

# Shame, Vulnerability, and Resilience

*A 6-week Lenten study for youth*

Jen Kidwell

This study is a labor of love.

This is probably one of the most systematic ways I've tried to package what I want to give my youth all the time: curiosity about themselves and scripture, confidence in their createdness, companionship in Jesus, and courage to transform the world through love. It features Brene Brown's wildly popular TED talks (excerpted), and weaves themes of vulnerability, fear, shame, guilt, repentance, and redemption together in ways that are intended to feel "Lenty" without being preachy. A few of the lessons also feature youtube clips from some popular TV comedies (Parks and Rec, The Office, Schitt's Creek, and The Good Place), which are optional, but I think will lighten the discussion in some helpful ways. Anytime anything remotely inappropriate appears in one of these short clips, I've noted it. However, I do recommend that leaders watch all the youtube content (TED talks, video clips, and a song or two) ahead of time.

This study is very participatory, but also includes paragraphs of written-out theology that you can either choose to read, summarize, paraphrase, or adjust for your context. It's written in my "Jen the youth leader" voice, so I encourage you to adapt it if it would be "totes awkward" for you to speak that way with your youth. Please use whatever interpretation of the Bible you prefer. I usually either ask for 1 volunteer, or rotate verse by verse around in a circle when we meet in-person. In some sessions I write out "retellings" of Bible stories to emphasize a point, but you could of course choose to read them directly from scripture. I often use a mix of direct scripture reading and story retellings in my lessons; it saves time and demonstrates that the stories are dynamic. Throughout, content in brackets indicates possible answers to questions. Depending on what kind of answers you get from your youth, you may want to steer them in certain directions or use that as a jumping off point for conversation even if it's "off script."

These are giant topics that loop through each other in ways that aren't linear. The format of 60-minute youth lessons can be challenging for topics like this, and so you may notice spiraling back through important topics as we go. This is intentional, as we have to start somewhere even though we're describing principles that are universal and connected.

I hope this labor of love is useful for your ministry this Lenten season, and that you are able to go to both difficult and beautiful places with your youth in this time of preparation and transformation.

## Session 1. Vulnerability aka "dust to dust"

Ash Wednesday is the time in the church year when, traditionally, people fill long lines to be told that "they are dust, and to dust they will return," have ashes placed on their foreheads, and then go back out into their daily life as if it is totally normal to walk around with this reminder of their

[www.jenkidwell.com](http://www.jenkidwell.com)

own eventual death advertised for everyone to see. The ashes might mean slightly different things to different people, but ultimately, they are a reminder of exactly what the words say: that we are made of dust, dust from the earth, maybe even dust from the stars, perhaps, but dust nonetheless.

Is receiving ashes a common practice in your church? How has it felt to receive ashes in the past? How have you interpreted the phrase “remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return?”

**Read:** Genesis 2:4b-8

Dust and spit aren't particularly glamorous ingredients to make up a human person. But it's God's spit, I guess, so it's holy enough. While modern humans have science and other tools to use when considering where the first human came from, what is this story actually trying to tell us about what it *means* to be human?

What words do you associate with dust?

What parts of you and your experiences feel the “dustiest”?

What parts of you feel the most holy? The things closest to God?

We are simultaneously humble like dirt and holy like God. And yet, we are fragile beings. Our bodies only live so long, even in the perfect conditions. Even if we're “finely tuned like a microchip.”

Parks and Rec clip from youtube: Chris - “my body is a microchip” - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-vmeMdTwy94> (2 min)

No matter how hard we try to protect ourselves, we can't protect ourselves from death forever. Or from suffering. Or from sadness. Or from failure. Or grief. Or any of these really awesome not-at-all-difficult to deal with situations or feelings. When people realize that they can't protect themselves from these things forever, how do you think they react? Do they embrace it? Do they say, “Yay! Being human is amazing! I can't wait to feel all the hard feelings! Extra whipped cream on my dose of suffering, please!” Or do they do something else? How have you seen people respond when they realize that these things are coming? Or when they have already happened?

[denial, control, running away/escape, distraction, numbing feelings, hiding emotions, coping through addiction, etc.]

