

Eve

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, April 28, 2019, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Genesis 2:15-25](#) and [Genesis 3:1-13](#)

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Back at the beginning of my career in ordained ministry, when I was serving as a Juvenile Hall Chaplain, I got to work with many volunteers. Most of them came from churches, and most of those churches were fundamentalist. One of the volunteers who would do a Bible study with me believed that men naturally have an odd number of ribs, one fewer than women, because God took one rib out of Adam to create Eve. I wondered why she had never confirmed the belief by counting her husband's ribs.

I don't know why I never had a literalist understanding of the stories of the Garden of Eden. I could have developed one as a child when most thinking and, therefore, most belief is very concrete. But I didn't. Perhaps my parents told me they were just stories. Just as Mike Mulligan and his steam shovel was make-believe and there never was a real bull named Ferdinand who liked to sit under the cork tree, Adam and Eve were make-believe and the stories of the Garden of Eden were just that – stories.

In my teen years, I saw them as stories of obedience and disobedience – and issue this headstrong adolescent was dealing with. Eventually, I came to see them, especially the two stories we heard today, as many things and primarily as an allegory. I see these stories as an allegory about maturation, particularly sexual maturation.

Our readings start with Yahweh putting the adam in the garden. I know you can't see it, but I'm using a lower case "a" because "adam" isn't a name. It's a description. It's a general term. "Human" would be a better translation than "man." This being doesn't get a gender until the rib-thing happens.

So the human being is in the garden and God sees that the human is lonely, so God starts creating other animals. All the animals are paraded before the human, and they're cool, but not really a partner. So God does the rib thing and, at last, "bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh," a true partner. These two humans get genders, thanks to some Hebrew word play: ish and ishshah, Man and Woman.

I love how this story ends: Ish and ishshah were both naked and they were not ashamed.

In the next story, things change. Though ishshah hadn't been created when God told the adam not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, she apparently knew about this rule. So does the serpent, I guess.

I like the way Nadia Bolz-Weber retells the story:¹

¹ This story is from Nadia Bolz Weber, *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation* (New York: Convergent, 2019), 311-313. (I think those are the correct pages; I actually copied it from the Kindle edition.)

We don't really know if all the animals could talk back them, or if for some reason it was just the snake. But the snake was a crafty motherfucker. He wanted to stir up some shit, so in an epic display of triangulation, he decided to gossip with Eve about God.

Like an episode of *Real Serpents of Eden County*, he slithered up to her and was like, "Honey, you know I totally love you, right? I mean that's like, the only reason I'm saying this, but did God really say you weren't allowed to eat from one of these here trees? I mean, did God really say that to you?"

Eve replied, "Well, kind of, I guess. I mean, we can eat of any tree; God just said there was that one in the middle, and — this is weird — we can't even touch it. Or else we'll die."

The serpent saw his opening. "Shut up! God said that? I mean, I know you guys are friends, but girl, you totally won't die. God only said that because God knows it. If you eat from that tree you would be like God, knowing good from evil. It actually makes me feel sorry for God, you know?"

Eve saw the tree of knowledge of good and evil was beautiful and the fruit tasty and the wisdom it promised desirable. She ate the fruit — and, just to be clear, her unbelievably passive husband, who didn't do or say shit, ate it, too. Rather than living in the freedom God gave them to just be who they were, they listened to a voice other than God's, and they believed the serpent and traded life for knowledge of good and evil.

The moment they ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, your eyes were opened and the freedom of life — the freedom of just being with God as God's created beings, allowing God to be God and we to be they who are in need of God — vanished.

Which is the exact moment the idea of "nakedness" was introduced. Before then it didn't exist. But now the humans covered their bodies out of shame. Which is exactly how shame operates: it makes us hate our bodies, it obscures the image of God within us, it makes us hide, it makes us afraid of God, it makes us blame others.

The next day, God was just kind of strolling around the garden and realize the earthlings were nowhere to be found.

So God called out, "Hey, where are you guys?"

But they were hiding.

Before the weight of good and evil and the legalistic bullshit that has forever plagued religion entered into the minds and hearts of human beings, there was no shame — no shame about our bodies, or what those bodies desired, or how those bodies looked. There was absolutely no reason to hide from God.

