***The Loneliness of Shame, Earned and Unearned***

*a sermon delivered by Rev. Scott Dalgarno, August 24, 2025*

*based on Jeremiah 6:13-15a*

In her book, *A Chorus of Stones,* Susan Griffin tells a poignant bit of family history.

*When my father was a small boy, his mother did something that was considered, then, unforgivable. It was a source of shame as many secrets are, and hence kept hidden from my father and, eventually from me. … Whatever she did was taken as cause by his grandfather and his grandmother to abandon her. They left Canada and moved to California, taking her two sons, my father and his brother, with them.*

*My father was not allowed to cry over his lost mother, nor to speak her name. He could not give in to grief but instead was taught to practice the military virtue of forbearance and to set an example in his manhood for his younger brother, Roland. In this way I suppose my great-grandmother hoped to erase the memory of my dad’s mother from all of our minds. But her loss has haunted us.*

*How old is the habit of denial. We keep secrets from ourselves that all along we know . . . I who am a woman, have my father’s face. And he, I suspect, had his mother’s face. There is a characteristic way my father’s eyelids fold, and you can see this in my face and in a photograph I have of him as a little boy. In the same photograph there is a silent sorrow mapped on his face, and this sorrow is mine too.*

It says in the Bible that "the sins of the fathers are visited on the children." For centuries people who have fancied themselves anti-religion or “free-thinkers” have chalked these words up to Biblical vindictiveness. But I cannot agree.

I see those words as merely a statement of fact. Troubles repeat themselves; especially in families. Denial is an illness, and families have the habit of bequeathing it on the young. As William Faulkner is remembered to have said, "The past is not dead, it isn't even past."

Some among us had the opportunity to learn this again over the summer when we sat down with our extended families at family reunions. Some bit of old family business may have percolated up. There was something in the air; history between people you could feel, like fumes off an overheated engine. Something happened long ago that wants, at least in part, to be known so it can hopefully be let go of and forgotten.

When I was in college, I asked my dad’s aunt to tell me all the family history she knew. She was our family’s font of knowledge. Among the many stories she told was the story of her grandfather, an early Gold Rush pioneer of California. He had made his fortune as a merchant and land owner in Sacramento. I was told that he had killed a man of Chinese extraction over some property squabble. I was also told that he was not prosecuted for it. Years later I found a tiny self-congratulatory memoir he wrote about himself in the third-person with no mention of that.

I have felt uneasy about that bit of information for decades; so many Chinese were murdered by white people back then; often rather casually. Well, a couple of years ago I found an archivist of early California history who did some digging for me and she found accounts of the inquest in two newspapers. The year was 1871. They agreed on the details: that the Chinese gentleman had been extracting gold from slag heaps on my great-great-grandfather’s river-front property left over from Gold Rush days, and that my ancestor used a shotgun on the man at close range and was initially accused of homicide. They agreed that my relative got off, claiming self-defense. He claimed the man had raised a shovel against him. A … shovel.

If there was counter-testimony at the inquest from other Chinese who were on the scene, it was either suppressed or not recorded. One newspaper referred to the man killed only as a “Mongolian,” a term of derision in those days. The other newspaper gave his name: “Ah Sing.”

I was haunted by this bit of family history since my youth. To find out the man’s name gave me something to hang my uneasy, guilt-by-association feelings on. There was no way to repair the damage. But at least a name was brought out into the light.

Shame doesn’t like light.

At least my great-aunt remembered the story, if not the details. She told me another story of my father’s father who died at age 44 at the California State Hospital for the Insane (that’s what it was called in 1922). He’d been a house painter and his insanity had been brought on, she told me, by lead, contained in the paint.

Thirty years later, my great-aunt’s daughter corrected that. She told me the truth her mother couldn’t comprehend let alone convey. My grandfather did not die of lead in his paint, but brought a venereal disease to California from his days in South Africa that no one would talk about for 50 years.

For some reason, truth often skips a generation or two. Something was just too sensitive for those who came before us (God bless them) to acknowledge or deal with properly. And, whether we want to or not, we take such things on. They get absorbed by our psyches.

This happens, of course, because truth has a will of its own, and refuses to be buried while it is still a little warm.

Interestingly, the Greek word for truth is *aleitheia*. Its root*, Lethe,* comes from the name of the mythical river of forgetfulness. So truth literally means, "not forgetting."

Not forgetting. The late Stephen Covey once told a story about the pesky resiliency of the unaccounted-for past.

*A few years ago when I was giving a seminar on the Oregon coast, a man came up to me and said, ‘You know Stephen, I really don’t enjoy coming to these seminars.’ He had my attention.*

*‘Look at everyone else here,’ he continued. ‘Look at this beautiful coast line and the sea out there and all that’s happening. And all I can do is sit and worry about the grilling I’m going to get from my wife tonight on the phone. She gives me the third-degree every time I’m away. Where did I eat breakfast? Who else was there? Was I in meetings all morning? When did we stop for lunch?*

*What did I do during lunch? How did I spend the afternoon? What did I do for entertainment in the evening? Who was with me? What did we talk about?*

*And what she really wants to know, but never quite asks is, who can she call to verify everything I tell her. She just nags me and questions everything I do whenever I’m away. It’s taken the bloom out of this whole experience.*

*He looked pretty miserable. We talked for a while, and then he made a very interesting comment. ‘I guess she knows all the questions to ask,’ he said, a little sheepishly. “It was at a seminar like this one that I met her . . when I was married to someone else.’*

The theme of shame is mentioned often in the Bible: There’s Adam and Eve leaving the garden. There’s Peter who denied Jesus three times saying he didn’t know him. In actuality, Peter didn’t know himself. Maybe none of us do until we are tested like Peter was.

