

PISAB workshops are probably in the running for many of us to be the most awkward experiences we could imagine. In one weekend, the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond puts on what they call "Undoing Racism", which is - as you can probably guess - a seminar all about the state of race relations in America.

But unlike a lot of seminars, PISAB's 'Undoing Racism' isn't a lecture. Attendees walk into a room that is a giant circle of chairs - a clear signal from the first moment that you're going to have to talk about race and racism.

They begin by asking you to introduce yourself, and as people take turns around the circle, common themes emerge:

"It's a little touchy."
"It's weird to deal with."
"I feel tongue-tied or frozen."
"I feel so anxious... It makes me want to avoid talking about it."

As much as half the room admits, from the outset, that talking about race makes them feel awkward or uncomfortable. But they showed up anyway.

PISAB coined a term for that discomfort - when well-meaning people struggle to talk about racism. They call it "your growing edge".

Which is really good news. Think about all that phrase implies. You're growing. This is a good thing. Yes, it's uncomfortable, but it's not the kind of pain that comes from a wound. It's a growing pain. You're getting better.

And it's the edge. You've found your limits, the extent of your abilities (right now). You're uncomfortable precisely *because* you're beyond your comfort zone.

I want to talk today about how God invites us into these awkward spaces. Because God wants us to grow. God wants to show us our unseen biases and unchallenged perspectives. God wants us to be a people of justice. But we can't do that until we learn to see the invisible structures of oppression and injustice around us.

God gives us to each other so we can learn to see, together. But we have to be willing to stay in our growing edge.

Message

We're in the season of Lent, a season the Church reserves for self-examination and repentance. Lent is a time we confess we are sinners and ask for God's help to heal us. But Lent presses us deeper than that

because Lent invites us to ask God, along with the Psalmist, to search us and point out anything in us that is displeasing to God.

In other words, during Lent, we assume there are sins in our life we're not even aware of. That's one big reason we need God's help - to point out what is otherwise hidden from us.

In that spirit, our series this year is called CRINGEWORTHY: A Theory of Awkwardness. According to journalist Melissa Dahl, we feel awkward when we see ourselves through someone else's eyes and we realize that the way they see us and the way we see ourselves don't line up. Awkwardness reveals when we don't live up to who we aspire to be, who God is calling us to be.

Awkwardness, in other words, can be a spiritual tool. Awkwardness can reveal that unexpected sin in our lives. We saw this last week in Genesis 3, when the first man and woman disobeyed God and tried to hide. Though they saw themselves as faithful and in control, God saw they were sinful.

Last week, we also saw what our natural tendency is when things get awkward - when we get called out on the carpet, we tend to try to hide, shift the blame or dismiss it (by laughing it off or minimizing). And there are some big, awkward conversations happening in our culture right now, around both race and gender (think of the Black Lives Matter and #metoo movements).

That's why PISAB works so hard to create those spaces for people to talk about issues like race. Those are conversations everyone feels awkward having, so we avoid them if possible. If we have to have them, we minimize (by claiming to be post-racial or colorblind) or dismiss them (like saying "All Lives Matter" or insisting 'Not all men are like that!').

When we get defensive or dismissive, we're not in our growing edge. We've shut down, instead of opening up. So PISAB has a couple of rules when you show up for one of their seminars. The first is the butt-in-the-chair rule, which essentially says that you've got to stay the whole time.

I know a few of you are already feeling a little defensive. You maybe weren't expecting to feel THIS awkward during our awkwardness sermon series. Let me encourage you: stay in the chair. You're going to be okay. We're going to be okay.

[[Scripture Slide 1](#)] Turn with me to Genesis 38. Throughout this series, we're looking at some of the most awkward stories in the Bible. Remember that awkwardness is caused when the gap that exists between how we see ourselves and how others experience us becomes obvious. So in all these stories, we're encountering people who see themselves as good and righteous - people who would say they are good, faithful, God-fearing people if you asked them. But over the course of the story, it becomes obvious they're not. When we find that gap, we find God's invitation to see that gap in our own lives, to see our sin from God's perspective, and to ask for healing.

Today, we meet Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar. Genesis 38 is a stand-alone story, and you should definitely read the whole thing on your own this week. Start to finish, it's one of the most awkward chapters in the whole Bible. The central question at stake in the chapter is "Are we taking care of everyone?"

This section of Genesis is often called the story of the patriarchs, so it should be no surprise that their culture was patriarchal, which means it was organized around the eldest male. In this particular story, that's Judah. At the beginning of the chapter, Judah and his wife have three sons. When the eldest, Er, is ready to marry, Judah buys Tamar to be his wife. Er does something evil - we're not told what - dies.

Here's where things get a little weird: Er died without a male heir. This makes Tamar, his widow, essentially unprotected. In a society organized as a patriarchy, widows are women not attached to any man - they no longer belong to their fathers, they have no sons, and their husband is dead. That's a big crack in the system, one through which Tamar was now slipping.

A custom called the Levirate Law was designed to seal up this crack - to make sure vulnerable widows were taken care of. The Levirate Law said that, in cases like Tamar's the dead man's brother should marry his widow and give her a son. That son would legally be the heir of the dead man - inheriting his property and carrying on his name. So, following tradition, Judah gave Tamar to his next son.

But with Er out of the way, son #2 was now the eldest. He stood to inherit his father's wealth - as long as he didn't have a son with Tamar. So he practiced the oldest form of birth control (seriously... go read the whole chapter. So awkward.). Because he refused to honor Tamar or his dead brother, he died, too.

