

Proper 7 A

Shame is a subject we all know something about and is much treated in the lessons for today. We all just sang of the reproach the Psalmist felt from others; we heard how Jeremiah was shamed in his service as a prophet of the Lord.

And Jesus said those who follow him would be called all kinds of names, as he himself was.

It is a feeling that arises from deep within, known in the earliest days of childhood, when we are caught with the forbidden cookie and see a parent's reaction, knowing his or her disappointment.

Later stages of life give us new reasons to experience it.

We don't make as much money as we think we should or spend too much; we make mistakes in relationships and marriage; family members fail us in ways that embarrass us.

Shame is sideways glances and hurried exits; it is hoping not to be known.

If we are really into shame, as happens to some, we are ashamed of things that are not even shameful.

Perhaps most tragically, we sometimes cause others shame and tell them they should be ashamed.

It is a terrible form of control.

If you have not, I suggest you watch some of the TED talks given by Brenne Brown, available online.

She social worker and researcher in Texas (and sometime Episcopalian) and writes and speaks about issues of shame and vulnerability.

She calls shame "the swampland of the soul," a place to get snake bit, stuck, and lost. Shame wants secrecy and dwells in darkness.

She says we are inclined to put it into a petri dish with judgment and silence and there it grows and grows.

The great prescription for shame is empathy, which happens in light and relationship, and shame dies in the midst of empathy.

Turning that corner into the light moves us from shame into vulnerability, which is a place where we claim our power over shame, turn it inside out, and become stronger and more generous.

We all have things to repent of; shame reminds us of that.

But we are not meant to live in it.

One thing we would have to struggle to recover, in our way with the Lord, is any sense of it being shameful, in the estimation of others, for us to follow him.

Jesus is utterly acceptable to most people in our world.

I saw a tea towel for sale the other day that said "I love Jesus but I cuss a little."

I saw a t-shirt that said "I love Jesus and America too," a lyric penned by John Cougar Mellencamp in my boyhood.

Jesus goes with lots of stuff rather easily these days;

his claim on us does not feel exclusive.

Not so in the world of the Scriptures.

To belong to him was to be an enemy of the emperor, to be part of a strange movement, to be associated with the lowly, poor, persecuted, and potentially traitorous.

If you became a Christian in 90 AD, your father might well have said to you,

“I am ashamed of you; you should be ashamed of yourself; you have brought shame on our family by joining the ranks of the Crucified.”

Shame was indeed heaped on Jesus.

He was criticized throughout his public ministry as a fraud, a drunkard, as too loose in his associations with sinners, women, and foreigners.

He was condemned in public,

forced to walk in shame to the place of his execution,

and tortured in public, dying before the prying eyes of those who made a most intimate, tragic moment a spectacle.

But shame did not stick to him. He would not accept it, even as he accepted it for the world.

What was pinned on him in the darkness, he brought out into the light.

He knew what they said about him; he knew what would be done to him.

He spoke about those things with those who loved him, creating that community of empathy where shame is turned inside out and becomes a holy power.

And then God did the same, turning the shame of the Cross into the wonder of Resurrection, into the beginning of new life for the whole world.

So we know this: that God’s deep sympathy is with the lost and sin-sick,

the broken-hearted and poor,

the losers and those who have been shamed by others.

The Cross of Jesus shows us that God loves us not just when we are our best selves

but when we have gotten into the worst trouble,

when we’ve made a total hash of it,

when we are ashamed of ourselves and our mama is ashamed of us.

God in Christ knows all about our shame and did not flee from it.

What good news; that in our shame, God has claimed us.

God has even shared it on the Cross.

We can still come to Jesus in our brokenness and receive from him entrance into a land of light and joy where shame will be banished and all restored.

We need not bear shame; we need not use shame.

Like all the broken powers of the world,

it has met its end in the loving, good will of God, revealed in Jesus Christ.