

“How to Receive the Father’s Favour”

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Mark 1: 1-11

Rev. Kimberly Heath
Wall Street United

This morning we move from the stories of the beginning of the life of Jesus on earth to the beginning of his ministry. For the Gospel of Mark, this *is* the beginning. The Gospels record the life of Jesus. Matthew and Luke talk about the birth of Jesus, but Mark begins with John the Baptist, and the baptism of Jesus.

John the Baptist preaches a baptism of repentance. Repentance is about turning around and making things right, acknowledging our brokenness and shortcomings, and being willing to make a change. Something about John’s message is resonating... people are going out of their way, traveling out of the cities and towns to see John, to hear him speak, to repent and be baptized in the Jordan river.

Ultimately, baptism is dying to an old way of life and being born to a new way of life. It is hearing and receiving God’s blessing, and responding with a commitment. What I often say at a baptism is: “Baptism is God’s ‘yes’ to us and our ‘yes’ to God”. Baptism has both an element of repentance and an element of blessing.

Jesus begins here. There’s a funny tension because the last person on earth who needs to be baptized, comes to be baptized. I’ve been trying to understand the connection between repentance and that knowledge of belonging and blessing. Jesus did not repent in order to receive the belonging. He didn’t need to. He waded into the Jordan River, and as John baptized him, he and maybe everyone around heard a voice from heaven that said: “*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*” It was a moment of pure blessing, pure belonging. And Jesus hears this before he’s done anything. This was not about what he had done, but about who he was — the Christ, the Messiah, the Chosen one of God.

John the Baptist was a pretty straight-laced guy. John had even taken a special vow as a Nazarite not to drink alcohol or to cut his hair. This was like a monastic vow of holiness. John was as holy as you get ... and even he knew that he didn’t compare to Jesus. Even before Jesus arrives, John says: “The one who is more powerful than I, is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.”

While belonging and that ‘yes’ are the central parts of baptism, for the rest of us, repentance is a necessary part of it. It is necessary not because God withholds blessing until we repent or confess, but because when we don’t repent, it is nearly impossible to feel God’s blessing and belonging. The sin in our lives blocks the blessing.

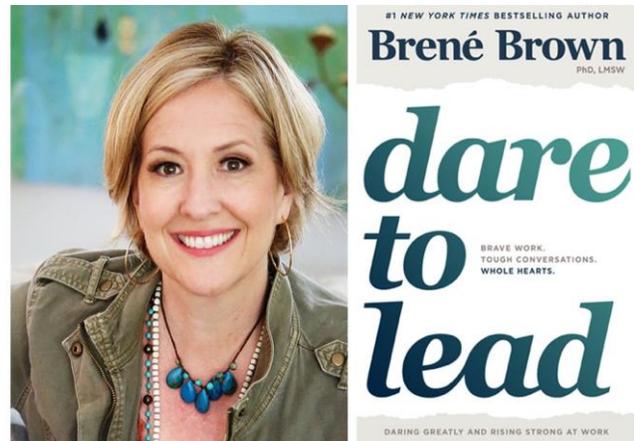
You need to understand that sin is not about eating chocolate cake or even having sex. Our humanness is a gift of God. I think we still have a cultural

hangover from the Victorian era that said that anything to do with indulging the body was sin. Remember that in Jesus, God took on the body. In Jesus, God became human. Sin, rather, is anything that separates us from God. Sin is whatever hurts us or another person, or God's creation, or that separates us from (and hurts) our true selves.

In December of 1952, London suffered one of the worst smog or fog pollution crises they had ever had. It lasted 5 days, and you could hardly see your hand in front of your face. It was described as 'pea soup'. The estimates are that something like 4,000 people died as a result of it and 100,000 were made ill from it. It was partly a weather issue, but mostly it was pollution from coal fire. That event spurred them to create the Clean Air Act of 1956, which had them curbing the amount coal-fired pollution into the air. But during those 5 days the sun never stopped shining. Far above London and the fog, far above the clouds, the sun was still there — but because of the pollution, no one could see it. That's a good image for sin. All of those things that hurt and separate us from God, others and ourselves really do block God's love. Like the sun, God's love for you never lessens. But sometimes it's hard to feel it and receive it.

I've been reading a wonderful book called *Dare to Lead* by Brené Brown.

Brené Brown is a research professor at the University of Houston. She's spent the last two decades studying courage, vulnerability, shame and empathy. Her 'Ted Talk' on vulnerability is in the top five most viewed Ted Talks. But it's her work on shame that I want to talk about today.



It is so liberating to discover ways to reduce our shame. Guilt and shame are two different but related emotions. Guilt says: "I have done bad" and shame says "I am bad." Do you hear the difference between those two things? Humans all experience both guilt and shame (unless you are a psycho or socio-path)!

Dr. Brown sees guilt as a good and helpful emotion. We experience guilt when something we have done or participated in clashes with our core values and causes psychological discomfort. Guilt is a warning signal that says 'Hey — this is not OK'. Guilt is like the rumble strip on the highway that warns us to move back over.

