

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Original Shame”
Genesis 3:1-13
September 11, 2016

Many of you have probably read Hawthorne’s famous novel, *The Scarlet Letter*. It begins with Hester Prynne walking from her jail cell, being led through a crowd with her three-month-old baby in arm.

Hester has been in prison for adultery, and is forced to always wear a scarlet letter “A” embroidered on her dress... “A” for adulteress. The “A” is there to always remind everyone what she is, and to make sure her shame is never forgotten... not forgotten by her, or anyone she knows.

Hester is led through the staring crowd, up to a set of scaffolding in the center of town, where she has to stand publically... for hours... wearing her shame under the jeering eyes of all the townspeople.

The women all talk about her as she goes.

The children yell out hateful things.

This public shaming was part of her punishment in her early American Puritan community.

You might think it’s the kind of thing we’d never do today... except that it’s a perfect external and physical depiction of what every day of Middle School feels like....

...especially if you’re the fat kid,
or the bug-eyed girl,
or the sensitive boy.

Of course, the truth is every kid walking around Middle School feels an incredible amount of shame. It’s just that when you’re in Middle School the only way you have learned to deal with your own shame is to get everyone focused on someone else... hoping that picking on someone else will distract the crowd of hormone-infused, awkwardly changing pre-teen bodies and minds... from noticing your own hormone-infused awkwardly changing pre-teen body.

You see, it is about that time of life, when shame begins to write its story into our bodies. It’s about that time, when our eyes are opened, and we realize for the first time, what it is to be naked.

I recently heard a sermon from Nadia Boltz Webber whose words have inspired mine today. She helped me to recognize that this story in Genesis 3, is the story of Original Shame. Genesis 2 ends with the man and the woman together... in God’s good creation, naked and unashamed.

It's a picture of God's great intention for us...
this complete vulnerability and openness to God and to one another,
this deep union that Adam and Eve have with one another and with creation and
with their Creator.

They were **"naked and were not ashamed,"** the scriptures say.

But then a little lie slithers its way into their world. A lie that says to them, **"This reality you're living in may be 'Good,' ...but there is something more you cannot see.**
There is also the sweet taste of the **knowledge of evil."**

You see, before Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden fruit, they already had the knowledge of Good. The scriptures say that they could see that the tree and the fruits of the garden were good for food, and a delight to the eye.

Before eating, they already know and live in half the equation.

In fact, goodness is all they can see... It's around them and in them. Imagine that for a moment... living in a world where all you know is blessing and joy...

There is no shame,

no hiding,

no fearing.

...because all you see and hear is the voice of God that spoke at the end of each day of creation still echoing through the world: **"It is good!"**

Imagine living in a world where all you know, all you see and experience is its goodness.

Its blessing.

Its beauty

That's all humanity is given to know...

All that Adam and Eve are given is the knowledge of Good.

What God did not want for humanity... what God tried to protect us from, was the deep, soul killing knowledge of good **and evil... the knowledge** that writes shame into our very bodies.

You see, it was **after** Adam and Eve eat from the forbidden fruit that their eyes are opened to more than just goodness and blessing. Once they have taken into their bodies the knowledge of good **and evil...**

then, they realize they are naked, and begin to cover their bodies.

It's in this moment when they go and hide themselves from one another... and hide themselves from God.

I imagine that in that moment, their shoulders begin to slump, and they become smaller.

So, when God comes to the garden and goes looking for them God asks, **“Where are you?”** And they say, **“We hid ourselves because of our nakedness,”** God’s first response is, **“Who told you that you were naked?”**

In other words, shame does not come from God. It comes from some other voice we’ve listened to. **“Who told you that you were naked?”** God asks... because it wasn’t God.

Now I know that more than once, God has been used to shame you and shame me and to shame our world. Too often, the Church has wielded the fruit of the knowledge of Good and Evil and used that as a pen to erase the story of love that was written into us, and to write in our bodies the story of shame.

But surely, ...surely, to use the name of God to evoke shame is to use God’s name in vain. Because the truth we see here from the very beginning is that shame is not from God.

In fact, we might even go so far as to say **shame is demonic**... because it is from another voice we have listened to in this world. And any voice that is other than God’s voice to us, is what we call in our tradition a **demonic voice**.

“Who told you that you are naked?” because this shame isn’t from God.

And in order to grasp that we need to understand that there is a difference between shame and guilt.

