

Message: Shame, Guilt and Christian Identity**Have you ever felt ashamed?**

I’m talking about the deep-down, heart-felt feeling of shame, when we feel like we’ve failed in some important way. The answer is “yes.” All of us have felt shame. It’s part of the human condition.

Shame has always been with us, from the time of Adam and Eve, to Cain and Abel, to the gathering of the disciples in the room we read about in John 21:19-31, and today. Shame and guilt will be with us tomorrow and in the future as well.

David Brooks writes, “Anthropologist Ruth Benedict popularized the distinction between a guilt culture and a shame culture. In a guilt culture, you know you’re good or bad by what your conscience feels. In a shame culture, you know you’re good or bad by what your community says about you, by whether it honors or excludes you. In a guilt culture, people sometimes feel they do bad things. In a shame culture, social exclusion makes people feel they *are* bad.”¹

Our Scripture passage asks, “How do we deal with shame?”

We see this question framed in the way our Scripture reading opens. John 20:19 tells us Jesus came to the place where the disciples were, behind closed doors, where they were gathered for fear of the Jews. In other words, the disciples were hiding behind closed doors out of fear. Rev. Dawn Chesser writes, “We can all understand the desire to go into hiding in order to avoid the judgment of other people. After all, we’re people who live in a time in history when, more and more, people are defined and judged not so much by their accomplishments, but by appearances and by their friends and associations.”²

The dictionary defines shame as “the painful feeling rising from the consciousness of something dishonorable, improper, ridiculous or disgraceful, done by oneself or another.”³ Shame has two sources: internal or external, meaning self-imposed or imposed by others.

¹ David Brooks, “The Shame Culture”, *New York Time op-ed*, March 15, 2016

² Dawn Chesser, <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lectionary-calendar/second-sunday-of-easter-year-c-2016>

³ Source: www.dictionary.com

Guilt, on the other hand, is defined as “having committed an offense, crime, violation or wrong, especially against moral or penal law.”⁴

When we feel ashamed there are two possible reasons.

First, we may feel ashamed for something we have done or the way we’re thinking or what we said. In this situation, we experience a difference between the way we are and the way our internal self, our conscience, says we should be. If we aren’t living up to the standard of our conscience, to our identity, we feel guilty and ashamed. We feel we’ve failed ourselves, our parents and our family. Shame just piles on, layer by layer.

Second, we may feel ashamed through our social interaction with others. If our thoughts, words or actions aren’t accepted by the group we belong to, or want to be part of, we feel shame when we’re put on the spot. This is true whether we’re part of a group or seeking to be part of a group. That’s what cliques are. It’s also true when you have differences between groups. For example, a lot of political ads are designed to highlight differences in opinion to create shame for being different and not following what the group recognizes.

The disciples were dealing with shame on several levels.

First, Peter and the disciples were ashamed because of how they reacted when the authorities came. Rather than standing and supporting Jesus, they ran away in fear. And, in Peter’s case, self-preservation led him to deny Christ publically – three times!

Second, the disciples are afraid of guilt by association. The temple officials used their political power and influence to convict Jesus and compel the Roman governor to punish and execute Jesus. They were able to stir up the Jerusalem crowd with lies and used threats to get what they wanted. Pilate could have executed Jesus in any number of ways. Crucifixion on a cross was the most painful, publically humiliating and demeaning way to do so. The disciples were insecure and afraid of the same fate. We would feel the same if we were in their sandals!

Shame is difficult to handle. When our thoughts and actions go against our internal values and conscience, we may become confused, depressed

⁴ *Ibid*

or even detached. We may question our motivation, our decisions, our values and even our identity. We can lose confidence and self-esteem. We may feel lost and alone, even anti-social.

When our thoughts, actions and values are different than those of the group we belong to, or wish to belong to, shame becomes a powerful social pressure. We all know the term “peer pressure.” That’s shame in action in a group setting. Shame, or the threat of shame, causes us to do things we wouldn’t normally do to be included as part of the group.

Have you ever seen people dress up in strange ways or do other things to identify themselves as part of a group? One example of this is those who paint themselves in bright colors and attend football games. They wouldn’t be caught dead wearing body paint during the week, but do so on game day to be part of the group. Not participating would lead to exclusion from the group. Shame is a very powerful force in groups today, just as it was in Jesus’ time.

Thomas’ lack of understanding goes against the belief of the group. He’s clearly in the position of outsider; one who is shameful for their lack of belief. Even today, the expression “doubting Thomas” has the power to shame someone. And yet what did Thomas do that was so wrong or so different from the other disciples? They saw Jesus and Thomas didn’t. They told him, “*We have seen the Lord!*” (v25). Because he questioned them, he was disgraced. Jesus didn’t leave Thomas in doubt, though. He restored him and showed him the way!

