

Shame and guilt

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

September 26, 2014

A few weeks ago, [Meredith Gould](#) mentioned something on Twitter that made me pause. She was in a discussion with someone else, and I was eavesdropping on the conversation, because that's what we do on Twitter. She mentioned that there was a difference between guilt and shame.

Dr. Gould is an avid tweeter, so I won't even attempt to dig up the original 140 characters. But I started nosing around a bit into Brene Brown's [Daring Greatly](#), where she goes into great detail about the difference.

Basically, guilt is feeling badly for something we do wrong. (I feel awful that I missed that lunch.)

Shame is feeling badly for who we are. (I missed that lunch. I am such an idiot!)

It's a subtle shift that can have huge consequences.

It makes me think of the wisdom of our liturgy. I love how the call to confession begins with the promise of forgiveness and ends with the assurance of pardon.

It's a crap sandwich, for sure. But it's an amazing gift to be able to name what we do wrong while also upholding the truth of who we are. We are made in the image of God and we are forgiven people.

It makes me think of my discomfort with Calvinist theology, particularly the "totally depraved" bits. Yesterday, I reread the depravity sections of the *Institutes*. And, there is a bit of exaggeration and oversimplification that happened at the Synod of Dort and continues in pulpits today.

But I'm not here to defend Calvin. I am here to say that teaching people that they are terrible can be psychologically damaging. We have to be extremely careful. We

do terrible things to one another. There's no doubt about that. But we are created good. We are people who are made in the image of God.

It makes me think of the sexism that Christians have perpetuated. In [*On the Trinity*](#), Augustine said that women had two parts—*homo* the intellect of a woman that that could be saved and *femina* the sensual nature of a woman that could not be saved. He contended that a woman had to be in covenant with a man in order to be fully the image of God.

Perhaps we can easily reject Augustine's notions, but we do have to think about how they seep into our culture. Women are often told that their flesh is a stumbling block. They must be modest and keep their flesh hidden, because men can't be responsible for their actions when faced with such temptation. Women are told that if they have a certain sexual experience (anything from engaging in sex before marriage to being sexually violated), they are [damaged goods](#). It is not only the act, but it is the flesh (particularly the woman's flesh) that is deemed bad.

It makes me think of the racism we engage in. Racism can closely align particular actions with general skin color or facial features.

After 9/11, people talked about being nervous in an airplane when they were seated next to a dark-skinned man. This has personal consequences. Most months, I get on 2-4 airplanes. I can arrive at the airport close to my arrival time because after seven years of regular travel, I have never been stopped or searched. In contrast, my friend, Rafaat, gets searched routinely. He has the "wrong" profile.

It is a subtle shift that we make in our liturgy and preaching. But it's an important one. We do terrible things and we must confess our action. But we are good. We are made in the image of God. And in Jesus Christ, we are forgiven people.