Brene Brown is a research scientist who has studied shame extensively. In fact, she describes herself as a researcher of shame. She says that there is actually a profound difference between shame and guilt.¹

While shame is destructive, guilt is constructive, helpful even. She says guilt is **“holding something we’ve done or failed to do up against our values and feeling psychological discomfort.”** And that discomfort is what pushes us toward living into values.

But Shame, on the other hand, shame looks like Adam and Eve covering themselves, cowering in the shadows of the garden, hiding themselves from the very source of life.

She describes shame as **“the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging – [It’s believing that] something we’ve experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection.”**

¹ Brene Brown, *Daring Greatly*.

Shame makes us think we should hide from God when we hear God's presence coming our way. It is what separates us from the Divine Love that is pursuing us... which is exactly the classic definition of Sin. Sin, with a capital "S," is separation from God.

It's what happens when shame begins to write its story in our bodies.

As Hester stands on the scaffold-platform in front of the town with the Scarlet Letter A embroidered and blazing on her chest, the crowd demands to know who the father is.

Hester refuses to answer, but we soon learn that it is in fact the town pastor... Dimmesdale. As the story goes on and time goes on, Dimmesdale begins to physically deteriorate under the weight of his own secret and shame. His body grows weak and frail.

He doesn't wear the public shame on his clothing the way Hester does, but eventually we learn that the Pastor has his own scarlet letter that has been carved into his flesh.

You see, it's the body where the Deceiver, the Evil One, chooses to sow shame into us. ***And so it's no small thing that God later chooses to put on the fleshiness of the human body.***

God redeems the world, by entering into the body.

God ***slips into skin***, as we say, by coming to us in the actual human body of Jesus of Nazareth.

And let me just remind you, that Jesus' body was like every human body, with its smells and awkward odors, and embarrassing bodily functions, and unique quirks. I bet you're not used to thinking of Jesus in the latrine, but maybe you should be.

Because I think, deep in our imaginations, we need to know, Jesus didn't come out of the Jordan River looking like Michael Phelps climbing out of the Olympic pool.

Nope. When God came to redeem the world, God took on an ordinary human body... like yours and like mine. God enters the human body to begin to erase the story of shame and re-write the story of blessedness and goodness into our bodies.

So, let's not forget that ***the body matters.***

Your body is holy and beautiful to God... your old, young, fat, fit, wrinkled, scarred, transitioning, balding, queer, straight, slumping, disabled, strong body is holy and beautiful.

It is pronounced good at the beginning, and made good in the incarnation... and Jesus keeps reminding us of its blessing throughout the gospel story. I mean, have you ever noticed just how physical the gospel story is?

Jesus is born in the messiness of an over-crowded home, with the ox and the ass stirring in the corner of the room. He grows up and is accused of being a glutton and a drunkard because he laughs and eats and drinks... enjoying the pleasures of the body. He heals and touches the broken, shamed, unclean bodies around him. *He touches them!*

And then it is his own body that is stripped, and beaten... shamed and spat upon. It was his own body that drug a cross through a jeering crowd... and hung in vulnerability before the whole world... taking into his own flesh all the shame that the world could possibly muster

And it was his body that is resurrected on the 3rd day.
And it is his body and blood we take into our bodies in the Eucharist.
And we are gathered here by the Spirit of God formed into very Body of Christ.

As Nadia Boltz Webber puts it, **“The Gospels are disturbingly physical in nature.... So, this Christianity thing just has to be more than just ideas for your head! It has to also be salvation for your body.”**

After all, it is the human body where God chose to place God’s own image at the beginning of creation, the *Imagio Dei*.

Sure, you might encounter the *majesty of God in the mountains*.

You might see the *mystery of God in the ocean*.

You may encounter the *nearness of God in a simple flower*...

or the changing color of fall leaves.

But it’s *only the human body* where you can find the very *image of God*.

So, Beloved of God, listen to the story of shame that was written into your body no longer. God slipped into skin so that you might know that the body is sacred and holy and beautiful in all its uniqueness and diversity.

So come out of the shadows and stand tall.

Know the dignity and beauty afforded to you by your Creator.

Hide no longer.

For Divine Love is coming your way.

Amen.

Silent Reflection

The voice of my beloved!

Look, he comes...

My beloved speaks and says to me:

*“Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away;
O my dove, in the clefts of the rock,
in the covert of the cliff,
let me see your face,
let me hear your voice;
for your voice is sweet,
and your face is lovely... ”*

*How beautiful you are, my love,
how very beautiful!*

~from Song of Solomon 2 & 4