

“SHAME CRUCIFIED”

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I remember a wedding I attended at Yale Divinity School’s Marquand Chapel. Many of the worship leaders were my fellow divinity students. One was to read the epistle of the day. He stepped up to the lectern and opened the Bible. He was assigned an obscure passage in a small, lesser known Pauline epistle. He stood there for what felt like an endless time leafing through the Bible, unable to find it. He had failed to mark it. It went from agonizing to excruciating as he leafed and leafed and leafed--*for minutes*. He finally found it. But after reading it, he felt so demoralized, he left and he didn’t return. He felt too humiliated, too ashamed. A pastor unable to find a Biblical text is like a surgeon operating on the wrong limb.

Do you have memories, when you recall them, even decades later, that still have power to make you wince and say to yourself, “Oh my, I can’t believe I did that!” For me it was shooting a robin on my grandpa’s farm after he had forbidden it, how he looked at me. The shame of it still penetrates as though it just happened. Today I preach on this piercing shame and what God did about it upon the cross.

All of this reminds me of Rembrandt’s sketch “*The Three Crosses*,” shown on the back of your program. As we study it, we first see the cross in the center, with Jesus nailed to it. As we scan the crowd at the foot of his cross, we are drawn to the various facial expressions and postures of those implicated in the awful crime of crucifying the Son of God. At the edge of the painting lurks a furtive figure, almost hidden by the ever-present shadows in Rembrandt’s work. Who *is* that? Some claim the figure is Rembrandt’s self-portrait. Here he owns his own human shame in crucifying Jesus. I suppose it’s a scene we can all paint ourselves into.

The cross and our human shame were linked together from the beginning. We tend to make a big deal about the *pain* Jesus endured on the cross. Revivalists and Mel Gibson elaborate in morbid detail about the metal-tipped lash of Jesus’ flogging. Physicians describe how the crucified would slowly suffocate to death.

But what the early Christians dreaded most about the crucifixion was not its pain, but its shame. Most agonizing for the early church was the sheer humiliation of it. In the book of Hebrews we hear, “for the sake of the joy that was set before him, Jesus endured the cross, disregarding its *shame*.” It was a shaming act. Crucifixion was reserved for slaves, rebels, hardened criminals, the sub-human, beings more reprehensible than living. To sentence a crucifixion, the formula was read: “Executioner, bind his hands, veil his head, and hang him on *the tree of shame*.” Sometimes the Romans killed people before crucifying them. The humiliation of shaming the sentenced—not torturing or killing them--was the point of crucifixion.

Shame resonates through our gospel lesson describing Jesus’ crucifixion. (v. 28) “The soldiers stripped Jesus and put a scarlet robe on him.” Shame exposes. (v.

29) "After twisting thorns into a crown, they put it on his head." Shame mocks. (v. 42) "He saved others; he can't save himself." Shame derides. (v. 44) "The bandits crucified with him taunted him in the same way." Shame ridicules from every side. (v. 46) "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And shame isolates.

Can you see what is happening? Jesus' enemies use the cross to kill his body, but shame is the weapon to kill his spirit, to annihilate and extinguish his soul. They seem to succeed. For Jesus here is fully discredited. His lofty mission is in shambles. His following is dispersed. His dream of God's reign is one big joke. Shame has apparently condemned everything he lived for. Shame defines Jesus.

Of course, this isn't the end. God brought Jesus back to life to vindicate him, his mission and his followers. No reassurance is more profound than his resurrection. No reassurance commends to our souls exactly what we need like Jesus' rising. It is the reassurance that *shame does not have ultimate power to break our spirit.*

Of course, we can't access this healing grace if we rush ahead to the resurrection without pausing first at his crucifixion. That is our temptation, skipping hideous Good Friday--being ashamed of it in this shaming world--in favor of sunny Easter. But avoidance and denial will never banish shame. Paul writes. "Christ redeemed us from the curse." (Galatians 3.13) Bearing his own curse as well as ours, and "disregarding the shame" means letting Jesus' generously forgiving love take root and rule where selfish human pecking-order jockeying instincts usually take over.

I heard a story about a new recruit who entered basic training with the Marines at Parris Island. He was somewhat different than the rest. And in an environment as regimented as that, you set yourself up for ridicule, pranks, mocking and shaming. In the particular barracks to which this young Marine was assigned, the degree of heartlessness was high. The other young men did everything they could to make a joke out of this odd recruit and to humiliate him. One day someone came up with a bright idea. Let's scare the daylights out of this fresh recruit by dropping a disarmed hand grenade upon the floor, and then pretending it's about to explode.