Here's an awesome example of denial. Watch how how Leslie Knope handles the flu - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=beBYb83lvkk> (5 min)

Think of examples from your favorite shows of people reacting badly in the face of bad things that they can't control. Find and share your favorite gif of this, if appropriate.

Sometimes, the thing to do is to become the master of existential angst, right??? "What is the meaning of it all if we all die in the end anyway?" There's a whole book of the Bible for that! Did you know? It's called Ecclesiastes.

The author of Ecclesiastes (who says he's King David's son who became king, aka King Solomon, but this book was actually written hundreds of years after Solomon lived), looks around the world and says, in paraphrase: "Meaningless, meaningless! What is it all FOR?! GAHHHHHHHHH!"

**Read:** Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Have you ever felt like this before? What examples stood out to you in this passage as ones that might make you have the same feeling as the author?

Are you surprised that this struggle for finding meaning is here in the Bible?

Spoiler alert: the author of Ecclesiastes does come up with some constructive recommendations of how to deal with this feeling...but it's not all optimism and roses. The author of Ecclesiastes takes this feeling super seriously, and almost gives into it a few times, seeming snarky and sarcastic about life having any meaning at all.

Regardless of how we try to escape, or numb, or dampen this feeling...we've all felt it before. That feeling of knowing that something unpleasant could happen to you at basically any moment? That you could be rejected, or fail, or be injured, or have an accident, or lose something that's important to you? That feeling of leaning in your dustiness in the best/worst way? That feeling, my friends, is vulnerability, and it is right at the center of being a human. Welcome.

Ash Wednesday is the beginning of Lent, the season in the church when we prepare our hearts for Easter. For the next 5 weeks, we will explore vulnerability and a bunch of other threads that are woven together with it. We are human persons created out of a unique blend of dustiness and holiness. We are human persons whose life will include fear and suffering and sadness and death, in addition to joy and belly laughs and simple peace. We'll learn that Jesus leads us deep into the heart of vulnerability, and that only by looking at our vulnerability square in the face can we be open to the most real and meaningful joy. There will be some stumbling blocks along the way, but together, we will arrive at Easter, and hopefully we'll be ready to proclaim that Jesus lives, and so can we.

Next week, we talk about how vulnerability manifests sometimes itself as fear. In week 3, we'll talk about how Jesus embraced vulnerability and can be a model and companion for us in the midst of it. In week 4, we'll talk about why vulnerability in front of God and each other can be

hard because of shame. In week 5, we'll talk about the difference between shame and guilt, and why it matters. And in the last week before Easter, we'll talk about how Jesus welcomes us as worthy of love and belonging, which can make us courageous change-makers and transformers of many things that need new life.

*Close in prayer*

## **Session 2: Vulnerability and fear**

Last week we talked about vulnerability, with the help of some friends from Parks and Rec. This week, we talk about how sometimes vulnerability manifests itself as fear, with the help of The Office. See, fear can be fun! Ahem.

Check out this clip of Jim's slow descent into fear of snowballs on season 7 episode 11 of The Office: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZZvmHWEu5E> (note to leaders: Dwight at one point says that he has "no feelings in his fingers or his penis" after hiding in a giant snowman. If you want to skip it, skip 1:59-2:05 on the video) (6 min)

Fear is a physiological response to things we perceive as threats. It's a response to things that can hurt us because of our vulnerability. Fear feels the same, whether a lion is chasing us or we're getting up to do a speech in front of 10 people. It feels the same, whether it's a real threat, or an imagined one. What does fear feel like to you?

What do you think are the top 10 most common fears (in no particular order)?

[Lists are in different orders all over the Internet! This is a composite grouping.

**Spiders**

**Snakes**

**Being alone**

**Being in crowds**

**Flying**

**Heights**

**Needles**

**Death**

**Public speaking**

**Small spaces]**

After you list them, break them into 2 main categories: fears that come from emotional vulnerability, and fears that come from physical vulnerability.

Here are a few more expression of fear from The Office:

Fear of not being liked

[www.jenkidwell.com](http://www.jenkidwell.com)