

“Shake It Off” by Rev. Michele Ward

*Focus & Function: The writer of Hebrews argues that Jesus endured suffering on the cross and disregarded the shame of the cross. The cross did not consume him. He overcame it. As Christ followers, we are to embody this kind of resilience, this kind of resistance. We persist in the struggle against evil. This does not mean we numb ourselves or close ourselves off to risk. Rather, living the resilient life means choosing courage.*

Last week, our series on Courage and Connection began. For the next month, Andrew and I will preach on the gifts and challenges of vulnerability and the courage it takes to live with our whole selves. September 9th Andrew spoke about what it means to live with extravagant openness, telling the story of the woman with the alabaster jar anointing Jesus. She chose to risk everything she had of worth, and God invites us into that risk-taking space, too.

But taking risks comes with all sorts of hang-ups, doesn't it? You see, the more risks that we take, the more likely we are to fail. And the harder we fail, the harder it can be to get back up again. The harder we fail, the harder it can be to ignore the shame we feel. The harder we fail, the harder it can be to believe it is worth trying at all. It is this question – what does it take to keep trying in the face of failure and the fear of vulnerability – that we turn to this morning.

In order to do this, we will dive into the book of Hebrews, a letter written by an anonymous apostle of the early church. Scholars speculate about the writer's background, popular theories being that Apollos or Barnabas wrote the book. Regardless of authorship, Hebrews is a beautiful series of sermons collected and sent out to the Christian community. We find ourselves smack-dab in the middle of one of these homilies in Hebrews 12.

Hebrews 11 chronicles what you will often call see titled the ‘hall of faith,’ a brief history of the lives of the fathers and mothers of the Judeo-Christian tradition. I recommend reading chapter 11 because it makes it clear that “the great cloud of witnesses” to which we belong includes all sorts of people making decisions, both great and small, in order to be faith-full to the life God calls them to lead. The beginning of chapter 12 sets up Christ’s response to the cross as the ultimate example of this risk-taking, faith-full behavior.

Hebrews 12:1-3 addresses a culture with a heightened understanding of communal honor and shame. In this context, the honor someone receives from the people around them defines their worth in the community. The shame someone experiences is not only a personal feeling; it is also a manifestation of the community’s declaration of someone’s worthlessness. In our contemporary culture, honor and shame matter, but not to the same extent that they did during the time this was written. Avoiding embarrassment still motivates people to behave in certain ways – after all, it is human to enjoy praise. Shame is deeper than embarrassment – it’s the belief that something is so wrong with us that we do not deserve love or community. Guilt is a healthy emotion when we do something wrong. Shame can turn into self-contempt and spiral into the belief that we are bad. Brene Brown writes that human beings have three typical responses to shame: we move away from others by hiding or bring silent.

We can move towards others and become more people-pleasing. Or we move against others, which often look like a bid for power, aggressive behavior, or intensifying the experience by out-shaming the person or people trying to shame us in the first place. I’m going to level with you: we cannot avoid shame. Shame is an inevitable part of the human experience. But what we can do is develop what Brown calls ‘shame resistance.’

The statement in verse two about Christ's response to the cross is deeply countercultural and a profound example of shame resilience. Christ "endured the cross, disregarding its shame." New Testament scholar Alicia Batten writes, "crucifixion was one, if not the most, dishonorable forms of execution in the Roman Empire. The victim would be publicly stripped and put to death. This public dimension of the death was especially humiliating" ("Honor and Shame in the New Testament," n.p.). Jesus died in one of the most humiliating ways in the Roman Empire. This was a complex reality for the early church leaders to explain, particularly to the people that never met Jesus. The verb choice the author uses is particularly important here – Jesus does not suffer or survive the cross. Jesus endures the cross – Jesus displays resilience. And it is this kind of resilience that God invites us to emulate.

This is not to say that Jesus does not suffer. It is the way we talk about his suffering that matters. William Placher's *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*: "God's willingness to risk suffering led ... to suffering, and such is love that God does not regret the risk" (116). Christ's suffering and death was a result of love, a deep love for creation and a commitment to the struggle against sin and death. Jesus was not a passive bystander, a religious zealot, or an enemy of the state. He endured intense suffering and shame for the sake of something greater. Placher: "Christ's suffering on the cross is the suffering of someone out to win in the struggle with evil, not the suffering of a passive victim only enduring suffering for the sake of the purported virtue of passive endurance" (117). It is this kind of endurance – this 'shame resilience,' this focused living, that Jesus models for us.

Taylor Swift, a pop music icon and celebrity, wrote a song called “Shake It Off.” The music video for this song was the first to gain over 2 billion views on YouTube by a female musician. She says that she wrote this song in order to take back the narrative from others that tore her down publicly. In an NPR interview 2014 she states: “I think it's important to be self-aware about what people are saying about you, but even more so, be very aware of who you actually are, and to have that be the main priority.”

I want to make a distinction between the culturally popular concept of ‘shaking it off’ and developing shame resilience. It is easy to say, ‘just ignore it,’ ‘don’t waste any time on them,’ ‘why does that bother you so much.’ And while Taylor Swift’s song is upbeat, her message to avoid the shame someone or something stirs up in us is not upbeat. It is one of the behaviors that Brene Brown encourages us to steer away from if we truly want to develop shame resilience. But Taylor Swift’s encouragement to remember who we are can keep us from someone’s attempts to bog us down in shame or contempt. When we ‘disregard shame,’ in a Christ-like way, we do not avoid our emotional experience of the world. Rather, our hearts lead us into the healing and the persistence that God invites us to build.

In Brown’s book on resilience, *Rising Strong*, she outlines four ways to respond to shame.

Brown’s elements of shame resilience in *Rising Strong*:

- recognizing shame & understanding its triggers – understand what shame is and recognize that triggers it for them
- practicing critical awareness – reality checking the messages and expectations that tell us that being imperfect means being inadequate

- reaching out – share stories with people that you trust – enter that vulnerable space of honest reflection with people that love and respect you.
- speaking shame –use the word so it no longer has power over you, talk about how you are feeling, and ask for what you need.

These practices matter because they invite us to live wholehearted, fully present lives.

They remind us that the pain that we endure shapes us, but the shame others place on us does not have to do the same.

Earlier, I referenced a theologian named Placher. He wrote about Christ's suffering and Christ's commitment to eradicating evil. Jesus was willing to endure significant amounts in pain, to the point of death, for the sake of this end. What is Jesus inviting you to risk? What story that weighs you down are you refusing to tell, even to yourself? What injustice or evil are you committed to seeing disappear off the face of the earth? Find the answers to these questions, and dig in. Disregard the shame others place on you or that you place on yourself. Your story is a story worth telling. You are a child worth loving. The God that endured much knows this.