

Examining our pain to live with healing



MAR. 5: *Sunday* PAIN OF SHAME

“But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” (Isaiah 43:1)

Brené Brown is known for her research on shame, which she says is different than guilt. Guilt, she writes, can be understood as, “I did something bad.” Shame, on the other hand, is, “I am bad.”

How often we take mistakes and failings to the extreme! If I preach a sermon that doesn’t land, suddenly I am a terrible preacher. If I fail to meet an aspirational goal – lose that last five pounds, finish that project before vacation, practice a digital fast from social media – I am a failure.

Shame is a powerful and painful emotion that inhibits authentic living and creative work. Because shame is rooted in our fear of being wrong, or being belittled as less than, it stunts all forms of innovation and holds us, our churches, our organizations back. “When our self-worth isn’t on the line,” writes Brown, “we are far more willing to be courageous and risk sharing our raw talents and gifts.

Shame also doesn’t honor the One who created, called and claimed us. We are worthy of God’s love and redemption; we must not let our shame messages tell us otherwise.



EXAMEN:

Listen to the shame messages you have heard or told yourself. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.



IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself being pieced together in your mother’s womb. Picture God smiling over your birth and cradling you in Divine arms. Bask in the knowledge that you have been claimed by God and blessed as worthy of love.



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MAR. 6: *Monday* PAIN OF GUILT

“For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves guiltless in the matter.”
(2 Corinthians 7:11)

Paul speaks of guilt, or “godly grief,” as motivation to restore and mend relationships broken by bad behavior. Reconciliation is a theme of 2 Corinthians. The Christians in this community were eager to mend their relationship with Paul after a painful incident where his honor and reputation were publicly insulted. Paul forgives them, absolving them of guilt and reconciling their relationship.

Guilt often lingers long after confessions are made and forgiveness offered. When I think back to words I said that caused hurt or harm, or ways I’ve behaved that undercut the values I seek to live by, I feel a hot tweak in my chest, a biting constriction that reveals guilt’s powerful and long-lasting hold. Releasing ourselves from guilt’s grip is onerous. It’s almost easier to wallow, swimming in this painful place like a Labrador circling a pond for a sunken toy. Words recognizing our amends or apologies and gestures of forgiveness from others are welcome and reassuring. But freedom comes not just from accepting forgiveness from others, but also forgiving ourselves.



EXAMEN:

Sit with your guilt over past mistakes. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.



IMAGINE:

Imagine you are carrying a number of large rocks, each representing a past mistake. Allow yourself to feel the weight of these rocks, how they slow you down and exhaust you. In the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. Visualize yourself setting each rock down as you repeat to yourself, “I am forgiven. I am forgiven. I am forgiven.” Feel your burden of guilt lighten and release.



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MAR. 7: *Tuesday* PAIN OF TRAUMA

*“How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?” (Psalm 13:2)*

In his book, *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, behavioral therapist Resmaa Menakem writes, “Trauma is the body’s protective response to an event that it perceives as potentially dangerous. We can have a trauma response to anything we perceive as a threat, not only to our physical safety, but to what we do, say, think, care about, believe in, or yearn for.”

In danger’s wake, our brains embed trauma in our bodies, which can manifest for years as pain, fear, anxiety, reactive behaviors, even violence. Trauma remains until it is exposed, named and addressed.

To heal from trauma, our minds and bodies must embrace and experience a sense of safety. We have to disrupt the narrative of threat. The promises of God’s love, grace and provision can serve as our disruptive, healing story. The Easter narrative unfolds a dangerous plot with a brutal death. But life emerges after brutality. Resurrection restores us to healing and hope. God’s love and grace have the last word.



EXAMEN:

Sit with your trauma narratives of threatening danger. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise. Notice your body’s response.



IMAGINE:

Pay attention to your breath, pulled in through your nose, filling your lungs, released through your mouth. Experience the life-giving quality of this breath. Imagine this life-giving oxygen as God’s love surrounding you, within you, flowing through every deeply held trauma. God’s love protects and provides for you. Feel God’s embrace. Relax in this space of safety.



