

“Shame”  
The Rev. Lauren McDonald  
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, VA  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – June 13, 2010  
Luke 7:36-8:3

Shame. It’s something we’ve all experienced at one time or another. I learned a lot about shame on the school bus. Every day until I got my driver’s license, I rode the bus to school. The bus was always crowded and noisy, and the bus driver frequently had to stop and yell at everyone because so many kids were misbehaving or making so much noise she couldn’t hear to drive. There were unspoken rules on the school bus. The most important one was not to draw attention to yourself. Fly under the radar. Don’t do anything to make yourself an object of ridicule... because then riding the bus became really awful. I always sat near the front of the bus, trying quietly to escape the notice of both the bus driver and the obnoxious troublemakers. Mostly I succeeded.

There was another kid who didn’t, though. I’ll call him Kevin. Kevin was a year older than me and very bright. He also didn’t have many social skills. He was tall and gangly and awkward. In the language of the 80’s, he was a classic nerd. He was on the Math team and in the chess club and took all gifted and AP classes. He was too smart, and though he usually sat by himself on the bus, speaking to no one, somehow he could not avoid the ridicule of his peers.

One day Kevin left his gym clothes on the bus. The way we knew this was that the bus driver taped them up to the front of the bus so everyone could see them, and presumably the owner would claim them. But Kevin's gym shirt had Mickey Mouse on it, something that was totally uncool for a high school student. Kevin wasn't on the bus for a few days, so that Mickey Mouse shirt and those yellow gym shorts rode around at the front of our bus most of the week, while everyone made comments. Then came the day that Kevin was on the bus again. Another kid, I'll call him Sam, could not resist. He began taunting Kevin. "Hey Kevin. Those your gym clothes, Kevin? Aren't you going to go pick them up? Gonna get your Mickey Mouse shirt back?" Kevin ignored the comments and refused to claim the gym clothes.

It was finally more than I could bear. I yelled at Sam to shut up and mind his own business. It had no effect. Sam just taunted him all the more. That afternoon I cried for a long time. Though Kevin and I never spoke of it, and he certainly didn't thank me for getting involved, I could imagine the shame he must have felt. What sin had he committed? He broke the rules of the bus. He was different. He stood out.

I'm guessing that we've all had experiences of shame, times when we wished the ground would just open and swallow us up. Maybe we were the different one on the bus who had to endure taunting. We might have dropped the tray of food in the cafeteria at lunch or always been chosen last for the teams at recess. We might have made bad grades in school or had a teacher who picked on us or had cope with the embarrassment of physical problems like acne or a birthmark or being over or underweight.

We may have experienced even greater shame if we had alcoholic parents or were victims of abuse. Maybe we've felt the shame that can accompany addiction or mental health issues or eating disorders. We might know the shame of having done something that we knew was wrong and feeling like we could never be forgiven. Some of us might even feel shame just for being ourselves.

Though we don't hear it directly in our Gospel story from Luke, we can imagine that the woman in the story, who is not given a name but who is simply called a sinner, felt shame. The text doesn't tell us what her sin was, but clearly it was something public. Maybe she was a prostitute. Maybe she had committed adultery. Maybe she was married to a Gentile. Maybe her sin was something she did, some rule that she broke. Or maybe her sin had something to do with who she was. We don't know. What we do know is that Simon the Pharisee knew about it. Imagine what courage it must have taken for her to walk into Simon's house, into a gathering of men, and then to approach Jesus. But Jesus didn't turn her away.

And Simon judged him for it. If Jesus were really a prophet, then he would already know, without being told, that this woman was a sinner. And if he knew she was a sinner, then he would never have allowed her to touch him at all, much less have permitted such a scandalous display of weeping and anointing and kissing of feet. Rules are rules after all. To be touched by this sinful woman would make Jesus ritually unclean as well.

But Jesus does not dismiss the woman, nor does he dismiss Simon. Instead, he tells a short parable about a creditor who forgives the debts of two debtors. Simon understands the meaning of the parable – the debtor with the larger debt will love the creditor more. Those for whom more is forgiven will feel greater love. Jesus applies the parable to the situation at hand. The woman who was simply called a sinner, the one who was carrying the burden of shame and guilt, the one who was living on the margins of her society, *she* was the one showing generosity and love to Jesus, whereas Simon hadn't even extended basic hospitality to him. Simon knows he is a Pharisee who follows the rules. What need does he have for forgiveness? He isn't walking around with a burden of shame. But the sinful woman is. When she meets Jesus, instead of rejection she finds acceptance. Instead of judgment, she finds forgiveness. Instead of condemnation, she finds love. And she is grateful.

This story reminds me of the short poem “Outwitted,” by Edwin Markham.

He drew a circle that shut me out —  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.  
But Love and I had the wit to win:  
We drew a circle that took him in!

We all have Simon moments, times when we draw circles that shut others out, times when our notions of what it means to follow the rules cast others to the margins and keep them from coming inside. We also all have burdens of shame that we carry around, brokenness that needs healing and forgiveness, just like the woman in the story.

Jesus draws a circle of love that includes the Simons and the sinful, those who make the rules and those who bear guilt, those who judge others and those who feel shame. Jesus draws a circle of love that takes us all in. To the Simons it doesn't seem right that the woman should be included. To the readers of the story it might not seem right that the Simons are included. But for the woman, she who had been weighed down by her shame but now has found forgiveness and acceptance, tears of joy fill her eyes and gratitude fills her heart, and she turns to Jesus with an abundance of love. I imagine that when Jesus told her to go in peace, she walked out of Simon's house with a sparkle of wonder in her eyes, hope in her heart, and the lightness of being that comes when a burden has been lifted.

What silent shames are you carrying? What burdens of guilt are weighing you down? What judgments have you made about others? Whatever they are, Jesus will release you from them. He stretched out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of his saving embrace, that all of us might come within his circle of love - whether we are the judged or the judging, the outcast or the insider, the condemned or the self-righteous, those who feel shame or those who have shamed others.

Jesus says to all of us, "Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace."