

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

June 12, 2016; the 4th Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: 1 Kings 21:1-21a; Psalm 5:1-8; Galatians 2:15-21; Luke 7:36-8:3.

Daring Greatly

Our Gospel reading for today says a lot about being human and about being God...who God is for us.

Jesus is in the house of a community leader, Simon, a Pharisee, a religious leader.

A woman comes in and washes his feet with her tears and her hair, she kisses his feet, and anoints them.

She is broken open before Jesus and in front of everyone.

Simon immediately judges the situation, the woman, Jesus, and concludes they are in the wrong...the woman is a sinner and Jesus should know better, if he is who people say he is.

In this beautiful account of Jesus and the unnamed woman, we have the stuff of vulnerability, shame, forgiveness, judgement, and a new creation.

Vulnerability.

Who here likes feeling vulnerable?

What is the gift and promise of vulnerability?

What is the grace known and experienced when we are open and real, about who we are, how we hurt, who we love...all of it.

More and more in faith communities, we hear about the necessity of being vulnerable and the strength and

courage involved in being so.

Many in the Episcopal Church are reading, and listening, and studying the words and message of Brene Brown, who has become known for her work in the realm of authenticity and vulnerability through a TED talk, which has now been viewed over 25 million times.¹

Brown is a professor and a trained therapist...a vulnerability researcher, as she calls herself. She shares the good news that rather than being a weakness, vulnerability is a measure of courage. Brown states that vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, change, creativity.

Jesus would agree - as today's Gospel makes clear. But that is not the message we get from our culture.

My dad has taken to sending me and my sister links to articles from the New York times online; recent ones include: "Making a Case for Eating Fat"² and "Why You Will Marry the Wrong Person."³

I appreciate what he shares; and it is interesting to see what he thinks about my life and my sister's.

Just last week, he sent one entitled, "Unless You're Oprah, 'Be Yourself' Is Terrible Advice."⁴

This article really got my attention, in relationship to today's Gospel reading and in considering vulnerability.

Well, you won't be surprised to know that the author is not in favor of being vulnerable.

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability?language=en

² <http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/03/04/making-the-case-for-eating-fat/>

³ <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/29/opinion/sunday/why-you-will-marry-the-wrong-person.html>

⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/05/opinion/sunday/unless-youre-oprah-be-yourself-is-terrible-advice.html>

He is coming at life from the perspective of “we know what we want, and to get it, we need to be what we need to be, whether that is who we are or not. (paraphrase).”

But more than that, he is confusing authenticity with something else.

He writes: *A decade ago, the author A. J. Jacobs spent a few weeks trying to be totally authentic....He informed a friend's 5-year-old daughter that the beetle in her hands was not napping but dead. He told his in-laws that their conversation was boring. You can imagine how his experiment worked out.*

Even though the author of this article quotes Brene Brown on authenticity, as being, “the choice to let our true selves be seen.” he does not know what Brene Brown is talking about, as true authenticity requires vulnerability, which the man who was telling everyone what he thought was not showing.

That man telling the child that the beetle was dead, is a lot like Simon in our story today.

Simon evaluated the situation and was determined to name names and pass judgement on the woman and on Jesus.

We learn about Simon by what he says, just as we learn about the man telling the five year old about the beetle, but Simon is not vulnerable here.

In a sense, Jesus makes this point by comparing Simon's actions with those of the woman.

Simon does not go out of his way to show hospitality to Jesus, yes, he invited Jesus into his home but he does not invite Jesus into his heart.

Jesus says to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.”

“Do you see this woman?”

“Do you see how one who knows oneself, and knows oneself to be forgiven shows great love, great gratitude.”

“Do you see her?”

Jesus sees her...and he loves her.

The woman is letting herself be seen, being vulnerable, daring to break all the rules to be herself in front of Jesus.

Jesus sees her...and that, being seen and loved, heals her.

“Do you see her, Simon?”

Simon does not want to see her.

Simon does not want to be seen.

The title of one of Brene Brown’s books, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead....*

Daring Greatly...

that is what this woman did...and her life was transformed.

How are we being called to dare greatly?

How can we open ourselves to be seen by God and by others.

Of course God already knows us intimately, but when we are vulnerable with God, being who we are with God, praying about every aspect of our lives, we find that God is close to us, we experience God in the midsts of our troubles our fears, our joy...we experience this love that God is always wanting to give us.

This woman washing Jesus' feet...her life was transformed...we don't know what happened after this encounter with Jesus but we can imagine that any shame she had was gone, any guilt, gone.

M. Jan Holton commenting on this scene writes that Jesus, "...is offering more than forgiveness that merely wipes the slate clean.

Jesus' forgiveness lifts the burden of shame, to give her value and worth in spite of how unworthy she feels. This kind of forgiveness allows us to release the moments in time when we feel like failures to ourselves, our families, or our God."⁵

Brene Brown tells us that guilt is a focus on behavior, "what I did was wrong."

Shame is a focus on self, "I'm bad."

Shame is never helpful, and it lives in "secrecy, silence, and judgment."

The antidote to shame is empathy.⁶

Simon would have judged and condemned that woman all night and the next day and day after day; but Jesus sees her, and has empathy for her, compassion, love, which frees her...gives her freedom.

So who do we want to listen to, Jesus or Simon?

Who do we want to be like, Jesus or Simon?

⁵ Feasting on the Word, M. Jan Holton, "Pastoral Perspective," Loc. 5184 of 14296.

⁶ https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_listening_to_shame?language=en In this TED talk Brene Brown reflects on what happened after her first TED talk, focusing on Shame. It is very funny as well as insightful.

As Brene Brown states in her 2nd TED talk on shame, "Shame says you are not good enough; who do you think you are?"

Sounds like Simon doesn't it?

Simon even said that about Jesus.

We can get a little Simon in our heads, from time to time, or maybe in the past or maybe in future, and when that happens, empathy is the answer, from another person, a trusted friend, a therapist, a member of the clergy, and certainly from God.

Jesus sees this woman; he recognizes her desire for closeness; he sees her vulnerability; he sees it because he was living vulnerability, authenticity.

Simon chose distance.

The woman chose closeness.

God chose closeness; God chose to know us and be close to us by becoming vulnerable.

God desired closeness with us so much that divinity entered humanity in the flesh -- in Jesus in a special way -- allowing God, the Creator of the Universe, beyond our understanding, a way to connect with us, to be with us, to come close to us.

Long ago and today.

So when we are feeling down in anyway, who do we want to listen to, the Simons in our lives or in our own minds, or Jesus...who sees us...knows us...loves us...upholds us...and sets us free.

Amen.