**Body & Spirit: Healing Our Shame**

**Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen**

**NPMC, Feb. 16, 2020**

***Scripture: Genesis 3:1-13, Mark 14:3-9***

 I have a rather complicated relationship with my body; likely most of us do. I was born with hip dysplasia, meaning that my left hip socket didn’t form properly when I was growing in the womb. When I was just one year old, I had to have surgery to correct this. Though it was successful, and I can walk without a limp and mostly without pain, it left me with a massive scar and with very limited flexibility – I can’t, for instance, sit cross legged on the floor. What this meant for me growing up is that I could pass as fully able-bodied, but dreaded gym class, sports, swimming, or other activities that would show my difference and my disability – or even just my scar. I felt a certain amount of shame at being different and physically limited, especially as a young person. But I have also marveled at what I can do, including of course carrying and giving birth to our two children – a miracle I embodied, despite my physical limitations. Probably many of us can relate to these mixed feelings of shame and wonder that we have for our bodies.

 As we wrap up our worship series on Body and Spirit this morning, I want to look at the way in which this dualism, this assumption of the separation between body and spirit and the superiority of the spiritual over the bodily (which, remember, we inherited from Greek philosophy), has led to shame about our bodies within Christian theology – a shame that has manifested in the belief that our bodies – especially our sexuality – are inherently sinful and therefore shameful. These ideas appear everywhere from ancient Christian beliefs about the need for priests to be celibate to contemporary fundamentalist “Christian” purity culture. This includes efforts to limit sex ed. to “abstinence-only” curricula and an emphasis on sexual “purity” (such as the book, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, which advocated that one’s first kiss should be during one’s wedding ceremony!).[[1]](#footnote-1) We also see it in the rejection of and violence toward LGBTQ+ people in some branches of the church, based on homophobic and transphobic ideas about sexual sin.

 A few years ago, Mennonite publisher Herald Press put out a book called, *Sexuality: God’s Gift* – now there’s a combination we don’t always see! This book seeks to counteract our shame about our bodies and our sexuality. It states, “Our sexuality and our spirituality are both gifts from God integrated in our being; they cannot exist in us as separate entities. But this is not what the church has emphasized historically. Its teaching has encouraged the idea that somehow our bodily and spiritual existences are separate, that the one is superior in worth and value over the other, the spirit over the body. Hence our sexuality has not been emphasized in our teaching and preaching.” This has led to a “void of silence” around very important questions around sexual health and sexual violence, which have remained “unaddressed and unchallenged by the church. This need not be,” the authors conclude.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Now part of what I find helpful about this book is its definition of sexuality, which is wider than simply sexual or romantic relationships. Rather, we are all sexual beings in the sense that we are all created for relationship and intimacy with God and with other people; this is a fundamental human need. We are all meant to be connected with and deeply known and understood by God and other people;[[3]](#footnote-3) we are all meant to love and be loved, body and spirit, which includes various kinds of close relationships with others, from friendship to parent-child to romantic or spousal, to other relationships and connections involving our whole selves. So intimacy can take the form of a sexual, romantic relationship, but is also wider, as intimacy is also found in other close relationships in our lives.

So this morning I’d like to explore this shame that we feel about our bodies, especially around our sexuality or intimacy, and look to the Bible and theology for alternative resources – resources that foster a healthy body image and a healthy embrace of ourselves as relational beings, created for intimacy with God, each other, and the earth.

Our Scripture passage from Genesis this morning is one of those well-worn passages that has had a major influence on Christian theologies of the body. This makes it hard for us to read, as we project layers of interpretation onto it, reading it through the lens of later Christian tradition – tradition which hasn’t always been life-giving. This story is known as “The Fall,” and we associate it with Satan and an apple and the introduction of sexual temptation into the world. If we read it carefully, these elements actually aren’t in the Bible narrative. So why do we assume they are?

 A lot of Christian theology around sin comes from Augustine of Hippo, fourth-century bishop in North Africa, who is famous for his doctrine of original sin. In his interpretation, this passage in the Bible is all about how Eve introduced sin into the world, and tempted Adam into it – so everything is her fault. In her book, *Shameless*, pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber says, “According to Augustine, every person born after Eve inherited her original sin, and so it is essential that men should be dominant – controlling women so they don’t screw over humanity anymore than they already have.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Augustine was a key figure in getting the Roman church to adopt infant baptism (to cleanse babies of “original sin”), clergy celibacy (to keep them “pure” from sexuality/sin), and the belief that sexual desire – except for the duty to procreate or “be fruitful and multiply” – was sinful.

