

SHAME

Luke 7: 36-50; John 12: 1-8

Have you ever felt shame? Have you ever felt ashamed? Maybe it's about how others have treated you. Maybe they've told you you're too fat, too skinny, too this and too that. Maybe it's the colour of your skin, the way you express your gender or sexuality, or maybe it's the culture or religion you identify with and how you express all that in what you wear and what you do. Maybe shame is about how you have internalized the judgement of others and how you feel about yourself as a result.

Maybe shame has arisen because of some mistake you made or a failure in your life which has had negative consequences. Maybe shame came after you hurt someone you care about. Maybe you felt ashamed when something you did in secret, maybe a habit, an obsession or an addiction, was found out. Or maybe shame came when someone found out something about you, and used it against you or humiliated you over it.

However it has come or however it may come, shame is something we all fear in some way. We are human, after all, and vulnerable to how others see us and treat us. We are also vulnerable to making mistakes or missing the mark and being shamed for doing so.

So how do we deal with shame? How do we heal from shame? How do we work through shame so that we come out more courageous and compassionate human beings? Our two gospel readings this morning are two versions of a similar story. In both cases, someone is being shamed. How does Jesus not only liberate from shame, but encourage and empower persons into transformation beyond shame?

1) Let's begin with our reading from Luke. Jesus is invited into the home of an important person. Pharisees are leaders in their communities. They are also the moral police. They have established the social rules of honour and shame, right and wrong, in their communities. If they condemn you by rules they set up according to their interpretation of God's law, you are shamed and you are ostracized too. Doors close for you. Nobody associates with you because association means consequences. Maybe our world here in Canada is a little different, but think about the ways people are shamed and bullied on social media, in their neighbourhoods, work places and within their families. It happens today just as much as it happened in Jesus' day.

So, Jesus is honoured by being invited for dinner. But it's also a test. Jesus will be questioned. Many people are being drawn by Jesus. Will he defend the rules and the leadership of the Pharisees or will he be an obstacle that needs to be dealt with? Whether

Jesus is honoured or shamed will depend on his deference to Pharisees and his adherence to their rules.

But here's where things take a turn. A woman comes into the home uninvited. Who is she? We're not told. What we are told is the label she carries: "sinner". She's one of those persons Pharisees have identified as not to be associated with but shamed into isolation. What had she done that she is so shamed? We're not told? Has she been divorced by her husband with bad things reported against her? Would she have any way to defend herself? Has she done anything else to deserve the label, perhaps selling her body out of desperation to eat? We're not told.

What we are told is something else. She's come looking for Jesus. And regardless of whatever shame was intended to keep her hidden and isolated from public view, she barges into that home and that lunch gathering, and she brazenly performs a ritual that is powerfully intimate. She pours some precious ointment all over Jesus' feet. She goes down on her knees and bathes Jesus feet with it. She's also weeping. She wipes Jesus' feet with her hair. She is also kissing Jesus' feet. Can you imagine? What a beautifully intimate act! Clearly, Jesus is not embarrassed by it. But the Pharisee... now he has major issues with it all! Even though he doesn't say anything, we're brought into his thought processes. He is appalled that Jesus would welcome such an act. Doesn't he know who this woman is? This woman is a sinner and therefore not to be touched or associated with, let alone encouraged! Jesus has definitely broken the rules!

But Jesus picks up on the Pharisee's disgust. And so, he tells a story. The story is about two people who owe money. One owes a large sum and the other a small sum. So far so good. But here's the thing. Neither of them can pay back what they owe. Ok, so how are they dealt with? How are they shamed for their inability to pay back what they owe? They're not. Instead, their debts are cancelled, just like that. Wow! OK. But we live in the real world Jesus. What does a silly little story about money and debt have to do with moral rules of right and wrong, righteousness and sin, honour and shame? It's got everything to do with it!

Jesus asks the Pharisee: which one of those debtors will be the more grateful? Obviously, the one who's been forgiven the greater debt, replies the Pharisee. Ah, replies Jesus, "you have judged rightly." And then he turns the tables on the Pharisee. He points to the woman standing there in front of everyone, and here's what he says: "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins... have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."

In other words, this woman has shown great love to Jesus while the Pharisee has not. Who should feel ashamed? The woman comes out on top, publicly honoured while the Pharisee is shamed. Jesus overturns the values of what constitutes honour and shame in his society. According to Jesus, being a sinner is not about breaking the social and moral rules of society determined by those who rule. Rather, being a sinner is about a failure to love. Being a sinner is about abusing and shaming people. Being a sinner is about taking advantage of people and committing injustices against them, especially those who have little power and are that much more vulnerable. On this scale, the Pharisee is a greater sinner than the woman. The woman is a victim of a society that shames those without the power to defend themselves.

