

Message for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year B (3/14/2021)
John 3:14-21

“Connection is why we’re here.”

That’s the premise of all of Brené Brown’s work. Human beings are social animals; we’re hard-wired for relationship, for love, for belonging. “Connection is why we’re here.” Yet, as Brown reports, “when you ask people about love, they tell you about heartbreak... when you ask people about connection, the stories they [tell are] about disconnection.” Through her years of research, she’s discovered that the enemy of connection, the enemy of love, is shame, and shame is quite simply “the fear of disconnection.” It’s the reluctance to reveal who I really am because people might not care to see it, the unwillingness to be my true self for fear of repelling others.

But, “in order for connection to happen,” Brown insists, “we have to allow ourselves to be seen, really seen.” Vulnerability is the key word. **Vulnerability is the courageous decision to make myself known to others, to tell the truth about my life, all the while believing that I’m worthy of love. And as it turns out, although vulnerability is risky and uncomfortable, according to Brown it’s also “the birthplace of joy, of creativity, of belonging....”¹**

These insights are coloring the way I read our Gospel from John today, which includes one of the best known verses in the New Testament: “For God so

¹ “The power of vulnerability,”
www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability?language=en#t-1199206.

loved the world....” But, this time through I’m struck by the lesser known verses at the end of the passage:

This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved [the shadows] rather than [the] light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.

I’ve typically read these verses in terms of morality. That is, I’ve equated “hating the light” with a sort of willful wickedness, or resistance to virtue, and “coming to the light” with repentance and a renewed commitment to righteousness and justice. In other words, “evil” people dwell in the shadows, according to the metaphor, while “good” people live in the light.

But, what if we read these verses instead through the lens of shame and vulnerability? The meaning changes significantly. First of all, the dichotomy between good and evil collapses. Everyone experiences shame, according to Brené Brown, everyone fears that they’re not enough – not attractive enough, not successful enough, not worthy enough. We’re painfully aware of our failures and limitations, and we suspect that these will alienate us from others. So, we work to conceal our imperfections, both from others and from ourselves.

But, **imperfection is what we all have in common.** To paraphrase the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans, *Everyone comes up short of the ideal.*² And, since our flaws are as much a part of us as our gifts, there’s nothing to be gained by suppressing them. On the contrary, vulnerability demands that we

² 3:23.

accept the whole truth about ourselves, that we acknowledge our regrets alongside our joys, our fears alongside our hopes, our weaknesses alongside our strengths. And when we do, we discover that we have a great deal in common with each other.

What if that's what Jesus is getting at in our Gospel today? What if that's what it means to "do what is true"? "The light has come into the world," he insists, the light of grace and truth, the light of love. But we "hate the light" because it exposes us; it illuminates us as we truly are in spite of our efforts to keep ourselves hidden. But, **when we "come to the light," we see ourselves as Love incarnate sees us: as beloved, as belonging, as worthy.**

What's more, when we feel the light of divine love fall on our faces, we perceive that all others are bathed in that light, too. "For God so loved the [whole] world," not just part of it. Although we may find it hard to believe that God loves freely and universally, that's precisely John's confession in chapter three verse sixteen. Love is not simply a strategy God employs to reach those who are receptive to God, God's chosen method to approach those who prove themselves worthy. No, **love is God's nature, God's way of being.** The author of 1 John goes so far as to say, "*God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.*"³

That is to say, **love comes first. If God is the primary actor, and the principal act is love, then we don't need to be afraid to be seen for who we**

³ 4:16. Italics mine.

really are.⁴ **Our dignity rests on God's love incarnate in Christ, pouring like daylight over all the world, dignifying everyone.** It's an unshakable foundation, and thus an invitation to vulnerability – to self-examination and honesty with ourselves and others – allowing us to recognize our shared human condition, our universal need for connection, and our common hope for a more gracious world. These are deeds done “in God,” to borrow language from today's Gospel, that is, done in the spirit of God's dream for our life together.

Connection is why we're here, friends, and the love of God makes deep connection possible. **Your worthiness to experience love and belonging doesn't depend on your ability to measure up to some predefined standard, so you don't need to hide yourself in the shadows for fear of being found wanting. Love is not in short supply⁵; there's more than enough to go around for everyone.** So, come to the light, and let it spill over you and everyone you meet, making life worth living together.

⁴ Jen Rude, Preaching Peace Tacoma, 3/9/21.

⁵ Paul C. Shupe, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2, 120.