Which left Judah in a predicament: his two oldest sons had died. He had one young son left (who was not old enough to marry yet) and he was suspecting Tamar was some sort of Black Widow (she wasn't - the sons were both evil, but shockingly in a patriarchal culture they blamed the woman). So he sent Tamar back to live with her family. He told her he would send for her when his youngest was old enough, but he had no intention of doing so.

Tamar is trapped. She's a widow without a son, and the guy who's supposed to make sure she's cared for - her father-in-law, Judah the patriarch - is refusing to follow the law. She can't sue him. She can't take him to court. She has no legal rights in a patriarchal culture.

Now, here's where things get a lot weird (I know... just now?!). We're going to have to work pretty hard not to show our cultural bias. Canaanite religions practice what we call today temple prostitution. Essentially, priestesses were seen as embodiments of the goddess, and men could sleep with them *and it wasn't seen as unfaithfulness to their marriage vows*. Because they were experiencing union with a goddess, not another woman. (Yes, that sounds very strange to us. If you're wondering who set that up, remember it's a patriarchal culture.)

So Judah's wife dies, and word gets back to Tamar that she's not going to be taken care of. So she disguises herself as a temple prostitute and sets up a shrine along one of Judah's regular routes. He sees the shrine and decides to use it. But he didn't bring his wallet, and apparently was too far from home to turn around and get it. So he promises the disguised Tamar he'll return with a goat for payment. As collateral, he leaves his scepter and seal (essentially think of them as his government issue ID).

He sleeps with his daughter-in-law, goes home and sends a friend back with the goat for payment. Tamar is long gone by this point, and Judah writes the whole thing off as a weird encounter.

This is where our story picks up, about three months after Judah slept with his daughter-in-law. Ready for the awkward? Let's read together:

About three months later, Judah was told, “Tamar, your daughter-in-law, has acted like a prostitute. And now, because of this, she’s pregnant.”

“Bring her out, and let her be burned!” Judah demanded.

But as they were taking her out to kill her, she sent this message to her father-in-law: “The man who owns these things made me pregnant. Look closely. Whose seal and cord and walking stick are these?”

Oooookay this is super awkward. Tamar is pregnant and Judah assumes she's slept with someone outside his family. This is a huge disgrace for a patriarch, so he demands a public execution. But before they can burn her, Tamar says, "Hey, I've got the government issued ID of the dad... do you happen to know him?"

And of course it's Judah.

Now Judah is in the awkwardness gap. There's the way he sees himself: a righteous, God-fearing man. A good father. A mourning widower.

And there's what's been exposed. It's not that he slept with a temple prostitute. WE look at him today and condemn that behavior (rightly so), but in his day, that was culturally acceptable. No, what made Judah unrighteous was his abandonment of Tamar. As a patriarch, he had a particular obligation to care for the orphans and widows. Because he had so much cultural status and privilege, he had a great responsibility to care for those left out of the system. Those like Tamar.

Tamar calls Judah on the carpet. And he has a choice. He could get out of the chair. He's a powerful patriarch. He could claim those were stolen. He could call Tamar a liar and shame her (we see powerful men do as much to women who come forward today). But PISAB would be proud of Judah. He doesn't leave. He doesn't defend or shame. He stays in the awkward:

Judah recognized them immediately and said, "She is more righteous than I am, because I didn't arrange for her to marry my son Shelah." And Judah never slept with Tamar again. When the time came for Tamar to give birth, it was discovered that she was carrying twins. -- Genesis 38:24-27

Judah recognized where he had gone wrong. He accepted that he was not, in fact, the wise, righteous patriarch he thought he was. And he made an immediate change. He took Tamar into his house and provided for her and her twin sons.

I told you earlier that PISAB has two rules in their race seminars. The first is that you have to stay in the chair. The second is, "When you reach your growing edge, keep going."

"Growing edge" is what they call it when you hit the awkward. Can you imagine how Judah felt, exposed in front of all his friends and neighbors? How much easier it would've been for him to curl up into himself and hide?

That's the growing edge. In race seminars, it often happens with white people especially, who suddenly realize we're not as good at talking about race as we imagined. The issues are a lot more complicated than many of us have given thought to. White people get defensive really quickly when race comes up (because no one wants to be racist).

But what's worse - to get called out, to realize that maybe we're more racist than we thought, to learn from our mistakes and grow? Or to shut down and continue to be racist?

Imagine if Judah had shied away from his growing edge. Imagine if he had burned Tamar and her unborn twins.

If Judah's name sounds familiar to you, it's because Judah is the father of one of the 12 tribes of Israel. The Tribe of Judah is the tribe from which King David came. And the most famous son of Judah is none other than Jesus himself. When God became human, God chose to enter into a family with an awkward history.

Because what makes Judah great isn't that he was perfect. It's that when he was confronted with that awkward gap, when he encountered his growing edge, when he had to face his sin head on, he didn't shrink back. He stood in front of everyone and confessed. He pointed to Tamar, his daughter-in-law he abandoned and left with no choice but to cheat an unjust system, and said, "She is in the right. I am in the wrong. I'm sorry. I'll do better."

Judah is the first person in the whole Bible to say he's sorry.

And the result is a family of kings and even the very messiah himself.

Friends, this is the powerful promise of God: if we are willing to face our growing edge, if we're willing to stay where it's awkward, where we come face to face with our sin, God will not leave us to suffer there. God will heal us and grow us and restore us.

If God did it for Judah, God will do it for us.

Communion + Examen

[[Communion Slide](#)] Jesus invites us to eat with him.

Assignment + Blessing

Where is your growing edge? How can you stay there?