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MAR. 8: *Wednesday* PAIN OF VIOLENCE

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” (Matthew 5:9)

Violence pervades our lives and distorts God’s kin-dom plans. The war in Ukraine reveals the consequences of violence on a global scale. But violence takes many forms: any behavior intended to hurt, damage or kill. Physical, psychological, spiritual and verbal abuse, bullying, economic and social violence all send shock waves of pain and destruction through bodies, souls, peoples, countries and our natural environment.

Our bodies release adrenaline and cortisol during conflict, tempting us to fight violence with violence. It’s important to acknowledge how this momentary surge of power can feel good. But our fight response also fans the flames of conflict, moving us farther from peace.

Violence demeans both victim and victimizer; its injuries not just of the flesh, but of the spirit and soul. The children of God are peacemakers who follow a crucified God. Christ did not meet violence with more violence. He resisted violence with that which is more powerful: love.



EXAMEN:

Sit with the pain of violence. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise. Notice your body’s response.



IMAGINE:

Picture Jesus with you, saying these words: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.” (John 14:27) Breathe in Christ’s peace, breath out the pain of violence. Repeat.



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MAR. 9: *Thursday* PAIN OF BETRAYAL

“Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.” (Psalm 139:7-10)

The pain of betrayal is particularly hard to understand. It’s the opposite of what you thought was true.

You thought someone was your friend. You believed promises wouldn’t be broken. You expected trust to be reciprocated. Betrayal leaves us reeling, wondering what is real.

People can and will betray us. The scriptures are full of stories of broken promises, abandonment, lying, disrespect, and unfairness. Betrayal has residual effects — we become more cautious, less open-hearted, hesitant to trust. In these moments, we can lean into the comfort our God provides. No matter where we go, no matter what happens to us, our God is present and our Creator’s faithfulness steadfast and ever-present.

We can trust God’s promises; this love will never turn on us.



EXAMEN:

Sit with a memory of betrayal. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise. Notice your body’s response.



IMAGINE:

Imagine the earth is shaking all around you. God is with you, holding your hand, guiding you down a steady path. Feel the firm grip of God’s hand in yours. Feel the solid ground beneath your feet. Allow yourself to relax into and trust God’s faithful support.



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MAR. 10: *Friday* **PAIN OF HUMILIATION**

*“The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit.”
(Psalm 34:18)*

Do you remember middle school? Does anyone survive those awkward years without a good dose of humiliation? Middle school is a Petri dish of peer pressure where anything you say or do can be used against you.

Humiliation is more painful than we realize. Researchers have discovered that the same regions of the brain active during physical pain are also activated during intense experiences of social rejection. Don't we all have memories of social rejection, painful put-downs, or public call outs, that still make us wince? Humiliating others is too often celebrated in our social media culture where missteps can go viral and cyber bullying is a real threat. Spirits can be crushed by such tactics, but God draws near to mend and heal our brokenness.



EXAMEN:

Sit with a memory of humiliation. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise. Notice your body's response.



IMAGINE:

Imagine God drawing near to you in that moment of humiliation, scattering your assailing enemies. Like a puzzle whose pieces have scattered across the floor, God gathers the broken pieces of you, puts you back together, and restores you to wholeness.



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MAR. 11: *Saturday* **PAIN OF LOSS**

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” (Matthew 5:4)

Grief is a pain we all experience; loss a natural cycle of life marked by endings and beginnings. We might grieve the loss of certain periods of time — our youth, our college years, the end of a wonderful vacation. We might grieve the loss of important places — our childhood home, a community in which we felt welcome, a place where we experienced personal growth. We might grieve the loss of meaningful things — our first car, old photographs, a treasured piece of art. But death, of course, brings the most poignant pain.

The poet Marie Howe describes her brother’s death as a making of space, a gate through which she, too, would eventually pass. Her brother’s body was taller, she writes, and younger, “done at twenty-eight.” The pain of Howe’s loss is palpable.

In the midst of the pain of loss, God shows up. God is present as Alpha and Omega, beginning and end. With each ending, God promises a new beginning, for those lost and those left behind. People aren’t replaceable. But love remains no matter which side of the gate we stand on.



EXAMEN:

Sit with your feelings of loss. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise. Notice your body’s response.



IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself before a gate. On the other side of the gate you see the person, place, experience for which you mourn. Picture your loss shining with vibrant joy. Feel the love passing back and forth between the gate. Visualize your emptiness being filled with this love.



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