There’s the case of the prodigal son. He’s a character in a parable, but Jesus draws him with such love and detail, he seems three-dimensional. The thing about the unnamed boy in that story is that he doesn’t let shame keep him from going home and facing the family he had betrayed. It takes him a while, though – until it’s either go home or die.

His shame is fed by the voice of his older brother in his head who says, "You can't be trusted. You've done something too awful, too unspeakable; you’re beyond forgiveness.” But he also knows his father’s love. The father who would say, "You're my son and nothing in creation will ever change that, and I don't care who knows it.”

I’m so glad that’s in the Bible, partly because it provides a counterweight to all the shame we can find there that is un-justified. Like women who are raped and carry that as dishonor. Appalling. Shame is even mentioned in reference to Jesus’s mother Mary. And the woman who is brought to Jesus because she is said to be guilty of adultery when the man who is involved is nowhere to be found.

There are those in the Bible, who, in fact, *should* feel shame -- like David after being identified as a murderer.

To be fair, the story, as it is related in the 2 Samuel, is clear that he is profoundly shaken, but one wonders if he is more shaken at being found out than by what he did.

And then there are those the Bible mentions as having no sense of shame whatsoever. That brings us to this morning’s text from Jeremiah. Here is how it sounds in the transliteration called, “The Message.”

“Everyone’s after the dishonest dollar,
    little people and big people alike.
Prophets and priests and everyone in between
    twist words and doctor truth.
My people are broken—shattered!—
    and they put on Band-Aids,
Saying, ‘It’s not so bad. You’ll be just fine.’
    But things are not ‘just fine’!
Do you suppose they are embarrassed
    over this outrage?
No, they have no shame.
    They don’t even know how to blush. (Jeremiah 6)

Well, this is the third sermon in a series on loneliness, so while those words are very relevant these days, I want to use my remaining time to focus on how lonely-making shame can be.

In her book, *The Anatomy of Loneliness*, Teal Swan says the following:

“Love is an instinctual reaction to pull something closer to you. Fear is an instinctual reaction to push something away from you. And shame is an instinctual reaction to push yourself away from yourself … The only way to push yourself away from yourself is through fragmentation. For this reason, we could say that shame is the mechanism for fragmentation as well as suppression.”

She goes further: “When you feel shame, you feel like something about you is so bad and so wrong that it’s inconceivable that someone or something could be attached to and connected to you. You run around desperately trying to be valuable enough or to earn the right to not be abandoned.

But because you don’t believe that you are worthy of connection, it always feels like abandonment is right around the corner. The only attachment you can recognize is the attachment that you have to others. You cannot recognize the attachment that they have to you.” (*The Anatomy of Loneliness: How Top Find Your Way back To Connection)*.

There’s a story in the gospels of Mark and Luke that is Exhibit A for that fact. A woman shyly approaches Jesus from behind and touches his garment. He feels it—and he feels power go out of him. So, he stops walking and turns to her.

We don’t know her name, but we know her condition. She has been hemorrhaging blood for twelve years. And her condition has made her a pariah, an outcast. Mark says, “She had endured much under many physicians and had spent all the money she had; and she was no better, but rather had grown worse.”

No one wanted anything to do with her. She was considered ritually unclean. And anyone who touched her was also considered unclean.

It doesn’t take much imagination to understand this woman’s isolation and terrible loneliness, the shame imposed on her by her religion which was reinforced every single day by the community that would have nothing to do with her.

And so, desperate, she comes to Jesus. She is suddenly a *Jesus* person because being a *religious* person all these years has not only NOT helped her, it has been a hinderance.

So, Jesus stops and talks with her. I imagine her cowering in fear. She didn’t expect to be noticed. Heck, she didn’t think she was worthy of his notice. A touch of his garment is all she is looking for, hoping it might do the trick. She is obviously in awe of him.

Well she should be. He knows that her touching him in the crowded street was not accidental. And look, she gets more than his attention; she gets his compassion, his love.

He calls her, “Daughter,” which is a term of endearment in any language; “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease.”

He lifts her shame from her like a surgeon removing a tumor, and more, he takes it on himself. He becomes unclean in the eyes of the Jewish culture he was born into. And he doesn’t even care.

The woman goes away healed and affirmed as a worthy person. Jesus heals her totally, body, mind and spirit, which is what makes him who he is.

There is a wonderful promise hidden in the 3rd chapter ofthe epistle called, 1st John*:* It's a letter written to say: “Love is not a feeling. If you see your sister in hunger feed her.” The promise, goes like this: "God is greater than our [accusing hearts] and God knows everything."

You mean God knows the thing I did . . . ? Yes indeed God knows everything and STILL . . .

This is a hard thing for many people. But then, no one can do violence to us the way we can do violence to ourselves.

I remember a woman long dead now who was in my first congregation who was feeling so guilty about something she had said to her step-father in 1918. And not one day ever went by, she told me, in which she didn’t feel absolute misery and regret for her words.

I didn’t talk her out of it. She had carried that burden so long it had become like a third arm to her. But the remedy for that is here. To receive the promise that "God is greater than our [accusing hearts] and God knows everything."

Allow me to close with this …

Some years ago, Kathleen Norris wrote a book called DAKOTA: A Spiritual Geography. She moved to the plains of South Dakota “for a year,” just a year. But she may still be there. She took over the house her grandmother willed her and she found it just as her grandmother left it.

I’ve mentioned this before in some past sermon but it bears repeating. There, on the night stand beside her bed Kathleen found her grandmother’s worn Bible.

Tucked in its pages she found the following --- yellowed clippings from newspapers, a dried prairie rose, a sepia photo of an unidentified baby in a coffin, and the following prayer in her grandmother’s hand: “Keep me friendly to myself, keep me gentle in disappointment.”

Amen