



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

## **Advent and Vulnerability**

**By The Rev. Sharon Gracen**

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Every Sunday morning, NPR airs the program *On Being* with host Krista Tippett. Every week there is an interesting conversation about the "big questions at the center of human life." It's the only time I regret having such a short commute. I hear five minutes of fascinating conversation and then I'm already at church hoping that I will remember to get back to it later. Well, I did remember this past week and what I heard was really profound and important. It was theologically elegant and humanly messy.

Krista Tippett's guest was Brené Brown, a professor in the Graduate School of Social Work and researcher from the University of Houston, and also an Episcopalian. Dr. Brown came into view in a big way two years ago when she gave a TED lecture. If you've not heard of them, the TED talks are a series of short presentations by a fascinating variety of people in the fields of Technology, Entertainment, and Design. I have heard and learned many fascinating things from TED talks but nothing like Brené Brown. She has spent over 10 years studying the most important things in life, how we connect and what gets in our way of connecting. In other words, she studies vulnerability and shame. I know, you may be asking yourself what I found so fascinating because those are two things we protect ourselves from and refuse to talk about. But listening to her—and I've listened over and over again—convinces me that if we are serious about our faith, being the best we can be and helping the world do likewise, we have to learn about this.

Here's her thinking in a nutshell. Human connection gives purpose and meaning to our lives, we are hardwired for it. The Bible says it, right off the bat. God saw that it was not good for the human to be alone. She set off to study connection but she discovered that if she asked people about love, they told her stories of rejection, if she asked about belonging, they told her about rejection and alienation. She says that she ran smack into this thing she hadn't expected and it was shame—which is defined as the fear of disconnection—being rejected for something that we are. Shame is the idea that there is something about us that we fear makes us unworthy of love and belonging. So we do everything that we can to keep that from being seen and known. She says that it's everywhere, everyone has it and no one wants to talk about it. Underneath it all is excruciating vulnerability, because in order to truly connect we have to allow selves to be seen and known, and if we do that, they'll see that we're not perfect. It's a snake eating its own tail. Brown thought she was going to study shame and vulnerability and figure it out, find a way to master it, and that it would take about a year. Six years later after she published her work she realized that she had missed something huge.

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All of the people she had talked to fell into two categories, those who had a strong sense of love and belonging and those who didn't. She dove back into her accumulated research and found that the only difference between the two groups, not levels of success or happiness, or lives without or without tragedy, the only difference was that those who exhibited a strong sense of love and belonging believed that they were worthy of love and belonging. She came to refer to them as whole-hearted people and describes them as those who live courageously. Now the word courage comes from the word for heart and it originally meant to tell your story with your whole heart. And this is where her Episcopalianism comes in; she quotes our confession, "we have not loved you with our whole heart." Wholehearted people embrace their vulnerability and are willing to love without guarantees, to try something and fail without thinking that they are failures. Dr. Brown says that vulnerability is the core of shame and fear and the struggle for connection but to her consternation, she also discovered that it is the birthplace of joy, creativity, belonging and love. Wholehearted people do not like the discomfort of vulnerability but they know that it is necessary.

So here we are on the first Sunday of Advent and we anticipate the birth of joy, creativity, belonging and love. As I listened to Brené Brown, the theology of creation and the incarnation screamed through at me. First of all, God, this all sufficient, eternal spirit, created all that is in the most spectacular expression of voluntary vulnerability that I can imagine. God is the Supremely Connected One and is therefore vulnerable to all that creation reflects back, the good and the bad, the believing and the non, the worship and the dismissal. If you have children, you know vulnerability. God has *all* of us with no guarantee that we will love back.

Our scripture and faith tells us that God reached out to humanity to be in even closer, more vulnerable relationship saying, "let us truly know each other and I will be your God and you will be my people, we will know that we belong to each other." Apparently God believes that we are worthy of love and connection, but we have not loved with our whole hearts because it's hard for us to believe that we are worthy and it's scary to love with your whole heart. When you love with your whole heart, you risk being hurt or let down.

And then in even greater vulnerability the divine looks at how lost we have become, how unable we are to live and love whole-heartedly, and came to live with us. It's breathtaking, really. Jesus comes to us in all kinds of vulnerability; a vulnerable infant born in a shameful circumstance, a powerless man of an occupied country witnessing the daily shame of his people, someone who saw that his religious tradition was veering off course and was willing to challenge and risk to love it back into righteousness. And the ultimate vulnerability of a rebel subjected to the shame of betrayal, abuse, public humiliation and execution. Jesus is the proto-type of wholehearted living. He risks the uncomfortable vulnerability of loving us without much evidence that we believe ourselves to be worthy of such courageous generous love.

As Brené Brown studied the wholehearted, she saw their courage to be open and authentic, was what allowed them to have meaningful connection. They were compassionate with themselves first so that they could have compassion for others. Their compassion for self was accepting their own imperfections. They embraced vulnerability and that they believed that what made them vulnerable made them beautiful.

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Brené Brown started studying vulnerability so that she could conquer it and manage it. Instead she learned that by leaning into and embracing the vulnerability, she began to live more fully than she ever had. Her crippling fear of vulnerability had caused her to live and love small. When she prepared for her first TED talk, she planned it as a chance to practice vulnerability, to share herself and her story openly, with a lovely sense of humor and a delivery that Meryl Streep could envy. Her willingness to stand up in an auditorium during the TED conference and live wholeheartedly has now been viewed over six million times.

Now, I think you know how I get when I think something's important and this is truly important. The problems that come from trying to keep our vulnerability at bay are the roots of most of our ills – addictions, violence, depression, insecurity, anger – you name it and if you or someone really smart like Dr. Brené Brown drills down into those problems you find the shame and vulnerability. Advent is a perfect time to do this work because it prepares us to be the birthplace of the divine. Christ cannot be born in you if you are afraid to love and to be seen with all of your imperfections. The irony here is that letting go of the fear of being seen and truly known, brings you more joy and love than you could imagine. Take the risk and you will be the welcoming birthplace of the Christ child – you will be Bethlehem.

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