

Vulnerable Church: Failure

Matthew 26: 69-75

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant-girl came to him and said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." ⁷⁰ But he denied it before all of them, saying, "I do not know what you are talking about." ⁷¹ When he went out to the porch, another servant-girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth."^[a] ⁷² Again he denied it with an oath, "I do not know the man." ⁷³ After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you." ⁷⁴ Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath, "I do not know the man!" At that moment the cock crowed. ⁷⁵ Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: "Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

Today we are beginning a new sermon series that relies on the work of Brene Brown, and especially her concept of vulnerability. How many of you are familiar with or have read any of Brown's books?

Brene Brown is a social worker and professor who researches courage, vulnerability, empathy and shame. She's written books, has a podcast, and her 2010 TED Talk, "The Power of Vulnerability" is one of the top 5 most viewed TED talks ever.

In this series, we will focus on Brown's belief that we have to walk through vulnerability to get to courage. She believes that choosing to be vulnerable about our fears, our insecurities, our failures is crucial in finding healing and living whole lives. She writes, "vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage. Truth and courage aren't always comfortable, but they're never weakness."

For me I think being vulnerable is sort of like eating healthy. I know that it's good for me to eat primarily a plant based diet. I know that I will feel so much better in the long run if I do. And yet, I really, really like bacon.

The same, I think, is true with vulnerability. I know in my head that it's good for me. I know that the more I can be honest with myself and others about my perceived and real weaknesses and insecurities, the more I can actually deal with those things and come out in a healthier place on the other side. I know that...and, yet, few things scare me more. And my guess, is that I may not be alone because while I think most of us know that the willingness to be vulnerable, while hard and uncomfortable, is actually good for us, particularly when we choose to be vulnerable with people we know love and care for us, we also live in a society that sends just the opposite message. Daily we hear the voice that says,

"Don't let them know that you don't have it all together, what will they think?"

“Don’t let them know that you lost your temper with your kid because you know they never have.”

“Don’t let them know that you feel like you don’t know what you’re doing at work because you’ve got to fake it till you make it.”

And I could go on and on about all the ways we are socialized to not be vulnerable.

The same is true in church. If there is any place where it should be ok to not be ok, it should be church, and yet, even in faith communities will feel this pressure to conform, to make sure everyone knows that our marriage is perfect, that our kids are perfect, that our faith is strong, and that we are living our lives exactly in accordance with the faith we profess all the while praying to God that nobody finds out about the places in our lives where we don’t have it all together.

And yet, if Brown is right, perhaps those places of which we feel most ashamed or most embarrassed are the places where we most need to be vulnerable. Now that doesn’t mean we just go around and tell everyone we come into contact with about those places. For vulnerability to be healing, we have to be able to trust those with whom we choose to be vulnerable. It might be a therapist or pastor, a spouse or partner, a close friend or a parent. But the invitation is that when we do have someone that we know we can trust, choosing to be vulnerable in safe spaces can open up a pathway to healing...at least that’s what Brene Brown argues.

So over the next three weeks, we are invited to journey together as we think through what it means to be vulnerable about our failures, our insecurities, and our times of loneliness. And today, we’ll focus a little on what it would look like to be vulnerable about the times we feel like a failure.

My guess is that all of us have times when we question if we’re succeeding or not.

Am I doing a good job as a parent?

What’s wrong with me that my career hasn’t gone like I thought it would?

Why was I so insensitive in that moment? How could I have lost my temper then?

How could I have said the wrong thing?

How could I let that relationship fall apart?

And I could go on and on, right.

I think we often think that feelings of failure come from a place of inadequacy – and that’s true to an extent. I feel like I’m not enough, I didn’t do enough, I’m not smart enough or brave enough and so I failed. But I also think that just as feelings of failure can come from a place of inadequacy, they also can come from a place of arrogance. Sometimes feelings of failure can come from the mistaken belief that we should have complete control over a particular situation even though so many factors are outside of our hands.

I think feelings of failure actually come from both of these places – a place of inadequacy and at the same time a place of arrogance – a place that says I can’t do anything right and a place that says it’s all up to me. Neither place is healthy and yet, I think both tend to be very present alongside feelings of failure. I think we see both of these places at work in the life of Peter.

In our Scripture reading today, Jesus had just been arrested and would soon be crucified and Peter, following at a safe distance, was asked if he were one of Jesus’ followers, an accusation that he denied three times. But the part we didn’t read was when Peter had declared that he would never deny Jesus, that he was ready to die for him. And yet, this passage ends with Peter weeping bitterly because not only had he not been willing to die for Jesus, he denied he even knew who Jesus was. A moment of arrogance (I’ll die for you. I’ll never deny you) and a moment of complete inadequacy, weeping because he couldn’t even admit that he knew Jesus – all wrapped up in what was I’m sure the overwhelming knowledge that Peter had failed.

And Peter was not alone. While we live in a world where we are tempted to hide our places of failure, the Bible is brutally honest about the failures of the characters within it, even the ones we think of as giants of our faith. Moses argued with God for three chapters before going back to Egypt. David was an adulterer, murderer, and just kept screwing things up. Paul talked about his thorn in the flesh. Peter and the other disciples were often portrayed by the gospel writers as more bumbling fools than the saints we think of today. Elijah felt his perceived failure so deeply, that he begged God to kill him.

And yet, God used every single one of these people to do something profound. You see, the lie we have all been told is that failure somehow prevents us from being able to have an important role to play. But our faith story tells us just the opposite. Namely, our Scripture tells us that God always uses broken, inadequate people, that God always uses people who will mess up and mess up again. That God always uses people like you and me with all of our mess, with all of our doubts, with all of our failures and perceived failures to do God’s work in the world.

And I think God does this because God knows that the two dominant messages we tell ourselves in times of failure – that I am not enough or that it’s all up to me (inadequacy and arrogance) – are both lies. You are enough no matter how many times you fail. But also, it is not all up to you either.

And finally, while God understands these two messages are a lie, God also understands something that is part of the very essence of our faith. Our self-worth does not depend on our success or our failure. So often, we believe we have to accomplish something, do something great in order to be whole, in order to be loved. And yet our faith says just the opposite. We are worthy, we are whole, we are beloved not because of anything we have done, but simply because

we belong to God. Our identity is not in our successes or our failures, but rather our identity is that each of us is created in the Image of God, each of us is loved by God. That's who we are at our core no matter how much we succeed or how much we fail.