The Very Good Gospel
Chapters 4 & 5

Chapter 4 ~ Shalom With God

- *When you were a child what were your thoughts about God? Or, what are your earliest ideas you can recall about God?*

- *If you are willing to share, what are some painful memories you have from growing up? What formative effect have those experiences had on you?*

(***Table Group Leaders: As always, please create a safe environment for people to share openly and vulnerably. Please be very sensitive if you choose to ask the second question.)

One of the things I appreciate about this book is how LSH shares from her own life, even the painful experiences. This is a subtle and implicit reminder to us that God can redeem the painful parts of our story/life as well.

"*There's a God-shaped hole in all of us that can only be filled with God.*" is a paraphrased version of the Blaise Pascal reference on page 56. Most of the pain in our lives comes from one of two things: the pain others afflict upon us and/or the various ways we try to fill that God-shaped hole in us. LSH goes on to assert that, "*Humanity is thirsty for God, but we drink from cups that can hold no water.*" (pg. 60)

- *What do you think/feel about the idea of a God-shaped hole in each of us? Do you buy into that premise? What questions does it raise for you?*

- *What are some ways you have tried to fill that hole or some things you've tried to fill that hole with?*

The overriding metaphor of this chapter, which is about our (humans') relationship with God, is that of marriage. We are reminded that the type of relationship that God has always desired with humanity is a Covenant relationship governed by love/chesed. The covenant of marriage is a frequently used illustration to inform our imagination of what God is seeking. To say it another way, we were created to be loved and to love in the firm bonds of a covenant relationship. Covenants are beautiful…but when they are broken the consequences are disastrous and painful for all involved.

(To understand a bit more about the use of covenants in the Biblical story, I would refer you to this short video from our friends at the Bible Project…The Covenants in the Bible Theme)

"*I have come to believe that the journey of our lives from birth to death is a journey back to God…God is our home, and from birth to death, the whole of our lives is a journey to return home.*" (pg. 60) The reason and purpose that you and I are alive is to have a relationship with God. That's what life is all about. It's interesting (in a sad sort of way) how we tend to make life

about something other than that…as we chase, pursue, and strive to achieve, accomplish, attain things that won't satisfy us.

- *What changes regarding how we view life and how we live life if we understand that we already have what we're looking for, what we're meant to have?*

"*Humanity's broken relationship with God is the ultimate cause of all other brokenness. In another sense, there is no way humanity could violate relationship with any other created being and not violate its relationship with God. Creation is bound together by relationship with our Creator since it is Creator God's love that binds us together. To break one tie is to break them all.*" (pg. 61) This takes us back to week 1 (chapters 1-2) regarding the interconnection/relationship between all that God has created. When the relationships/connections between all that God has created are good, this is Shalom. Relationships are of ultimate importance because the breakdown/fissure of relationships causes a cosmic ripple effect. Thankfully, "*God is recreating the world one person at a time.*" (pg. 65) This includes reconnecting the broken/separate parts of the world back to the way they were meant to be.

LSH shares about her "come to Jesus" moment during a campfire/revival meeting back in August of 1983 (see pgs. 63-64). I appreciate how she understands that this reconciling/ reconnecting moment was real…and also just the beginning of re-creation…there was still much to be worked out…there was much re-formation/transformation yet to come. (Notice how many times she uses the word "revealed" on page 66.) While the details of your story and mine may differ from LSH's, there is a general pattern to most redemption stories…a realization or awakening, followed by a journey/process on a different trajectory. There are highs and lows, victories and setbacks, joys and sorrows along the way….

- *Have you had a "come to Jesus" moment? (Perhaps you've had more than one.) Please share if you are willing.*

- *What difference has Jesus made in your life?*

(***Table Group Leaders: If you ask either of the two questions above, listen carefully to people's responses, particularly if you use either of the two questions above…notice if they are describing their encounter/relationship with Jesus or their relationship with the church. People often conflate their relationship with Jesus and their relationship with the church. Just listen and make a mental note.)

