

The shame stops here

‘I am never enough’.

I wonder if you ever find yourself thinking that.

Never attractive enough, never solvent enough, never spiritual enough, never good enough... never enough.

Today’s sermon owes everything to the book ‘Daring Greatly’ by Brené Brown, which is based on 12 years of research into that primitive human emotion we call shame.

We live, Brown says, in a culture of scarcity; a world of never enough; this constant feeling that we never have enough time, enough sleep, enough money; enough success; we’re never safe enough, satisfied enough, social media ‘liked’ enough. And this culture of never enough is of course an ideal breeding ground for disappointment and disengagement and shame.

I have to say I for one was mighty relieved to hear of the demise of the Jeremy Vile (sorry, Kyle) show a few weeks ago, where sadly it took a tragedy to highlight the cruel and systematic shaming of some of society’s most vulnerable. Its popularity highlights, I guess, that we humans are drawn to car-crash TV; we take a degree of pleasure in the belittling of those we demonise.

It’s important to say here that shame is not the same as guilt.

Guilt is ‘I did something bad’. Shame on the other hand is the belief that ‘I am bad’.

Guilt, of course, can perform an important function - it spikes our conscience. Shame on the other hand only ever destroys; in fact, it corrodes that part of us that believes we can change.

Shame is everywhere. Too often it's used within families or partnerships, at school or in the workplace, in churches to manipulate and control.

None of us are immune and for some of us it's a constant companion.

There is one thing, however, that shame hates more than anything else, and that is to be spoken. Shame prefers secrecy and silence.

Interestingly, research shows that men and women experience shame for different reasons. For women, 'it's often built around this web of unobtainable, conflicting expectations about who you're supposed to be'.

So, you're supposed to have the perfect body, the perfect career, the perfect partner, the perfect home, the perfect children.

For men, the pressure's different; it's about never letting anyone see we're weak; be a man, be strong, be confident, capable; and, for heaven's sake, never show fear.

The antidote to shame, according to Brown, is ironically something many of us believe to be a weakness; the cure for shame, she says, is vulnerability.

'Vulnerability' in Brown's words 'is the cradle of the emotions and experiences we all crave. Vulnerability is the birthplace,' she says, 'of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy and creativity' and if we are to know more of our purpose, to

have more meaningful connection both to others and to God, then vulnerability is the only way.

Life, by nature, is vulnerable – there are few guarantees. And love, of course, is the most vulnerable thing of all. Love anything and you risk a broken heart. Yet surely most of us would agree that love is our reason; it's what we're for. Love makes a life. And for the Christian we only have to look at Jesus to see what a vulnerable life 'in all its fullness' could look like. Brené Brown calls it the Wholehearted life, which I love. Vulnerability leads to wholeheartedness. More of that in a moment.

Vulnerability is one of the most terrifying and powerful and attractive things in the world. It's impossible, I think, to relate to someone who isn't vulnerable, who never shows you the real me beneath the pretence.

And yet, while vulnerability may be the first thing I want to see in you, it's often the last thing I want you to see in me.

I want others to think I'm strong, together, bullet-proof.

Vulnerability is the best measure of courage and its power is that vulnerability begets vulnerability, it's contagious. When someone opens their heart, lays bare their soul, dares to show us who they really are, it gives others the permission to do the same. It releases us from the tyranny of never enough and the perfectionism it inspires. And with time, it begins to free us from shame.

Vulnerability is the best way to empathy, to those two ultra-liberating words – 'me too'.

Vulnerability is terrifying because it's so risky – what if you don't like the real me? One of the greatest barriers to a Wholehearted life is the belief that we are

unworthy of love and connection. And I'm sorry to say that religion has played its part in rubbing that in, rather than rubbing it out.

The story I grew up with was built on the first principle – I am sinful; I am bad, I am wrong; the very definition of shame.

And yet while sin, the mess I create, is an undeniable truth about me, it isn't the whole truth. Jesus banged on about sin because he knew that if we are to become Wholehearted, we have to own our mess, speak that truth, confess it, so we can cut its power off at the knees.

If Jesus came to do one thing, wasn't it to show us that we are worthy of love and connection? Wasn't it that we don't have to please or perform or perfect to be loved; that we are each intrinsically worth loving, this much (*stretch arms in shape of cross*).

Brené Brown's description of the Wholehearted life is 'engaging in our lives from a place of worthiness. It means cultivating the courage, compassion, and connection to wake up in the morning and think: No matter what gets done and how much is left undone, I am enough. It's going to bed at night thinking: Yes, I am imperfect and vulnerable and sometimes afraid, but that doesn't change the truth that I am also brave and worthy of love and belonging'.

I am enough; three more of life's most liberating words. a great definition of salvation, I think, would be moving from I am never enough, to, by God's grace, I am enough.

When Jesus stretched out his arms on the cross, he said 'it's finished'. Now I've always interpreted that as 'it's done, I've completed what I came here to do'. But what if this vulnerable, stripped naked, shamed man was also, as Hebrews say, 'scorning its shame', saying 'enough'... the shame stops here.

Because that was his reason; his life.

When he called out that woman who sneaked her healing from the bleeding that had shamed her for 12 heart-breaking years, he wanted her to know that she was worthy of love and connection.

‘Daughter’ – he said. In other words, ‘you, who for 12 years have been excluded from human contact; you belong, you’re family... the shame stops here’.

And when that other woman accused of adultery was dragged before him without the man, surprise, surprise, Jesus called out the sham-ers – ‘Throw the first stone if you have nothing to be ashamed of...’, he said. And when they had all left one by one, he picked this broken woman up and said, ‘Don’t hurt yourself and others like this again... the shame stops here’.

Shame is starved of its oxygen when it is spoken. It’s why confession is so powerful. When we dare to be vulnerable before our vulnerable Christlike God, he picks us up and says, ‘Don’t hurt yourself and others like this again.... the shame stops here’.

Shame dissolves in that knowledge that there is nothing we can do to make God love us more, and nothing we can do to make him love us less.

This is the truth that sets us free; free from what others think; free from the disease of perfectionism, free from anxiety as a lifestyle, free from all the supposed to’s, from the fear of being weak, from that toxic cocktail of shame and never enough.

I long for a shame-free religion, for a church where it's OK to be weak; OK to try and fail, OK to doubt and question, where self-compassion is taught to us from our mother's knee, where we learn to speak to ourselves like we would to someone we love, where we practise a kindness not least to ourselves, because we are worthy of love and connection; because Jesus proved it.

God, I ask that you would break shame's power in our lives by reassuring us that we are worthy of your love, that there is nothing we can do to make you love us more, nothing we can do to make you love us less. Teach us the ways of a Wholehearted life.