As Christians, we are called to regularly confess to God when we have 'crossed over'. At Celebrate Life I often talk about how we need to 'take the garbage out'. Every day before bed you can review the day with God in prayer: where did you feel like you were who you were created to be? Where did you shine? And where did you feel like you were not living the life you were created

to live? Where were you living in the shadows? Acknowledge both. Ask God's forgiveness and be assured that you are forgiven. Be assured that you are not perfect and you are so fully loved.

The dangers of not acknowledging the things we've done wrong and seeking forgiveness is that as we attempt to bury those faults and mistakes and things we are ashamed of, they begin to bury us. Guilt can turn into shame. *While guilt is a helpful emotion, shame is not.* Shame is destructive. Shame tells us that not only have we done wrong, but that we are not worthy. We are not worthy of connection, we are not worthy of blessing, we are not worthy of love.

Brené Brown defines shame as "*the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging — something we've experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection*". Can you see how this blocks love in your life?



The Book of Forgiving tells a dramatic example of one woman whose shame nearly killed her. Her ← name is Kelly Connor. At the age of 17 she was responsible for the death of a 77-year-old woman in a road accident.

The teen was on her way to work, driving too fast up a steep hill. At the top of the hill there was a crosswalk ... but at a critical time, as she was beginning to crest the hill, she was looking in the rear view mirror at a taxi that was pulling out and was speeding up towards her. When she looked forward again, there was an elderly woman in the middle of the crosswalk. She struck the woman. The elderly woman died in hospital a few hours later.

When the police arrived on the scene, they asked Kelly how fast she was going, and she answered truthfully that she was speeding, going 45 mph. The officer asked her the speed limit, which she correctly answered was 35mph. The officer then asked her again how fast she was going. She was confused and told him the truth. He then told her he was only going to ask her one more time — "How fast were you going?" The puzzled teen replied with a question: "35mph?" "Good!" The officer answered, and wrote that down.

Kelly was not charged with any offence. At home her mother declared that they were never to talk about this incident again, and they were going to pretend that it never happened. No one seemed to blame Kelly — even the son of the elderly woman stopped by the house to say that the family did not blame the teen. The only problem was that Kelly herself knew she had done something terribly wrong, and the silence all around her, rather than helping, made it worse. She developed a deep and secret shame.

Shame thrives and grows in secrecy. Kelly became anxious, depressed and suicidal. She felt the only one who could truly forgive her was no longer alive, so the best thing she could do would be to join the woman she had killed. After a failed suicide attempt she spent some time on a psychiatric ward, which got her through that dangerous time. Then she simply didn't talk about it for 20 years. It was only when she had a daughter of her own that she began to heal and change. When her daughter was 14, Kelly decided she needed to tell her what she had done. Her daughter listened but didn't seem to judge her mother for it. Her daughter was only worried to learn that her mother had in the past attempted suicide. That sharing helped Kelly to see herself the way her daughter saw her, and it opened the door to seeking forgiveness.

She discovered the 4-fold path to forgiveness:

1. Telling the story
2. Naming the hurt
3. Granting/ Seeking forgiveness
4. Renewing or Releasing the relationship

For shame in particular, telling the story and getting whatever it is that you feel shame for out in the open is very important. Tell someone about it: maybe a therapist, maybe a minister, maybe a trusted friend or family member. If that feels too difficult, write it out, wrap it around a rock and throw it into the river. Be honest in your story telling.

I think Kelly Connor's story came to mind this week as we heard about the truck driver who entered a guilty plea in the aftermath of the horrendous tragedy of the Humboldt Bronco's hockey team accident. It is very clear that that driver is guilty and caused the loss of life and so much pain for those who survived and those whose loved ones didn't survive. Hold that driver in your prayers, even as we continue to hold the family and friends of the victims in our prayers. Even though the driver caused great harm and needs to face the consequences of his actions, he still deserves to feel loved. Every human does.

There won't be many in this congregation who have caused the level of hurt that both Kelly Connor and Jaskirat Singh Sidhu caused ... but all of us have at some point in our lives felt shame.

What is the antidote to shame? Empathy and connection. Sympathy says "Poor you." It also has an undercurrent of "It sucks to be you!" Empathy, on the other hand, says "I understand. I am human, and you are human." You don't have to have had the same experience as another person to have empathy. If you have felt the same feelings as the other person, you can empathize with how they are feeling.

That is what a life of faith is all about — it is about making a connection. Professor Brown, who is a strong Christian, talks about the connection of faith like this: "*It is recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected*

to each other by a power greater than all of us and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and compassion. Practicing spirituality brings a sense of perspective, meaning and purpose to our lives.”

We are created for connection. We are created for love. Everything about us — body, mind and spirit — is hardwired for connection. When we are blocked from that connection we fall apart, we don't function, we hurt ourselves and others.

This is the power of Baptism — the binding together of repentance and blessing. As humans we need to repent, we need to confess and get that stuff out that blocks us from feeling the Father's blessing.

I believe the Father's blessing is there for you too. It's not just for Jesus who didn't need to repent. I believe that if we could tune our ears, if we could have perfect pitch, we would hear clearly the love of the Father saying “*You are my daughter, you are my son, you are my beloved, and with you I am well pleased.*” It's not because of anything we have done but because of who we are: a beloved child of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.