"*And thirty-two years later, I am still waiting on God for some of the most stubborn brokenness in my soul and life to be healed. Meanwhile, I partner with God to bring healing to some of the most broken corners of our society and world.*" (pg. 66) This is real…and hopeful. The transformation process is slow. Healing and wholeness takes time. But please allow me to encourage you with this thought: We are built for eternity. We've got nothing but time. There's no hurry. Think progress over perfection. Or, in the words of Jan Johnson, we do the connecting, God does the perfecting. Isn't it GOOD NEWS indeed that God loves us as we are?

We don't have to fix our brokenness in order for God to love us (and we couldn't do that no matter how hard we tried). Rather, we're called/invited to work with Him on our brokenness, as well as to be agents of Shalom to the brokenness around us.

LSH uses the story of the Samaritan woman from John 4 as the backdrop of this chapter. There's a lot going on in that story. It serves as a microcosm of what God is up to in the grand scheme of things. It demonstrates brokenness–between an individual and God; between an individual and herself; between people groups; between the individual and others. It demonstrates that God in Christ comes near…initiating contact and conversation, bringing healing and wholeness. It demonstrates the resulting transformation as the individual (the woman) goes from being a marginalized cast-off to the one whose testimony brings others to Jesus. Again, the details may vary, but the general pattern holds true. This is what God is up to. This is the invitation to each of us. How are we responding?

Chapter 5 ~ Shalom With Self

This chapter leans heavily on the work of Dr. Brene Brown. If you are not familiar with her, I'd recommend Googling her and getting acquainted with her work. A good place to start is a TED Talk she gave back in 2014. Here's the link…

The Power of Vulnerability | Brené Brown | TED

Quoting Brene Brown, shame is "*the fear of disconnection", "…shame is a fear that our failures, our shortcomings, our true selves make us unworthy of connection. The core lie of shame is 'I am not enough.'* " (pg. 69)

There is a difference/distinction between healthy shame and toxic shame. Healthy shame is an emotion/feeling we experience; toxic shame is an identity we adopt.

Healthy shame leads to regret, remorse, repentance, and reconnection. It is an acknowledgment that we did something wrong and seek to make amends. It is important to be able to make such an acknowledgement. (If you disagree, consider the person who can never admit that they are wrong.)

Toxic shame, on the other hand, leads to rejection, separation/disconnection, and a sense of unworthiness.

- *What do you think of the distinction between healthy shame and toxic shame? Can you share a time when you experienced one or the other?*

The concept of shame comes up early in the Biblical story. Genesis chapter 2 ends with this statement, "*Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.*" (Gen. 2:25). Immediately after eating the forbidden fruit we read, "*Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as He*

was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God…" (Gen. 3:7-8, emphasis added)

God asks three questions in Genesis 3:9-13…

1. "Where are you?"
2. "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"
3. "What is this you have done?"

Keep in mind that when God asks questions it's not because God doesn't already know the answer. Rather, God's questions are invitations to fess up, to reestablish relationship, to reconnect. God was trying to get them back on track by offering the opportunity to tell the truth. "*[Shame] has nothing to do with the truth. It is based on lies about the essence of our being*." (pgs. 70-71)

It was right for them to feel/experience shame. Shame as a consequence of wrongdoing is good and healthy. Or, perhaps another way of saying it, shame is an appropriate feeling to accompany guilt. But it is not meant to be a place we stay in…shame is not meant to be our home. Rather (healthy) shame is meant to cause us to course-correct. The truth of the matter is that even while we may do bad/wrong things, it doesn't change our essence of being the image and likeness of God and being dearly loved by Him. This is the basis of our value, worth, significance, and identity. It is a lie to think of humans as anything other than, or less than, that.

"*Shame is a counteroffer to the love of God, which is the connection between all things*." (pg. 72)

Sin is anything that breaks relationships, and the result is shame, fear of rejection, separation, distrust, reliance on ourselves instead of reliance upon God. A downward spiral results with sin begetting shame, which begets more sin, which begets more shame, and on it goes. Shalom, on the other hand, is all about connection and making things right, which requires trust and vulnerability. This is why the practice of Confession is so important and, sadly, often neglected. Even when we do wrong/bad things, there stands an open invitation to confess, repent, and get back on track.

