

February 6, 2022

**“Serving God or Serving Shame”
Sermon by Rev. Susan Drake**

Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

*“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”*

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

Luke 5:4-11

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them.

And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Sermon “Serving God or Serving Shame”

I went on a walk with Oprah the other day... She was on a Weight Watchers podcast and I was on my treadmill, but it was called something like “walking with Oprah.” One thing she said that stuck with me was that if we want to know where we will be in 5 years just listen to our thoughts now.

She said our own thoughts determine in a large part the course our lives will take. She said she has learned that whatever follows “I am” in our self-talk is what we become such as I am worthy, I am a success or I am unworthy or I am a fraud.

It is interesting to note here that the Hebrew’s word for God was mostly Yahweh which means “I am” so of course those two little words are going to have a lot of power in our life. It is up to us though to determine whether that power is used to serve God or to put ourselves down.

The lectionary this morning put these two scriptures side by side but I wish I could take credit. Though at least 750 years separate these two passages they both speak to something so elemental to the human experience, shame. They illustrate that it is our own shame that leads us to feel unworthy, not good enough to serve God or even to be in the presence of God.

In both of these stories God has already decided that Isaiah and Peter are worthy enough to serve them, in both of these stories the men are already forgiven of whatever they have done but both of their initial responses are basically the same.

Isaiah says when he realizes he is in the presence of God, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips.”

And Simon Peter cries “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” See how “I am” is used in both of these instances: “I am lost, I am a man of unclean lips, I am a sinner”

Yet we know that both of these men go on to be great servants of God. They confess to God how they feel about themselves, who they think they are, how they perceive themselves and in essence God says “No that isn’t how I see you, I see you as someone who is my beloved, someone forgiven and who has the potential to affect great change in the world I created and to care for the people I care for.”

That intense encounter with God is enough to start their healing from shame, but they also have to do the work, they both commit to lives of service to God. What would have happened if

they had just stayed in that shame, stayed in those feelings of unworthiness, kept playing that story in their head that they weren't good enough.

One of my favorite authors is Brene' Brown, she defines shame as the "intensely painful feeling that we are unworthy of love and belonging." The monumental problem with that is that in the absence of love and belonging there is always suffering.

She goes on to say that the difference between shame and guilt is that guilt is when I did something bad and shame is when I am bad. But she offers this hope, that shame cannot survive being spoken out loud and it can't survive empathy.

We are a shame-based culture, shame is heaped on us from the time we are young until we become an adult and start heaping it on for ourselves. We shame people for being too fat or too thin, too emotional or too cold, we tell young men that big boys don't cry then judge them when they become emotionally unavailable as men.

We shame the liberals, we shame the conservatives, we name call, we bully, we judge, we put down and when it's not being done to us then we do it to ourselves.

We get on the Facebook and compare ourselves to others and hear this; just because your old college roommate travels the world a lot doesn't mean she is any happier than you. Or just because your high school buddy doesn't have the little paunch that you do doesn't mean that he is any happier than you. We can know this, but still that shame is never far away, waiting to tell us we are unlovable and not enough.

And that's just your everyday Joe that goes through that kind of self judgement and self shaming, if you make Joe a black person in this country or a gay person, or someone truly weight challenged, or differently abled— then watch out— the shame train is really coming for them.

And that's to say nothing about people those of us who live with childhood trauma, those unhealed wounds that can come about from having parents that told you you were bad, not that your actions were bad but that you were bad, worthless and that you would never amount to anything, that will stick with you for the rest of your life if you don't seek some way to heal it. You will play those messages over and over again and no matter how much love comes your way, you won't let it in and you will just be waiting for people to disappoint you and make you a victim all over again because that's all you know. Something, or someone or some God has to disrupt those cycles of shame that in which we become entrenched.

We are a very blessed nation and yet suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the US and in the last 20 years the suicide rate has increased by 33%. So many people in our country seek to numb the pain of their shame with alcohol and drugs both street drugs and prescription. Or we take the Amazon pill by hitting that “Buy It Now” button. Or we seek out carbs that comfort or all of the above. We can find ourselves so empty and often lonely in a crowd because our shame can keep us from true relationships.

The church universal can be a place of grace, it wasn't always that way but we are starting to know better. This is where healing from shame can begin. Each one of you can be one of those people that shows empathy to someone, who listens deeply to them when they speak their shame out loud. Someone who doesn't judge or lecture or tries to fix but one who just listens and when they've stopped talking you tell them they are enough. We can be like Jesus saying “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” saving them from that endless cycle of unworthiness.

We can't do all the work for people but we can be the starting place for some, they have to decide to follow God, and to hear God's forgiveness, and to listen when God calls their name but we can accompany them on the journey, love them through it all, give them a safe place for their shame to be spoken so it can't survive, a place where empathy and connection can help smother it, so it is no longer the driving force in their lives.

The number one thing that keeps people coming to church isn't great sermons or music, it's connection. And connection is the energy between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued. When that happens then we can all become like Isaiah where he says “Here am I; send me!” or Simon Peter who is ready to drop everything and follow Jesus. We are all ready, God has already forgiven us, we are good enough, we are lovable and we are worthy. AMEN

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