

SHAME (PART 2)

Mark 14: 66-72; 1 Timothy 1: 12-17

One of the best novels I've ever read, I read this summer. It's entitled: *Ragged Company*, and it is written by an Indigenous Canadian: Richard Wagamese. He has written many novels and we have discussed at least one of them in our literary society book club. Personally, I found *Ragged Company* the best. It really goes deep in terms of how broken we can become as human beings, but also the powerful healing that can come when love and friendship are experienced in profound ways. I wept reading this novel several times.

The main characters are street people. The reason they're on the street is told only when they're ready to tell it. All of them have a story of how they've been broken by life. Intoxication through alcohol and drugs is a way to forget the pain and the memories. Knowing others on the street and knowing they are there because they are also broken makes them friends. But the rule is: don't ask and rarely does anyone tell.

The five characters in the novel build a friendship, and somehow, as they become more vulnerable with each other, their stories come out. They are stories about tragedies that have befallen them, but also, about terrible consequences from choices they have made which they regret so profoundly, they cannot cope. And so, they end up on the street.

One of the characters is named Timber. Timber was once a highly talented and successful wood carver. His career really took off when he met a gifted artist who came into his shop one day and saw his work. She was totally taken by his work and she described her experience of it in ways Timber never imagined. He began to see himself and his work through her eyes. The way she loved him he began to love himself. She was as beautiful to behold as she was beautiful inside. They fell in love, got married and began building a life together.

But then, tragedy struck. One day on her way to work, she stepped out onto the street. A drunk driver hit her. Timber saw the whole thing. He ran to her, the ambulance was called. She was injured so bad she ended up in a coma. It was all touch and go for months. Finally, she emerged from her coma. What wonderful news! But she was not the same. She didn't remember anything of her past. Most of all, she didn't remember Timber and she didn't remember that he was the love of her life. She also needed care, not only mentally but physically. Proper care was beyond what the health system could

offer. Timber started pouring money into getting her the best care and the best therapy, and always there was the hope that she would not only get better, but remember.

Things did get better and there were improvements. But she never remembered life before the accident and how deeply in love she was with this nice man who came to spend time with her every day. Eventually, Timber had to sell his business, his house and all he had to keep up the cost of extra therapy and care. He was spending most of his time and his mind elsewhere from work anyway. He was also finding himself hitting a wall. Finally, there was a breaking point. He just couldn't continue this any longer. Every time he saw her and she had that blank stare with no deeper recognition, his heart broke. He couldn't do it anymore.

And so, one day, on his way to the care facility, Timber didn't stop when he got there. He kept walking and walking and didn't look back. Eventually he found himself on the street. He felt profound guilt and shame for walking away, but he just couldn't do it anymore. He would continue living, but heavy intoxication would ensure he didn't remember or allow himself to feel much most days.

So what happened next? Before I get to that, let's zero in on our scripture readings and the whole reality of shame... Last week we focused on shame that is something people and society do to us. Today, the focus is on shame as what we carry because of choices we have made and the consequences that have followed from our choices.

Our scripture readings focus on two people who are pillars of the early church – Peter and Paul. The gospel of Mark is the earliest gospel written. Tradition says that Peter himself was the author although a younger scribe named Mark actually wrote the words. Whether this is actually true or not, the important thing is that the early church gave authority to this gospel as scripture because the story it told was so compelling, it had to be written by the chief apostle himself – Peter. But how does Peter come off in a narrative he is responsible for dictating? Even as he is chosen to be the chief apostle, he is depicted as someone who is rash in his actions, speaks before he thinks and in the end, fails to stand up and be counted for his master. And worse, Peter goes out of his way to make great claims for himself and his courage, and yet, he is depicted as failing in the worst way possible. How shameful! How unforgivable! Jesus is crucified and Peter runs away. What kind of loyalty and faithfulness is that? How can Peter live with himself after that?

And what about Paul? His shame is not in running away and abandoning his master and friend like Peter. No. His shame is that he espoused a religion full of hate to the point of

arresting, imprisoning and ultimately being responsible for killing innocent followers of Jesus. How does Paul, now a convert to Jesus, make up for crimes he can never take back? This is unforgivable too.

So then, there's abandoning a friend in their hour of greatest need... And there is being responsible for the suffering and death of innocent people... Is there any worse cause for shame?