The effects of Augustine’s theology have in many ways been devastating for the church. He connected sin so closely with sexuality, including blaming women alone for sexual sin and temptation, that it’s taken us almost 1700 years to start to undo these associations. In other words, Augustine is largely responsible for the culture of shame around our bodies that has been so common in the church. Thankfully, the Reformation undid some of these harmful notions; the early Anabaptists rejected the need for infant baptism, saying that infants were without sin, and reversed the requirement that pastors remain celibate (leaving that instead to individual choice and/or calling). But more unlearning remains to be done.

 Returning to Genesis, I want to point out some details that we may have missed, since we were so distracted with Augustine’s take on things (or Augustine’s baggage, really). Bolz-Weber points out a really interesting detail of the story: that before any supposed punishments from God or any explanations of the first sin, the first consequence is actually shame. She writes, “The moment they ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, their eyes were opened… Which is the exact moment the idea of ‘nakedness’ was introduced. Before then it didn’t exist. But now the humans covered their bodies out of shame. Which is exactly the way shame operates: it makes us hate our bodies, it obscures the image of God within us, it makes us hide, it makes us afraid of God, it makes us blame others.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Notice in the story how the ripples of shame and blame extend at the end of our story. Adam and Eve are first ashamed of themselves, and they hide at the sound of God taking a stroll through the Garden. When God calls to Adam, Adam admits to fear and shame: “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.” When God asks, “Who told you that you were naked?,” and about the tree, Adam blames Eve. And when God asks Eve what happened, she blames the serpent (Gen. 3:9-13). If we look at the pattern here, God creates a good world, with the gift of healthy relationships between humanity and God, among humans, and between humanity and the rest of creation. What shame does here is break each of those relationships, one by one. Shame causes the people to run from God, to turn on each other, to blame creation for their mistakes. Shame breaks relationships, and gets in the way of our living out, with our whole selves, our identities as creatures in the image of God.

This ancient story about the destructive nature of shame is confirmed in present-day literature. Researcher Brené Brown defines it like this: “Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love, belonging, and connection.” In other words, it’s “the fear of disconnection,” and it’s different from guilt. For Brown, guilt is “I did something bad,” but shame is “I am bad.” She names real examples from her research on how people experience shame:

“Shame is getting laid off when we’re expecting our first child.

Shame is hiding my addiction.

Shame is raging at my kids.

Shame was my response to seeing my parents’ shame when I came out.

Shame is getting sexually harassed at work but being too afraid to say anything because he’s the guy everyone loves.

Shame is watching things change so fast and no longer knowing how and where I can contribute.”

These kinds of experiences lead us to feeling shame, and if we don’t deal with that shame, if we don’t “recognize and talk about shame to get out from under it,”[[6]](#footnote-6) it leads to us lashing out at ourselves and others, to straining or even breaking our relationships.

 So how do we heal our shame? How do we foster a healthy sense of our spiritual and embodied selves, scars and all? How do we move toward healthy relationships and healthy intimacy of various kinds? Brown begins to point us in the right direction. If shame is the “fear of disconnection,” then connection/reconnection with each other begins to unravel the hold shame has on us. This is the key difference between “purity” and “holiness” according to Bolz-Weber: purity divides – it’s “about separation *from*” – whereas “holiness is about union *with.*” And you know who often got in trouble for disregarding taboos around purity and connecting shamelessly with all the “wrong” people? That’s right – Jesus.[[7]](#footnote-7)

 Our second Scripture passage this morning is a key example of the kinds of connections that Jesus was known for. This narrative of the woman who anoints Jesus (Mark 14) is found in all four Gospels, but with different details. In some, the woman is identified as Mary of Bethany (John 12), or simply as “a sinner” (Luke 7). In our version from Mark (cf. Matthew 26), the woman anoints Jesus’ head, but in Luke and John, she pours the ointment over his feet, even weeping and wiping his feet with her hair.

In all versions, the other men at the table with Jesus are scandalized. In Mark,

they make it about money: they are outraged that the woman has supposedly wasted such an expensive jar of ointment on Jesus, when the money could have gone to the poor (that’s a sermon for another time!). In Luke, they look down on her for being “that kind of woman,” “a sinner,” who dares to touch Jesus in public (in a context in which women and men didn’t even speak to each other in public, never mind touch). So “they scolded her,” these other men who have a seat at the table – in other words, they tried to shame her about what she has done. This public display of affection, this unashamedly intimate gesture of love for Jesus, this profoundly physical gesture by a woman: it’s made them uncomfortable, and they want to put this woman in her place.

