



Wednesday in Holy Week

The Cross Defeats Shame

[RCL] Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 70; Hebrews 12:1-3; John 13:21-32

As we continue our journey through Holy Week, our attempt to be faithful to Jesus in his hour of need, we need to ask: what prevents us from following him? What drives us away from his presence? What keeps us from living up to our aspirations to love God and our neighbor with freedom and joy?

Shame. Shame shows up all over our texts today, and it turns out that shame is one of the deadliest barriers lying between us and faithfulness to Jesus.

Our Hebrew scripture lesson is the third of the four Servant Songs in Isaiah. Although this text can stand on its own with rich meaning, as Christians, we hear these verses in the voice of Jesus. It describes the pain and indignity of what he will go through on Good Friday, and his willingness to endure it: “I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.” Pulling out someone’s beard and spitting on their face are ways of imparting shame to someone. They demean and devalue the victim.

And most of what happens to Jesus on Friday is designed to enforce shame, all the way up to and including his death on the Cross. Crucifixion is intended not just to kill someone effectively—that could be done much faster and more efficiently by beheading them, as happened to John the Baptist. Crucifixion is a slow, painful death in full view of the world, meant to be a spectacle showing everyone that the crucified person is a criminal and the dregs of society.

And the victim is robbed of all dignity or privacy. As they slowly lose strength, they are reduced to animal pain, losing control over their body and their mind in full public view. As with all shaming methods, it robs the person of their identity, crushing them completely until they die, no longer who they were or wanted to be.

It is unlikely that any of us will ever have to go through something as terrible as crucifixion, although we must always remember our siblings around the world of all faiths who are persecuted for their beliefs. But what the world did to Jesus on the Cross, killing him not just with violence but with shame, the world tries to do to us.

It happens in a thousand small ways. Think about how often you are told you are not enough. You are not smart enough, thin enough, handsome or beautiful enough, masculine or feminine enough, rich enough, sane enough, white enough, religious enough, straight enough. You are not enough. That is what the world tells you.

And if you listen, you will die.

You will die, just like Judas. Think about Judas and Peter for a moment. They both abandoned Jesus. They both betrayed him. They both sold him out, gave him up, denied him, and left him to die alone. All of their best intentions and dearest hopes were destroyed by their own self-interest and the triumph of their baser selves.

But Peter survived, and Judas did not. Peter came back, and Judas did not. Peter was redeemed, and Judas was not, at least not on earth.

That was because Judas gave in to shame. The world imparts shame to everyone, regardless of merit. Whatever we do, we will be shamed. But in scripture, the determining factor of whether people allow shame to penetrate and dominate and destroy them is whether or not they turn to God *in the midst of their shame*.

When we're feeling ashamed of ourselves, when we know we've done wrong or when we feel like we're not enough, that's when it's hardest to turn to God. We want to hide away, cover our wounded vulnerability, avoid the truth, and numb our pain. But this is when we need God the most, and when God welcomes us with the utmost tenderness.

Peter took the risk to turn to Jesus in his shame. Judas did not, and it killed him.

We turn back to Isaiah's Servant Song and we hear Jesus setting the example: "I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near... It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?" Jesus cannot be destroyed by shame, even the shame of the Cross, because his heart is safe in the keeping of God the Father, even in the midst of his suffering.

The author of Hebrews drives the point home in our lesson tonight: "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart."

Jesus disregarded the shame of the Cross, in fact, he turned it inside out. Our collect for yesterday sums it up: “O God, by the passion of your blessed Son you made an instrument of shameful death to be for us the means of life.” The ultimate tool of destroying a person’s self-worth and identity in that society, a punishment for being who he was, became the very means by which he saved the world by pouring himself out in love.

And so, our task is not to avoid shame, but to take our broken and ashamed hearts to God, trusting that God is our vindicator, our defender, and our redeemer. Whether our shame is earned by our sins or unearned from the world, God receives it with healing grace.

At the Last Supper, Jesus does not reveal Judas as his betrayer by name. The disciples have to sit there and ponder: “Could I be the one who betrays him?” Just admitting the possibility of our betrayal before it happens places us in a place of humility, of knowledge of our need for God. We don’t have to come crashing down from some lofty height of self-sufficient pride and arrogance. We’re not shocked that we’ve failed yet again. We’re in touch with our humanity, and we know Jesus loves us deeply in our humanity, frail and mixed-up and sinful as it is.

“Could it be I who betrays him?” we ask. The answer is yes, and the answer hurts us.

But there is another question: “Could it be I who loves him?” The answer is yes, and the answer heals us.

And so, our call this Holy Week is to turn to God with our shame and let ourselves be healed, to “lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely” as Hebrews says. But our call is broader than that. Just as Jesus’ dying body on the Cross is a beacon of light to a whole world of people who are aching for someone to know them, to remember them, to love them, we are called to join him in that circle on Calvary.

We are called to be a part of the light of Christ, beckoning all those to him who are too ashamed to believe God would die for love of them.

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