I John 1:8-10 says, "*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make Him out to be a liar and His word has no place in our lives*." Claiming to be without sin is another way of trying to hide and cover up shame, which, again, causes separation/disconnection. Confession is our first step to establishing Shalom. And confession is more than acknowledging the wrong we've done. It also encompasses acknowledging the hurt we have experienced, the hurt done to us. Denying hurt is a form of hiding shame as well.

- *Who do you trust? Who do you find it comfortable/easy to be vulnerable with? Why do you think that is?*

- *Who do you find it difficult to trust? Why do you think that is?*

- *Who knows you…really knows you? What did it take to get to that place relationally?*

Shame can also result from sin done to us. Whether it's by our own doing or someone else's, anything that says, "*You are unworthy*." (pg. 75) is unhealthy/toxic shame. So confession is more than acknowledging the wrong we've done; it also encompasses acknowledging the hurt we have experienced, the hurt done to us. Denying hurt is a form of hiding as well. Shame, in all its manifestations, needs to be brought into the light in order for there to be restoration.

- *What is your go-to form of self-protection? How do you reach for fig leaves to cover your shame?*

Quoting Brene Brown, "*The Wholehearted identify vulnerability as the catalyst for courage, compassion, and connection."* (pg. 76) Courage, compassion, and connection are things, I suspect, we all want. But the question is whether we are willing to be vulnerable, which is what's necessary in order to have them. Confession requires vulnerability, because it always runs the risk of rejection. The fear of rejection is legitimate…it's really what we all fear most…thus, the temptation to hide.

On page 76 LSH, again leaning on the work of Brene Brown, states that the way we counter shame is not through self-confidence but rather through "shame resilience". She proceeds to offer four recommendations on how to strengthen that resilience…

1. Recognizing shame and understanding the triggers (This is why it's important to pay attention to our feelings/emotions.)
2. Practicing critical awareness (Identifying/naming the lie/false narrative at play)
3. Reaching out (Establishing connection…this undercuts the root of shame.)
4. Speaking shame

(I would consider numbers 1 & 2 as reflection/self-examination and numbers 3 & 4 as practicing confession. If you are sensing that confession might be a good Soul Training Exercise, your intuition is good. 🙂)

The top of page 79, discussing healing prayer, reminds me of the Good and Beautiful series we went through back in 2022 that explored our false narratives regarding God, others, ourselves. Our value, worth, and significance comes from God. If we look for it elsewhere (believing lies/false narratives) we will be disappointed and hurt. Healing comes when we look to God and receive from God what He's always wanted us to have. Not even sin can take away our intrinsic value, worth, and significance.

- *What lies do you believe about your own worthiness? What makes you feel that you're not enough?*

- *Do you believe that God smiles when He thinks of you? Why or why not?*

- *"Healing prayer", as described at the top of page 79, is a practice that requires vulnerability and risk, both to offer it and to receive it. Have you ever experienced anything like "healing prayer"? If so, and if you feel comfortable, please share a little about that. If not, what do you think/feel about it? What might it look like for CUMC to make healing prayer a regular practice?*

One of the beautiful and powerful aspects of the very good Gospel is that we don't need to live in shame. We are invited/called out of it by our good, loving heavenly Father who desires to provide for us and protect us.

Here's the basic takeaway from this chapter: You are Worthy! You are Wanted! You are Beloved! If you are having trouble believing and receiving this, then we need to get to the bottom of that. Is that a journey you're willing to take? (Because wallowing in shame is no way to live life.)

<u>Soul Training Exercise ~ Practicing Confession</u>

We tend to think of Confession as admitting our sins…which it certainly is that. But it also is admitting the hurt/pain caused by sins done to us. In fact, simply sharing the various feelings we experience with another person is a form of confession. (Nothing against our Catholic brothers and sisters, but we need to think beyond priests and confessional booths.) Additionally, if you see a counselor/therapist, that's a form of confession in that you're sharing what's going on in your heart/mind/life.

Confession is about Connection. And Connection is what breaks the power of Shame. So step one of Confession is connecting with another person. Step two is sharing on a deeper-than-surface level. It's allowing yourself to be seen and known by another person…which obviously requires trust, risk, vulnerability. It's about revealing faults and hurts and receiving forgiveness and acceptance.

Ideally, this becomes a regular practice with a friend, or two or three. The point of it all is that we are made for deep connection with others, without which we can't experience Shalom.