

Praising the Lord with All Our Might

If we believe the stories of the Bible, then I guess we could say that humans have always been prone to feel shame, especially when it comes to our bodies and our behavior. That's where the story of Adam and Eve in the garden winds up going – having eaten from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil they realize they are naked, and feel ashamed, and God makes them clothing to hide their nakedness. Don't worry, this is not going to be a sermon in which I tell everyone to go expose themselves, but I do want us to ponder the ways that shame keeps us from fully following God, and more so, from praising God with our whole bodies and our whole beings. I get it, I'm a lifelong Presbyterian who feels uncomfortable at conferences where people raise their hands while singing praise songs, and when it comes to dancing, well in the words of the song sung by Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in the 1935 film *Roberta*, "I won't dance, merci beaucoup." But today's Scripture tells us that "David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the Lord with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals." So what does this Scripture have to teach us? And what keeps us from dancing with all our might before the Lord ourselves?

First, I want to go back to the idea of shame. Brené Brown has a fantastic podcast on Shame and Accountability where she defines and distinguishes shame and guilt, as well as humiliation and embarrassment. Her findings from years of research show that while **guilt** can be helpful and lead to change, **shame** does not (which also means shaming others is not helpful). Guilt, she says, is the response to an action that was wrong, guilt is "I did something bad," it focuses on the behavior. And guilt is ok because behaviors can be wrong, and behaviors can be changed. In contrast to guilt, Brown's working definition of shame is "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love, belonging, and connection." She elaborates, "First, shame is the fear of disconnection. Given that we're physically, emotionally, cognitively, and for many of us, spiritually, hard-wired for connection, love, and belonging, and it's why we're here, it's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives, think about how powerful shame is, because it's the fear of disconnection, it's the fear that we've done something or failed to do something. We haven't lived up to an ideal, or we haven't accomplished a goal that makes us worthy of connection. "I'm not worthy or good enough for love, belonging, or connection."

Shame is hard stuff. I feel sadness at Adam and Eve, and so many of us, feeling indecent as God created us. Shame can be traumatic, and shape our lives, often for the worse. It can be used as a tool of oppression. But it's also universal, we have all had and will have the fear of not belonging, of not being part of the group, of not being good enough, maybe of even wondering if we deserve love. And this is not what God wants for us. God wants us to know that we are

loved and claimed just as we are, for all that we are. We say a prayer of confession each week for things that we may feel guilty about, but the prayer of confession is never meant to make us feel shame. It is an opportunity to examine our behaviors, to see where we have wronged others, our world, or even ourselves, but we do this believing that we can grow and change those behaviors moving forward. And while confession acknowledges that God is God and we are human, and prone to make mistakes, it should never make us believe that we are unworthy of connection or being loved. In fact, that seems like one of the reasons God wants people to be reconciled with God throughout the Bible, so that though the world may batter them, they will know that they belong to God, who has cared for us our entire lives.

Our Ephesians passage reminds us of this. This passage comes at the very beginning of this letter to the community at Ephesus, and what is the first thing the author wants them to know? That they are chosen in love and adopted by God. They are claimed as beloved children, without qualifiers. There's no only after you do this, or once you change that you'll be adopted. Being claimed by God is the foundation on which everything else will be built. And it tells us that this inheritance as children of God is so we "might live for the praise of Christ's glory." Which brings us back to praising God. And also brings us back to facing what it might be that keeps us from praising God with our whole beings.

At the Celebration service, I get to watch young children worshipping God, and it's a beautiful thing. I know things like shame and guilt are huge topics, there are books written on them, therapists who spend their careers talking about them, and there is no way to talk about all the aspects of shame in a single sermon. I know it's talked about in parenting books, and while I don't know exactly what age it is that kids lose that freedom to just be themselves with full-bodied dancing to the music, it's earlier than it should be. The fear of not being accepted, or not being connected, that we don't measure up to some ideal is too real, and has probably only gotten worse in the age of mass media and now social media.

Perhaps shame was driving some of David's behaviors, too. The lectionary, the three-year cycles of Scripture we typically read and preach from, is sometimes funny in how in choses verses, and you may have noticed it skips verses 6 through part of 12 in the passage from 2 Samuel. If you read them you'll get why, the oxen carrying the cart with the ark get a little unsteady, the ark looks like it's wobbling, someone reaches out his hand to steady it and for touching the ark is struck dead. That's a lot to deal with. But because of this, David is afraid, and won't bring the ark into the city. Verse 9 says, "David was afraid of the Lord that day; he said, "How can the ark of the Lord come into my care?" I think David doubted himself, and God's call. David grew as a shepherd, the youngest son of Jesse, seemingly an unlikely choice for the king of Israel. Now things had gotten real and David seems to questions his ability to do what God has called him to do, seems to feel like he can't live up to some ideal, and truth be told, with all that we know about David, and about ourselves, he can't live up to that unrealistic ideal. But

he can trust that God has called him into this role, and that God will be with him, with all his strengths and flaws.

During this time, the ark resides for three months at the house of a man named Obed-Edom, and because he keeps the ark, God blesses him and his family. Once David sees this, he goes to get the ark and bring it into the city. And it is brought with fanfare and with dancing. And at the end of all this, David knew that he was leading the people in praising God. You may have noticed that as they are bringing in the Ark of the Covenant we are told of his wife Michal's reaction – it tells us she “saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord; and she despised him in her heart.” When he goes home, she tries to shame him, to make him feel by exposing himself in dancing before God he has become, in her words, the same as any “vulgar fellow.” David responds by saying that he was dancing before the Lord, who had chosen him to lead the people, and that the people he was leading in dancing and singing and praising God would see and know that this is what he was doing.

There was a lot of baggage between David and Michal, but it seems like she felt in his behaving and dressing not as a king but like a priest leading people in worship, he was behaving in an undignified way. And David's response was that he was dancing before the Lord, who had claimed him. This passage makes me think of the David Crowder song from nearly 20 years ago about this passage, a song called Undignified,

“I will dance I will sing
To be mad for my king
Nothing Lord is hindering this passion in my soul”

So often, shame does hinder us. Again, I can't say everything there is to say on shame, and I can't make it go away. I know it's not as simple as saying, “Know that you are God's beloved child,” and we'll never question our worthiness again. We need to each do our own internal work. But what I can say is this, you are a child of God, claimed and loved for who you are, and you are worthy of being loved. And because God loves us so incredibly much, we should praise God, with singing and instruments and as much full-bodied dancing as we can muster. Some of us may be ready to do so in the streets and in the sanctuary, and others of us may need to start off at home, but I invite you to expand your praise of God to include more of you, the you who God created, claims, and loves. Amen.