

A number of years ago, I was at a national young clergy gathering back when I was still young enough to be considered a young clergy. At the time, I was the pastor of Community Church without Walls, a church that I had planted in a low income community of Birmingham where in addition to worship, we tried to break down walls of racism and barriers to opportunity for people in the neighborhood. One of the conveners of the conference knew little bit about that church and asked me to speak about it. So I told my favorite stories – you know that ones that seem like we were changing the world; the ones that made me look really good.

People loved it.

But later that night, another participant in the conference approached me and said, “Ok, tell me the real story – not just the good part.”

He was right.

I had only told part of the story. Everything I said was true, but I had left out the parts that weren't so great. I didn't tell the part about how one of our church leaders stole the church van or the part about how one of our church services was interrupted by two people getting into a fight – a literal fight. Or any other number of examples of times when we clearly weren't changing the world or the stories where I didn't come across too well.

The truth is that ministry of any kind is like life – beautiful, difficult, and messy.

Around the same year I attended that young clergy conference, I took a group of high school kids on a youth retreat and I will always remember what one of the counselors said in her morning devotion. She shared about how she struggled with feelings of inadequacy – feeling like she wasn't enough or that she had to do more to be worthy of love. In her journey she discovered a prayer that was profoundly helpful to her. Since then it has become profoundly helpful to me and a prayer I say every day. It's simply this: “God help me to see myself just as I am, nothing more and nothing less.”

Today, our theme is about imagining church being a community where all of us can be honest about who we are without feeling shame. Where we can accept who we are – nothing more and nothing less – and I think it's a lot easier to do that if we can trust that the community in which we are a part will accept us for who we are as well. And I can't think of a better teacher for us in living into that theme than Brene Brown. If you're not familiar with her, 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.

Brene Brown believes that choosing to be honest and vulnerable about who we are and especially 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.” And yet, I can't help but feel like 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 Mike Baker's barbecue.

It's hard to be honest about who we are and I think the primary reason is because it's hard to find spaces and communities where we can be honest about who we are and know that we won't be shamed. Daily we hear the voice that says, "Don't let them know that you don't have it altogether, 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."

"Don't let them know that things aren't great in your marriage, because theirs is perfect."

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

The same is true, maybe especially true, in church. If there is any place where it should be ok to not be ok, it should be church, and yet, there is so much pressure to conform, to make sure everyone knows that we are living our lives exactly in accordance with the faith we profess.

So let's try something right quick. If you ever feel like you are alone in not always having it altogether, you're not. Take a look to your right...and now to the left...look in front of you and look behind you.

Now, let me tell you a secret, those people you looked at, they don't always have it together either. Or take a look at me. I don't always have it together either.

None of us do.

And that's ok.

Because church should be a place where everyone feels safe to be honest about who we are – nothing more and nothing less?

If I go back to my first story, the story where I selectively told the conference attendees about all the good parts of the church. If I'm honest, what I was really doing was not just telling them the good parts about the church, I was telling them the good parts about MY Work...and by extension I thought I was telling them the good parts about ME. I wanted them to think well of me, and, for some reason, I thought for that to happen, I could only tell the parts where the outcome of my work was inspiring.

But deep down, I didn't always feel that way. I was a part of a community, but I was so worried that the ups and downs of that community would not be seen as the successes or shortcomings of our community as a whole but of me, personally.

Nothing More, Nothing Less

You see, so often I think we hesitate to tell the whole story, to be honest about who we are out of a place of inadequacy – this feeling that I’m not enough, I didn’t do enough, I’m not smart enough or brave enough and so I am inadequate. I also think that this hesitation to be honest about ourselves can come from a place of arrogance. How arrogant was it of me to think I had complete control over how that community, or any community I’m a part of, does.

And I think sometimes we think they’re people who struggle with feelings of inadequacy and others who struggle with arrogance and while I think that one of those feelings may play a more dominant role in different people, I actually think that for most of us, both feeling inadequate (less than) and arrogant (more than) can be at work – even at the same time.

And that brings us to our Scripture because 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 a little earlier 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 sense of shame Peter must have felt.

And Peter was not alone. While we live in a world where we are tempted to hide our places of failure, shortcomings, and insecurities, the Bible is brutally honest about the shortcomings 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 inadequacy so deeply, that he begged God to kill him.

And yet, God used every single one of these people to do something profoundly important. Our Scripture tells us that God always uses broken, inadequate people, that God always uses people who will mess up and mess up and mess up again. Our story is 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 – 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 feel like you fail. You are enough and any voice that tells you otherwise is a lie. But also, it is not all up to you – whether you’re thinking about

raising kids, being a partner or spouse, or caring for aging parents, your job or career, your faith, doing the work of church, or whatever else it may be – it is not all up to you. It's not all up to any of us alone. That's why being a part of a community is so important. We are in this together.

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 deserving of love 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, unconditionally, by God.

So friends, may we learn to see ourselves and one another in the same way that God does. May we learn to see ourselves just as we are...nothing more and nothing less. Amen.