Everyone was in on the joke. A grenade landed in the middle of the floor. Someone yelled, "Live grenade, live grenade! Get out, get out." They expected the new kid to go nutso-hysterical, to soil himself, or to run shrieking. Instead, the marine fell on the grenade, hugged it to his stomach, and yelled for others to flee. "Run, you'll be killed!" The other Marines froze. Their cruel, juvenile joke had backfired.

So Jesus did not so much end shame with his willing sacrifice on the cross. But by allowing our shame to be crucified with him, Jesus disarmed it. He stripped shame of its final death-dealing. For after dying, Jesus was raised. And as he arose again, shame did not get up with him, but stayed down in the dust, where it belongs. By enduring the cross, Jesus suffered the worst that shame could do to any human being. Then he was vindicated by God. In doing so, he secured our

worth in God's ultimate scheme of things. No shame, whether just or unjust, petty or spectacular, "can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

I heard another story about a man in Korea who lived in the fourth century A. D. He had two sons. The elder son rose to become the Chief Justice in that country. But the younger son traveled a different direction and became an infamous thief. The elder son loved his younger brother, but was unable to persuade him to amend his ways. Eventually, the younger son was caught and brought before his judge brother in the courtroom. Everyone smirked, "Well, we know how this will turn out." They thought the younger brother would get off because of his Chief Justice elder brother. But at the close, the elder sentenced the younger to death.

On the day of his execution, the elder brother came to the prison and said to his brother, "Let's swap places." The younger brother nodded, thinking once they realized that they held the elder brother, no way would his execution take place. The younger brother went up the hill to watch the proceedings. His brother was brought up at dawn. And much to his horror, his venerated brother was executed.

Filled with remorse, the younger brother ran down the hill and told the guard his name. He claimed that *he* was the criminal who should be executed. The guards said: "There's no sentence outstanding on anyone with that name." Since the crucifixion of Jesus, the same can be said over us, even the ones we have written off as doomed. "There's no sentence outstanding on anyone with that name."

Maybe that can help us see how the cross creates a community which, no longer afraid of being defined and destroyed by our shame, can admit our failures and confess our need for forgiveness. Since we know shame can't destroy us, we no longer need lie about it, or deflect it by blaming others. So many cannot ask for forgiveness. What a lonely, burdened, cold, and bitter existence that certainly is. We can ask for forgiveness—from God and one another—because we know it has been granted in its ultimate form, and its champion was eternally vindicated.

Such is the way of Holy Week. We pause before the cross of Christ despite our shame, lurking with Rembrandt in the wings of that evil deed. It dawns on us that Jesus has broken the vicious, horrible chain of being shamed and shaming others for all time. That condemning others as worthless—even the guilty—is no longer acceptable after Jesus. As we witness others using shame to kill the spirit of others, as Jesus' followers, we step in and say no more. For Jesus took upon himself not only our rebellious hatred against God, but our lingering shame also.

This is the way through and beyond humiliation; this is the road to eternal life. So whatever excruciatingly embarrassing thing you did that you can barely ponder; whatever heartless and demeaning thing was done to you that you can scarcely rehearse, never mind admit to others, it is taken from you. Let it go. And let God. Amen.

Gentle Savior, you declared God's presence among us in a gracious and festive way. If we are unable to stand by you in your hour of anguish, it's because we never expected God would save the world in such a way. It's because when we see you hanging there, without comfort in your affliction, without words from heaven in the deadening silence, with no dramatic intervening from above in your suffering and torment, we simply cannot comprehend such a thing. But you not only understood that there would be suffering in your glory, you faced it, enduring the worst we can imagine, and did not despair of God. You did not curse the executioners. You silently bore the derision, the scourging, and even the crucifixion, staring down the worst of horrors, calling to the last upon your God.

All of this you bore for us, suffering and dying that the way we treat each other here and now should be transformed, that we might be outfitted for eternal life. O Lord, be with us in every hour of darkness and torment. Help us to endure our hours of tortured questioning of God. Teach us the meaning of dying to ourselves in such a way that God's unfathomable purposes might yet break through in some unforeseeable new dawn.