And then there's forgiveness. Forgiveness is not just forgiving you for breaking the social rules as established by those who rule. No. Forgiveness is about debts being cancelled. It's about being embraced and re-admitted into society. It's about being welcomed and restored in dignity and respect. It's about being raised up again when you have fallen. Forgiveness is about getting second chances and making new beginnings. The more you seek it, the more you will keep receiving it until it transforms you.

Maybe the woman needs forgiveness. Yes, but we all do, and certainly the Pharisee. Jesus' point is that this woman seeks it and is grateful for it on a whole other level than the Pharisee and many of us who have not experienced the kind of shame the woman has experienced. Once again, Jesus has turned the tables. Do you and I feel shame because society shames us or because we have failed to love, neglected and mistreated another creature of God or this earth? Honour and shame should be for the right reasons, not the wrong ones.

How do we liberate ourselves from the wrong kind of shame imposed on us by society's standards and judgements? And how do we find honour because we commit ourselves again and again to justice and love in our personal lives and our social commitments? Whether society wants to shame us or honour us, being rooted in God means we find our honour and shame from a difference source. We also find our empowerment through love from the very same source. Do you see how it works? God's love liberates us from the wrong kind of shame and empowers us to love which is the true basis of honour.

2) But this brings us to our second gospel story. Here, Jesus and his disciples are having dinner at the home of Martha, Lazarus and Mary, who are friends of Jesus. While Martha is serving the food and Lazarus is getting everyone seated around the table, Mary enters with a big bottle of very expensive perfume. Like the woman in our first story, Mary pours this perfume on Jesus' feet and then bathes Jesus feet using her hair to wipe them. Once again, this is a beautifully intimate act. Certainly, that's how Jesus experiences it.

But here's where things get sticky. One of Jesus' disciples – the notorious Judas – voices objection to what they have all just witnessed. This perfume was wasted. It wasn't necessary to use such expensive perfume to wash Jesus' feet! Some basic water and soap would have been just fine. A better use of the costly perfume would have been to sell it and give the money to the poor. What Mary did was wasteful and irresponsible! But just like in the first story, Jesus rebukes any who would shame Mary. What she has done is an act of love. Immense love expresses itself in extravagant ways. The more you love and the more your heart is filled with gratitude, the more lavishly you want to express it. Beauty has no price tag. Love has no limit to how deeply it can touch a heart. Gratitude can transform in spectacular ways. Judas' heart is hard, calculating, small. He has not been transformed by Jesus' love like those who open their hearts to receive it. You can only give what you receive and only as you receive a lot do you give a lot.

Once again, according to Jesus, honour and shame are not to be measured by social rules of right and wrong as defined by those in power and by the dominant culture. Rather, love is the determiner of honour and dignity. And love is ready to give and to forgive, not shame. Jesus is not interested in shaming the Pharisee and Judas to make them feel small. No. He wants to raise up Mary and the unnamed woman. To have your heart filled and transformed by God's love is to experience true freedom from shame. And to express such transformation through love in the world is to live a life of true honour. Mary and the unnamed woman have discovered this, while the Pharisee and Judas have not. What about you and me?

True love expresses itself in extravagant ways as much as in small and humble ways. True love liberates persons from the shaming, bullying and dismissing that society imposes on all who don't meet the standards set by the dominant culture. True love embraces a spirit of gratitude, service and compassion, and the more one is vulnerable and downtrodden, the more love must be shown them. We must love the poor tangibly, yes. Jesus gave himself for the poor. But sometimes our love for another is most beautifully expressed in its extravagant and spontaneous excess.

Maybe we carry shame because society or our family have made us feel ashamed. Maybe we carry shame because we don't measure up somehow. Maybe we feel ashamed because we cannot forgive ourselves for a mistake we made in life that had negative consequences for someone else. Whatever the reason, we need to experience the forgiving love of God, the embracing love of God and the liberating love of God. We need to become free of society's power to determine whether we feel honour or shame, and we need to align ourselves to divine standards for what is honourable and shameful. It's all about love and the justice that engages our world because we love. True honour is about the courage and heart to love. True shame is about a refusal to love.

After I finished writing this sermon, I realized that the unnamed woman and Mary in the gospel stories are not just representative of all women in patriarchal societies throughout history shamed by men holding the power. They are also indigenous peoples of this land who were shamed by a Pharisaic church, with a concerted effort to erase all their extravagant and beautiful languages, traditions, cultures, spiritualities and children... But they are being liberated by the power of divine love, and their journey of healing and justice is now shaming the church into seeking out forgiveness for our own healing... Jesus continues to confront the powers of oppression and his Spirit will not let evil go unchecked...

Like Mary and like the unnamed woman, may we, too, love and love extravagantly. May we experience liberation from the bad shame we carry around us like excess baggage weighing us down, so that we may open our hearts to being embraced, forgiven and healed, taking the hand being offered us in new partnerships with the earth, its peoples, and its creator... Amen.