And yet, the story the gospel tells is a story about love. And the kind of love needed to heal and transform a human being who has fallen into the worst kind of shame, has to be a really special kind of love. Paul calls himself the foremost of sinners. This means he sees himself as having committed the most shameful kinds of action, something that in itself is unforgivable. And yet, he says, he received mercy. He also says that Christ exercised the utmost patience with him until slowly, but surely, his life turned around and space was offered him to swim in the healing waters of mercy until wholeness was found.

But how does such mercy work? How do you move past the kind of shame for things you have done and the consequences of your choices that you can never take back? What about mercy for all those wounded, hurt and destroyed by your bad and cowardly choices? Our gospel reading ends with Peter confronted by his shameful cowardice, denial and abandonment of his master. We're told that he "broke down and wept." And what about Paul? He can't restore the lives lost and the trauma of violence and imprisonment suffered by innocent followers of Jesus of which he was the cause. So what does he do about that? Does he, like Timmer, end up on the street abusing himself with drugs and alcohol because he can't live with the shame of what he has done?

No. The gospel story doesn't end in shame or in death, but in resurrection and new life. But let's be careful here and not jump too quickly into the positive as has been done too easily in Christianity and the church. If Peter is, indeed, the author of the gospel, he goes out of his way to emphasize the shame of what he did. Paul, too, doesn't just glorify all his accomplishments and his resume of success bringing people to Jesus. He begins and ends by naming again and again the shame of what he was responsible for committing, no matter all the influences and causes that made him who he had been. He was responsible. He had to carry the shame.

But here's where things move toward healing and reconciliation. A love stronger and deeper than the sin and the shame meets both Peter and Paul on the other side. In their Holy Saturday after the Good Friday, they encounter the Easter Sunday of mercy,

forgiveness and grace. A hand is extended to them. A door is opened for them. They have to open their hearts to it though. And that means they have to name it, claim it and trust that beyond the breaking of their hearts for the shame, there will be a rebuilding, a renewing and a transformation into a new humanity, broken yet whole.

Peter has an encounter with the risen Christ later in the gospel narrative. He is invited to finally claim his role as the chief apostle. He is given another chance to stand up alongside his master. Legend has it that Peter himself was eventually arrested and crucified. This time he would not run away. He would die whole. And Paul? Paul would become an apostle who worked twice as hard as the rest of them. And this was not about making up for the bad he had done, even though it could seem that way, no. For Paul the mercy and love that met him in Jesus fired him up with joyous passion and gratitude. His whole life now would be about sharing the love of Jesus overflowing from his heart outward.

Healing love is what transformed Peter and Paul. And because they knew shame firsthand, they embraced all those who felt excluded because they carried shame. The love they came to know was stronger than any wall of shame. The kind of loving flowing through Jesus would break through any such wall and revive any heart broken by shame.

But what about the victims and what about Timber in our opening story? Where is the kind of mercy the apostle writes about that is rich enough to work forgiveness, healing and new life?

Timber's heart is opened because of his friends. He tells his story to them. And more, he decides he must go back and see what happened to the woman who was once the love of his life. He goes back, but his friends also follow him and refuse to allow him to make the journey alone. She is still alive. He sees her. A kind doctor and a kind therapist have taken her on and she is safe and well cared for, although her memory is still lost where Timber is concerned. He embraces her. He gives to her care all the money he recently received in some unexpected way. And then, with the love and support of his friends, he will rebuild his life and begin his work as an artist again.

That's what it takes in the face of shame... a love stronger and more powerful than the shame and its consequences, a love that can walk alongside us as we face those consequences and the people we have hurt, or face their families and communities when those people are no longer alive...

It is such a love that is being offered us as we walk through the shame of what we did to Indigenous peoples over hundreds of years... Love as mercy is creating space for us to walk alongside those we have wounded, facing our brokenness and shame, and seeking a genuine wholeness.

From Peter and Paul may we learn that the gospel is not about happy people being thankful for all the privilege of being whole. This is not real but a façade. Rather, the gospel is for people who know they are broken in some way, whether it's visible as on someone on the street, or invisible as for someone who lives a life of privilege on the outside; whether it's the shame that is visible because people remind us, or the shame that's invisible because we hide it deep inside... space is created for us by Love to name it, claim it and walk the journey from death to new life, from brokenness to wholeness...

This is the gospel of Jesus we are called to embrace... May the energy of his love flow through you and me as we seek to walk our own journeys through shame or some other way brokenness afflicts us, into resurrection light... Amen.