

Shame cannot survive being spoken

Sunday May 5, 2019

Acts 9:1-6, (7-20)

Psalm 30

Revelation 5:11-14

John 21:1-19

Around a dinner table recently a topic of discussion which arises now and again was that of 'shaming people'. I was recalling an incident in 1978 where the local Boys Highschool team, sporting a number of blokes who became Junior All Blacks and All Black players a couple years later was beaten soundly for the second time in 25yrs by the local co-ed High School, a girls school beating a boys school. The Coach and Headmaster of Boys Highschool paraded the team in front of the whole school and 'shamed' them for loosing, short of a public canning they were the laughing stock of the school for weeks later.

Another person at the table recalled a similar incident in an elite Auckland school not in 1978 but 2013 the top sporting team came second and they were 'shamed' in front of the whole school.

A 40yr told of being caned 2yrs after the NZ had abolished caning 1987 but before it was made a criminal offence in 1990. He spoke of the humiliation that affects him to this day. To rub salt into the wounds, the 'master' who with glee had caned him was in the NZ Herald has having extolled the value of abolishing the cane!

There are many ways other than a public flogging where we shame people.

What was it like in your era, in your school, in your family, in your village your community, this thing of punishment being made to feel ashamed of your mistakes, wilful or otherwise?

In the 60's and 70's it was an era that did not have a great practice of or culture of restoration. Resolving conflict was more about by having to get on with each other, more than restoring to right and stronger relationships. Despite my family's best intentions, we never found our way to a language of grace and mercy, though we were church going people. Seldom if ever did we hear, "I forgive you," it was implied, by still being fed and clothed implying we were loved, but seldom was there words of "I still love you" or simply 'it's OK and I love you,' or 'we will work on this together.'

Generally in that society this culture there would be a period of time where we abandoned the wrongdoer in our midst to a thick, damning silence. There would be a withdrawal of affection to re-establish our honour. We avoided eye contact, shut down authentic conversation, and rendered the offense and the offender invisible.

Eventually, after hours, days, or weeks — depending on the severity of the sin — the ice thawed, and life returned to a "bruised" normal. But a wound still festered below the surface. Feelings of a thick, hot shame all be it often unjustifiable overwhelmed a persons feelings and assured them that they were unfixable, unlovable, and wrong there

was always and elephant in the room no one talked about.

Though you may have paid the time for the crime, given penance. It certainly was not restorative. Restorative means that the “crime” the “sin” is talked about, acknowledged, the individual, family are helped to address the problem find resolution restore to right relationships and build better trusting relationships, only then can people move on.

This week’s Gospel reading begins with shame so thick, it makes me cringe. It begins with the disciple Peter battling his shame on a fishing boat in the Sea of Tiberias.

Peter the Rock.

Peter whom Jesus astounded with a miraculous catch of fish.

Peter, “a fisher of men.”

Peter who proclaimed Jesus the Son of God before any other disciple dared to.

Peter whose mother-in-law Jesus healed.

Peter who walked on water.

Peter who saw Jesus transfigured on a mountaintop.

Peter who promised to stay by Jesus’s side even unto death.

Peter whose courage failed so catastrophically around a charcoal fire on the night of Jesus’s arrest that I’ll bet he expected to spend the rest of his life fleeing from that single, searing memory: *“Hey! I saw you with Jesus! You*

must be one of his followers.” “No. No, I am not! I swear, I don’t even know the man.”

That complicated, wounded Peter returns to his fishing boat.

Isn’t that what we all do when we’re ashamed?

Retreat to whatever is safe, comfortable, and familiar? Run headlong towards something — *anything*— that will help us feel competent and worthy again?

Peter flees to his boat, his nets, his vocation. As if there is some time or place in his life where shame is not. Where his wound is not. Where Jesus is not.

But of course, there *is* no time or place in our stories where Jesus isn’t. There isn’t a time where our memories both conscience and sub-conscience don’t affect our lives our decisions our relationships and Jesus is present there to. Jesus is just as present in our fleeing as he is everywhere else. Just as loving in the midst of our failures as he is when we succeed. It’s not Jesus who has stakes in drawing out our humiliation or maximizing our penance.