Shaming is an action some take to disgrace others. For example, bullying is shaming, no matter whether it’s done in person or indirectly. The temple authorities and the political leader of Israel bullied Pilate into taking action. Bullying happens today as well. Road rage is one example. Another example is cyber-bullying, through social media, texting, Twitter or other means. Shaming others is a real phenomena fueled by our need for recognition by other members of a group. It is particularly prevalent with youth.

Kara Powell, the executive director of the Fuller Youth Institute, tells a story from the time she was a teenager. Kara was walking down the street one day when she tripped and fell. “There were maybe

five kids sitting in a car across the street,” she says. “I remember them laughing at me as I picked myself up. But that was in front of five kids, and it was over in five minutes. If someone caught a moment like that on a smartphone and shared it on social media today, the shame could live with the kid for the rest of high school.” Ms. Powell also notes, “On Facebook, other’s perceptions of us are both public and relatively permanent. You post something and everybody comments on it. People tag you, people talk about you. And if no one comments, that can be just as much a source of shame.”⁵

Some believe our society is shifting from a culture of guilt to a culture of shame. Pastor Andy Crouch, author for Christianity Today writes, “The ultimate sin today is to criticize a group, especially on moral grounds. Talk of good and bad has to defer to talk about respect and recognition.”⁶ Our society today values inclusiveness, fame and recognition over values based on truth. The problem is that “everybody is perpetually insecure in a moral system based on inclusion and exclusion. There are no permanent standards, just the shifting judgment of the crowd. It’s a culture of oversensitivity, overreaction and frequent moral panic, and everybody feels compelled to go along.”⁷

Jesus came to the disciples on the first Easter evening and later in the week to help them deal with their shame. Doing so, Jesus teaches us several things about shame.

First, we learn that Jesus doesn’t give up or condemn us. Jesus came to the disciples behind closed doors and stood in the middle of the group. What did he say? One thing we know: it wasn’t “why did you run away?” Jesus knew the disciples were feeling guilty and ashamed. He didn’t add to their burden. Jesus sought the disciples out on the evening of his resurrection and a week later, regardless of their sins or failures, and said to them, “*Peace to you*” (vv19,21,26) three times, a sign of great emphasis and importance!! Jesus makes a great effort to

⁵ Andy Crouch, “The Return of Shame,” *Christianity Today*, March 10, 2015
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/march/andy-crouch-gospel-in-age-of-public-shame.html?share=TpXih9BTOZ5XVTIN6sRVIVusVW9KGY0n>

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ *Op cit.*, Chesser

restore our relationship with him, no matter what’s happened. He didn’t rise from the dead to shame us. Jesus rose from the dead to save us!

Next, Jesus restores us to community. Jesus showed the disciples the wound in his hands and his side twice: once without Thomas and once when Thomas was present. Jesus restored Thomas to the group and he later restored Peter to the group as leader. Jesus’ response, “*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe*” (v29) is a message to Thomas but it’s also a message to the rest of the group and to us, as a group, today. Jesus didn’t come to condemn us (John 3:17). He came to save us as a sign of God’s life-changing love and mercy. Jesus takes away our shame and restores us to a place of honor and respect.

Finally, Jesus gives us what we need. Rather than tiptoeing around the elephant in the room, the question “is it you?” Jesus proved he was flesh and blood by showing the disciples the wounds in his body. Jesus received those wounds for us, yet he doesn’t hide them. Jesus isn’t ashamed or self-conscious about his scars or his identity. He knew what the disciples needed. Jesus knows what we need when we’re feeling guilty and ashamed. We need to be forgiven. We need God’s love.

Rev. Dawn Chesser writes, “Jesus came and stood among the disciples and offered them not just peace, but absolution. Not only that, he breathed his very spirit into them and sent them out with a clear commission: forgive the sins of others. Jesus didn’t just forgive the disciples. He empowered them to offer forgiveness to others; and in doing so, he equipped them to turn the social order upside down. Jesus turned a threat into an avenue for hope and grace not just for them, but for others.”⁸ Jesus gives the same absolution and commission to his disciples today. We have the same power to turn our social order upside down, to seek a meaningful relationship with Jesus and his followers, without shame or guilt.

That’s because Jesus doesn’t hold back. He doesn’t withhold God’s grace from us to get us to act according to Old Testament Law or the rules of the church. Jesus doesn’t emphasize our guilt or seek to shame us. No matter what our faults are. No matter how badly we failed and

⁸ *Op. cit.*, Chesser

broke someone's trust. No matter how negative or hurt our feelings are. Jesus loves us and sees us as his brothers and sisters, part of God's family. With Jesus' love and help, we're secure, healthy and whole as children of God. He has restored our relationship with God. Even better, Jesus gives us the power, the means and the authority to forgive others, love them and restore them in his name. That's the antidote to shame, fame and exclusion. That's the power of the manager, the cross and the empty tomb. That's the power of God's love. Halleluia!

Psalm 150 (NRSV)

Praise the LORD! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament! Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness! Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! Let everything that breathes praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD!

John 20:19-31 (NRSV)

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.