiness seems to suggest something similar, if with less hyperbole. And so may we consider those things getting in the way of living in the fullness of joy, meaning, and purpose... both in our individual lives and as this community of St. Andrew’s. As we connect in ever more meaningful ways with one another, may we extend our reach beyond our circle of friends to include those most in need of the connection that banishes fear and shame. May we, in the words of Brene Brown, “craft love from heartbreak, compassion from shame, grace from disappointment, courage from failure.”