We do that to ourselves. That stuff is on us. It’s on our flawed theologies, practice and understanding of this ancient image of God. We have an obsession with triumphalism or smugness with other people’s failures. Our need to rebuke and shame wrongdoers in order to keep ourselves pure, we exalt feeling good about ourselves based on others failures. That is some truth of our culture.

Jesus doesn't exhibit these flaws, obsessions, or need to; his will is reconciliation, and his pleasure is grace and mercy.

But Peter doesn't know this. So he spends a long night trying to catch fish without Jesus, and he fails. Dawn breaks, Jesus shows up, a miraculous catch follows the night of futility, and Peter finds himself, breathless and soaked, sitting by a charcoal fire.

Again. Looking into the eyes of the Lord that he thrice denied.

Again. Facing three costly questions.

What I find both searing and instructive in this story is the way Jesus saves Peter by returning him to the source of his shame.

He doesn't wrap the humiliated disciple in cotton wool.

He doesn't avoid the hard conversation.

He doesn't pretend that Peter's denials didn't happen and didn't wound.

But neither does Jesus preach, condemn, accuse, or retaliate.

He feeds. He feeds Peter's body and then he feeds Peter's soul. He surrounds the self-loathing disciple with tenderness and safety, inviting him to revisit his shame for the sake of healing, restoration, and commissioning: "*Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me? Feed my sheep.*"

As I meditate on Peter's story, I wonder what our failures would feel like if we offered each other the safety that Jesus offers his disciple.

The safety to return to the heart of our wrongdoing and despair.

The safety to wrap fresh language around our failure/failures.

The safety to experience unconditional love in the midst of our shame.

The safety to try again.

What would our witness look like if the Church epitomised Jesus's version of reconciliation? What would the world be like if Christians were known as the people to run to in times of humiliation? Can we, like Jesus, become sanctuary for the shamed? Certainly Nelson Mandela's Truth and Reconciliation Commission went some way to making this a reality.

Just think if our church is truly inclusive and a place that people feel free to abandon themselves to in their darkest times ... what it would do for people, families, communities?

Around the fire Jesus builds, this time by the sea, Peter's fear and denial ("I don't know the man!") evolves into trust and worship: "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you." In the end, Peter realises that it's what Jesus knows that matters.

Jesus knows that we're more than our worst failures and betrayals.

He knows that we're prone to shame and self-hatred.

He knows the deep places we flee to when we fail.

And he knows how to build the fire and prepare the meal that will beckon us back to shore.

Jesus's appearance to Peter — like all of the post-resurrection appearances the Gospels record — speaks volumes about God's priorities. In the days following the resurrection, Jesus doesn't waste a moment on revenge or retribution. He doesn't storm Pilate's house, or avenge himself on Rome, or punish the soldiers whose hands drove nails into his. Instead, he spends his remaining time on earth feeding, restoring, and strengthening his friends. He calls Mary Magdalene by name as she cries. He offers his wounds to the skeptical Thomas. He cooks bread and fish for his hungry disciples. He heals what's wounded and festering between his heart and Peter's.

In other words, Jesus focuses on relationship. On reconciliation. On love. He spends the last days before his ascension delivering his children from fear, despair, self-hatred, and paralysis. He wastes no time on triumphalism or smugness of another person's failures. Even at the height of his power, he chooses humility. He chooses to linger on a lonely beach till dawn, waiting for his hungry children to realise how much he loves them. He chooses to ask Peter an honest and vulnerable-making question about denial, even though the answer might hurt. He chooses to feed and tend his sheep.

Peter's shame meets Jesus's grace, and Jesus's grace wins. That's the Gospel story in a nutshell. As writer and

research professor Brené Brown puts it, “Shame cannot survive being spoken.” Meaning, shame cannot survive the living Word.

Shame cannot tolerate the resurrection.

When shame encounters the God who is Love, it burns to ash and scatters.