

Gremlin Ninja Warrior Training: Part One

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First Congregational UCC, Gaylord, MI

Rev. Greg Watling

Texts: Psalm 121 and John 4: 1-29

I don't normally split up sermons. But this week and next week will be part of one sermon. The other option is to have an extraordinarily long sermon that most of you would click off before it ended, just because it's too long. I also want to share is that I am indebted to the world of psychology, especially the work of Brene' Brown. She is a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work. Her books include *Daring Greatly* (from which I will quote a lot), and *The Gift of Imperfection*. Dr. Brown is a nationally renowned speaker whose work has been featured on PBS, NPR, CNN, and TED talks. For more information on Dr. Brown, please check out brenebrown.com. I also will be quoting extensively from a CD of hers called *Men, Women and Worthiness: The Experience of Shame and the Power of Being Enough*. Both the book resource and the CD are available for you to borrow from my library. It is likely that the public library has access to Dr. Brown's work as well. In fact, the title of this two-week

sermon is *Gremlin Ninja Warrior Training*, and it comes directly from Dr. Brown.

With all that, let's get started.

This week, we encounter the woman at the well from John's Gospel. In this first sermon, I want to concentrate on her and what she may have been experiencing. I believe the experience of the woman at the well is an example of the universal human experience of shame, although the details are different for each of us. Jesus encounters this woman and asks her to draw water from the well for him. Several things are going on here. First: she is alone. Normally, you would think that drawing water would be something that more than one woman would be doing at the same time. Either by choice or necessity, this woman is alone. That leads me to believe that she may have been shunned from her own community. Second: she was a Samaritan. You and I have learned about the Good Samaritan, but in the Ancient Near East, Jews felt there was no such thing. According to most scholars, there was quite a rivalry and a deep divide between Jewish people and the Samaritans. Jewish people thought that Samaritans were a different race and certainly Samaritans were looked down upon. Next: a Jewish man is speaking to a Samaritan woman. This is viewed as wrong in that time on two counts as neither a Jew should talk with a Samaritan, nor a man with a woman in this setting. They did both. Then, of course, is the issue of the five

husbands. Typically, the woman receives the blame for having “so many” husbands. Well, this a fundamental misunderstanding of the culture. Men, in those days, could dismiss a woman on any grounds. And I mean, ANY grounds. We have no idea whether any of them died, whether they dismissed her with just cause, or if they just grew tired of her and kicked her out. No matter what, she would be blamed regardless of the actual circumstances. To say this woman lived in shame is an understatement, I believe, and that led me to Dr. Brown’s work about shame, this woman, and by extension you and me.

We all have shame. We all have good and bad, dark and light, inside of us. But if we don’t come to terms with our shame, our struggles, we start believing that there’s something wrong with us. We start to believe that we’re bad, flawed, not good enough – and even worse, we start acting on those beliefs. If we want to be fully engaged, to be connected, we have to be vulnerable. In order to be vulnerable, we need to develop resilience to shame. Often, however, we get confused about what shame is. We use this word interchangeably with humiliation and guilt. That is not the case. In simple terms, guilt is “I did something wrong or bad.” Shame is “I AM something wrong or bad.” It’s no longer about taking responsibility for a misstep; it’s thinking that we ARE a misfit.

And if we think about it, really take time to ponder it - you and I have a lot of these feelings, whether we acknowledge them or not.

Shame can be debilitating, keeping us from being the person that God created us to be. It's ironic that we've debated masks so much in this pandemic, when most of us wear a mask everyday...it just cannot be seen. The mask of perfection, the mask of being in control, the mask of knowing it all, the mask of having it all together...and on and on. We wear masks all the time and they get in the way of our relationships with others. If the image of a mask doesn't work for you, try thinking of shame as a wall. Whatever word works for you, I think you'll agree that we have a lot about ourselves that we don't share simply out of fear. We fear being unloved, unwelcomed, unappreciated, uncomfortable, and unimportant. So, we become what others call a "false self" to fit in. We just can't let people see us for who and what we really are, because we're afraid that if they did, they wouldn't like us anymore.

Well, the woman at the well couldn't hide it. If she wasn't ashamed of herself (which I think she was), then surely others were ashamed of her, if for no other reason than she had five husbands. Or her race. Or her gender identity. I'm not saying they were right, just that she was perceived that way. Stay tuned for next

week about how Jesus sees her. For now, I want you to feel something of what she felt. At the same time, I want you to get in touch with your own feelings of shame. Because if we don't, then everyone loses. In the words of Dr. Brown, "Shame becomes fear. Fear leads to risk aversion. Risk aversion kills innovation." Think of what this means to business, education, community, church and even faith itself. Why, then, is shame so hard to talk about? Well, first, we all have it. Shame is universal and one of the most primitive human emotions that we can experience. The only people who don't experience shame lack the capacity for empathy and human connection. You would think that would make us talk more about it, but for some reason, we avoid it. Maybe that's because, we're all afraid to talk about shame and the less we talk about shame, the more control it has over our lives. We fight anyone or anything that has control over us, but we let shame control us and rob us. Talk about losing our freedom! And yet we choose to do it every day.

Shame hates having words wrapped around it. If we speak shame, it begins to wither. If we don't come to terms with our shame, our struggles, we start believing that there's something wrong with us – that we're bad, flawed, not good enough – and even worse, we start acting on those beliefs. If we want to be fully engaged, to be connected, we have to be vulnerable. In order to be vulnerable, we need to

develop resilience to shame. The great psychologist Carl Jung has said, “you’re only as sick as your secrets.”

Did you notice in our scripture for today that the woman spent no time defending her history, only claiming it? Perhaps she knew that everyone already knew her shame, so why hide it? Maybe, for some reason, she knew she could be vulnerable around this strange man? For whatever reason, this woman became very vulnerable by telling her story to Jesus. Certainly, people of faith like us don’t try to keep secrets from Jesus, do we? Do we act as if Jesus doesn’t know the worst parts of us? Have we ever read Psalm 139?

¹ O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

² You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

³ You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.

⁵ You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

Such words of faith, and yet so often we hide from God. The woman in our story, not knowing who Jesus was, shared who she was. And what did she get out of it?

We live in a shame-based culture. Like I've said before, shame is universal, and yet, it has great power not only because of its universality, but because of our inability or unwillingness to speak of our shame. If we're going to find our way out of shame and back to each other, vulnerability is the path and courage is the light. The woman in our story possessed both. We look for vulnerability in others but will not allow ourselves to be vulnerable most of the time.

There is no way that I can explain to you all that Dr. Brown or anyone else has to say about shame. I want to talk about the differences in men and women, and I want to talk about how damaging this is to individuals and to our society, but let me say it this way: until we claim our shame and speak it, men will be full of rage or will shut down, and women will continue to layer their masks. In both cases, society will continue to unravel, and God requires our participation in solutions to our problems. While God could create a miracle that took our shame

away, the greater miracle would be if we dismantled it together. It's time for us to show up, to be seen for who we are, and name our shame. It's taking a risk that we'll no longer belong to the groups we belong to today, but maybe we'll belong to wider groups, healthier groups, more meaningful groups, groups that don't take so much of our energy just to belong. What if we redirected all the energy we spend keeping our masks intact into naming shame? What if, when we take the off the masks one day at the end of the pandemic, we also were able to take off the other masks we wear quite willingly? Now that, my friends, would be freedom. Freedom on a level we can only imagine. That freedom could lead to love. And that is where we'll pick up next week.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.