But rather than just be with God as we were created, the humans chose to try to be *like* God, and that shit has not stopped to this day. We love

taking our so-called knowledge of what is good and what is evil, of who is good and who is evil, and applying that to ourselves and to others like we were God.

The very first expression of shame was over our naked, sexual bodies. And since then, we earthlings have tried to define and control and condemn human sexuality.

Shame has an origin, and it is not God. When Adam and Eve tried to avoid God, God said, "Where are you?" And they said, "We were naked and tried to hide from you because we were afraid." God then said to them: "Wait. Who told you you were naked?"

Who told them that they were naked? My money is on the snake.... And he's a damned liar.

Historically, when Christians have thought about the banishment from the Garden of Eden, the focus has been on the sins of disobedience and pride. Don't eat the fruit from *that* tree, God told the adam. Why to the kids put beans in their ears? They do it 'cause you say, "No." Of course they disobeyed the commandment. Of course they were disobedient.

Though, God saying "Don't" wasn't the only reason they did it. Eat the fruit, the serpent told ishshah, and *you'll be like God*. Like the pride exhibited in the Tower of Babel story that comes a few chapters later in Genesis, the desire to be like God, to think too much of yourself, is a problem.

What we've failed to notice is that the other end of the spectrum is also a problem and it's in this story, too. Thinking too little of yourself, shame, the feeling that one is bad and unworthy, is also a problem. Shame is destructive.

Brené Brown, who may be America's greatest expert on shame, differentiates between guilt and shame. "I believe that *guilt* is adaptive and helpful – it's holding something we've done or failed to do up against our values and feeling psychological discomfort," she writes.

"I define *shame* as the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging – something we've experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection. I don't believe shame is helpful or productive. In fact, I think shame is much more likely to be the source of destructive, hurtful behavior than the solution or cure. I think the fear of disconnection can make us dangerous."²

In other words, guilt can be helpful and productive. Healthy guilt allows us to seek forgiveness and correct a wrong. It can lead to healing. On the other hand, shame causes us to fear rejection and tempts us to hide and disconnect from others and to avoid what causes us shame.

² Brené Brown, "shame v. guilt," *brenbrown.com*, <https://brenbrown.com/articles/2013/01/14/shame-v-guilt/> (posted 14 January 2013; accessed 22 April 2019); emphasis added.

In an interview with Oprah Winfrey, Brown said, “I think shame is lethal. I think shame is deadly. And I think we are swimming in it deep.”

“[And] here’s the bottom line with shame. The less you talk about it, the more you got it.

Shame needs three things to grow exponentially in our lives: secrecy, silence, and judgment.”³ When we keep quiet about our shame, Brown says, it grows. “It will creep into every corner and crevice of your life.”

The antidote, Brown says, is empathy. She explains that by talking about your shame with a friend who expresses empathy, the painful feeling cannot survive. “Shame,” she says, “depends on me buying into the belief that I’m alone.”

“Shame cannot survive being spoken.”

“It cannot survive empathy.”⁴

This sermon is the first in a series we’ll be preaching during the season of Easter. The series focuses on women from scripture. I realize I didn’t talk much about Eve as a person, as a character in scripture. In fact, the ishshah hasn’t even been named “Eve” yet.

The thing is, when Pastor Brenda and I decided on which characters in the scriptures to include in this series and decided to include Eve, this important aspect of the story called to me. I had to talk about the destructive power of shame. And I had to talk about the antidote that Brené Brown identifies: breaking the silence, unmasking the secrecy with someone who will listen empathetically, with someone who will remind you of your worth and of God’s amazing, unconditional love.

Amen.

Questions for contemplation:

What shame are you holding on to?

What can you do this week to break the silence and unmask the secrecy so that this shame’s lies will no longer have a hold on your life?

How can you help heal someone else’s shame?

³ Lynn Okura, “Brené Brown On Shame: ‘It Cannot Survive Empathy,’” *Huffington Post*, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/brene-brown-shame_n_3807115 (posted 26 August 2013; accessed 26 April 2019).

⁴ *Ibid.*