And I love this painting by Wayne Forte, which shows the intimacy of this gesture. It also shows Jesus’ blessing of the woman’s actions – notice his hand above her head in a gesture of blessing:

 You see, in all four Gospels, Jesus defends what the woman has done, saying that it was “a good service,” an appropriate preparation of his body for burial, and something for which she deserves to be remembered. In this act of intimate connection with Jesus, she has shown care for his body, and for his whole self. She has done so with vulnerability and courage, and Jesus affirms her for refusing to be ashamed. He says, in effect, “This is what the gospel – my message of good news – is all about. She’s got it!” It’s all about connection and relationships that heal us of our shame. And in Mark for sure, she’s contrasted with the male disciples who just don’t get it, who remain caught in power struggles and confusion.

 In the Gospel of John, this passage is all the more powerful because it is followed by Jesus washing the disciples’ feet – in other words, Jesus affirms this woman’s action and then emulates it (John 13). He follows her example of a gesture of care that cuts through our shame to connect us, body and spirit. I find it interesting that the practice of footwashing used to be something the Mennonite church was known for. It even inspired this satirical “Mennonite Valentine” that I saw on social media a few days ago:

Roses are red / My heart starts to beat

Really, really fast / when I’m washing your feet.

I’ve also heard funny stories of women who wore tan pantyhose and kept them on for footwashing, so they didn’t have to show their bare feet (there’s that shame again)!

 As someone who has never practiced footwashing in all my years in the Mennonite church, I find myself wondering why we stopped practicing it. Was it too embarrassing to touch one another’s feet? Was it too unsanitary? Too physical? Too logistically complicated? Maybe all of those are true, but I wonder if it isn’t also symbolic of us falling a bit further into that dualism between body and spirit, of slipping into that shame about our bodies. After all, Jesus’ contemporaries seemed to have felt the same way about footwashing. But he and the woman were unashamed.

 I can’t help but compare this story to one of the most humbling moments when my body was cared for by a complete stranger. It was just after I had given birth to our daughter in the hospital, and I was still very weak. While my spouse held our new baby, one of the nurses went with me to help me shower, to make sure I didn’t fall or anything. She was so kind and so gentle with me at such a vulnerable time, and made me feel like my lumpy, hurting, weak, just barely-no-longer-pregnant body was nothing to be ashamed of. It was really moving, actually, to have my body cared for which such gentleness and respect. There was something actually sacred about that moment of human care and connection.

 It is in these types of moments that I believe we can begin to break the hold that shame has had on us, and begin to see that our bodies are nothing to be ashamed of – vulnerabilities, scars, and all. We begin to recognize that it is not in spite of our bodies that we are in the sacred image of a relational God, but in our bodies – as integrated bodies and spirits, embodying the connections and intimacy for which God created us. This is the good news Jesus and his anointer exemplified so beautifully and so unashamedly. I want to close with a prayer by Carol Wise that speaks to this:

gathering: *this is my body*[[8]](#footnote-8)

This my body:

This is my body:

The earth, God’s body

The cosmos gleaming

Rivers and air

Mountains and valleys

Stars and coral reefs

This is my body:

This gathered body

This body of seekers

This body of Christ

This hopeful and yearning body

This gathered body, here in this place.

Thanks be to [G]od. [Amen]

Passionate Struggling

Broken Healing

Tempted Steadfast

This is my body:

Alive in the margins

Black, brown, yellow, pink

Lesbian, gay, bi

Male, female, trans, queer

Rich, poor, hungry, lost

This is my body:

Loving, laughing

Aging, newborn

Thirsty, satisfied

Aching, strong

1. Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation* (New York: Convergent, 2019), 122-124, 16. The writer of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye has since admitted his ideas have been harmful. See https://joshharris.com/* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Youtha C. Hardman-Cromwell, “Foreword,” in *Sexuality: God’s Gift*, 2nd Ed., edited by Anne Krabill Hershberger (Waterloo: Herald Press, 2010), 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Willard S. Krabill, “The Gift and Intimacy,” in *Sexuality: God’s Gift*, 53-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bolz-Weber, 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bolz-Weber, 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead: Daring Greatly and Rising Strong at Work* (New York: Random House, 2018), 126-127. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Bolz-Weber, 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Carol Wise, Executive Director, BMC (Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests), *All Along the Arc: Worship and Ritual for Welcoming Communities* (Minneapolis: BMC, 2017), 9-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)