

Shame Off You

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Richmond Heights, Ohio

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Proverbs 11:11-21
Matthew 5:1-12

Text: Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. – Matthew 5:10

Happy 4th of July to all of you. While we all celebrate our country's freedom, this morning's message is a kind of message of personal freedom.

There is one thing true of all of us: we are dying to be loved. We crave it, we search for it, and if we never find it, we die spiritually. Love is our deepest reason for existence. I, like you, long to be loved unconditionally. I am a sinner, like all of us are. Some of us struggle to believe that God could love a sinner, to love who I am, as I am.

The love of God is not only something we need; it is the reason we were made. God loved us into existence. God saw us before we were born and out of love declared that we ought to be. Everything that exists came into being by the love of God. And, we were made to be loved.

Each of us wants desperately to be valued and accepted as we are by others. The failure to find this can cause deep pain and drives us, often subconsciously, into activities that we think will help us find value and acceptance. So we will do anything to find it: climb the ladder of success, try to be funny, acquire possessions, etc.

Each day we face a barrage of images and messages from society and the media telling us who, what, and how we should be. We are led to believe that if we could only look perfect and lead perfect lives, we'd no longer feel inadequate. Social expectations teach us that being imperfect is synonymous with being inadequate. So most of us perform, please, and chase perfection, all the while thinking, "What if I can't keep all of these balls in the air? Why isn't everyone else working harder and living up to MY expectations? What will people think if I fail or give up? When can I stop proving myself?"

So, we learn to hide our struggles and protect ourselves from shame, judgment, criticism and blame by seeking safety in pretending to be perfect. Those times when we are hiding can be the darkest of times. Those are the times when we think we are totally alone – and we are afraid – and often we are unable to reach out for help.

Then there are the times when someone piles on and says, "Shame on you, shame on you." Or they say something that humiliates you. But you don't think you've done anything wrong

– the person said this simply because you are different. Those are the times when the feeling of aloneness is particularly real; the words of shame and humiliation stick to you like glue.

We all know shame, but it sometimes can be difficult to describe in words. It's just there, and you know it. It's a negative, painful emotion or feeling that may stem from comparison of your state-of-self with the ideal social standard.

Then there shame's close cousin, humiliation. We've all heard the various sayings like "I've never been so humiliated." Humiliation is the lowering of pride, a humbling. It is an emotion felt by a person whose social status has just decreased.

Having just finished June Pride month, let me reflect, as an ally of those who are LGBT. Shaming of LGBT folks is still far too prevalent in our community. It's especially sad to see righteous judgments and not-so-kind spoken words, many times in the name of Jesus, trying to pile shame onto LGBT folks and their allies. It reminds me, with a little twist, of the Gospel passage from this morning – in particular when Jesus said in Matthew 5, verse 10, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Now this is the twist. Through the affirmation and justice activities of those who care, some of that kingdom of heaven is being brought into LGBT folks' lives.

Now we have come quite far from the days of the Stonewall riots in New York City, when being arrested for being gay was commonplace. When in 1969, 49 of our 50 states of America still had laws on the books making acts of homosexuality illegal. Back then homosexuality was still listed by psychiatrists as a mental disorder. So fast forward to today where laws are better, but they still have ways to go. I know that LGBT folks and their allies are happy regarding the Supreme Court's ruling on marriage, but did you know that in more than half of the states, including Ohio, it is still perfectly legal to fire or demote someone from the private sector workplace for being gay? The common misconception about this was pointed out in the front page article in yesterday's July 4th edition of the Plain Dealer. Sure the EEOC (the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) has shown good support for LGBT folks in the last couple of years, but it's no wonder then that statistics say, and these are soft statistics, that more than half of the workers in the US who are LGBT do not reveal it to co-workers or management. Because if you are LGBT, there is more at stake than just shame; the ability to put food on the table and shelter over your head is at stake. And in the words of some great freedom fighters in our US history, we with the help of God, shall change this. We shall overcome.

Now this sermon is not going to be my true confession to you. I am not going to stand up here and share with you my darkest "People Magazine" secret involving shame and humiliation, but suffice it to say, I have also felt the feeling of shame and humiliation in other ways. And it is not fun, and if it is deep enough, you feel like you are branded with it for life. We all forget things as we get older, but the deepest moments of shame and humiliation, somehow, are never forgotten. Under the right circumstances, that emotional pain can be brought right back to the surface. So how do you deal with that? Well some would recommend a psychiatrist – and sometimes a professional is needed. But sometimes the answer is closer than you think.

So remember this as you walk from these doors behind you and re-enter the world around us. Used as a social tool, shame and humiliation are powerful. Be careful where you use shame on others. Be careful who you humiliate.

Also keep your eye out for someone who is suffering from having needless shame or humiliation piled upon them. Look for the person who seems to be alone. And remember that your empathy could be the antidote. Two of the most powerful words when we are in struggle can be: Me too. Me too. So be that friendly face, be that confidant. And remember that hurt does not go away with the snap of your fingers.

Also help that person who is struggling to remember that faith can be an answer. Encourage them to tell their story to God. Encourage them to listen for God's message. And tell them God's reply may not come in a form that they expect.

And then encourage them to practice letting it go. Just let it go. We need to let go of the need to earn God's love, and that in turn is a kind of death. And you know what, because we are human beings, and we are fallible, we will need to let go of this need to earn God's love not just once, not just twice, but many times in our lives.

It is far easier to think that our fine performance has merited God's favorable posture toward us than it is to admit, "I am weak, broken, and there is nothing in me that demands, or deserves to be loved." But I am loved, you are loved, nonetheless. Letting this love of God soak in makes the shame, makes the humiliation, hurt less. For God can, and does, take the shame off you. Amen