

SHAME (PART 1)

Genesis 3: 1-13

I had just begun ministry in a new congregation and I was just getting to know people. It was a Saturday and there was a fundraising event at the church with lots of food. As I walked into the kitchen to thank all those serving, I noticed one young man whose face I had seen Sunday morning. His name was Zach. Zach was a dad at the church and a Sunday school teacher. But clearly, he was also involved in helping out at community fundraising events like this one. He seemed warm and friendly and he clearly got along with the older women serving alongside him. But as he was moving here and there, grabbing dishes, putting them on trays, pouring drinks and laying out food, there was something else I noticed about Zach I hadn't noticed in the little I'd seen him: he only had one arm. His other arm was prosthetic. I was so impressed by how he was able to work so fast and carefully, and do what he did as if it was the most natural thing in the world. The people around him must have been so used to Zach and the way he worked because they were so thrilled they had this younger man to help them out as ably as he did.

When I saw Zach at church the next day, he didn't have his prosthetic arm. In fact, unless he was really needing it, most times I saw Zach he did just fine doing all he needed to do with one arm. I was impressed how he handled the kids, his Sunday school material, writing on the chalk board and everything else as if it was the most natural thing in the world. After a while I no longer noticed Zach having one arm and I realized this is exactly how everyone knew him too. Zach's physical situation was irrelevant to who he was and what he could do physically or otherwise.

Once we had a chance to sit down and chat over coffee after church, I asked him about it. He said that he was born with one arm, but from his earliest memories, his parents and siblings treated him like everyone else. He had enrolled in the same sports and activities as his brothers and played the same games. He never felt inhibited or flawed because he had one arm. And so, he was totally unselfconscious about it and totally free. Whether he was in a bathing suit swimming with the kids and his partner, in a t-shirt playing ball, riding his bike, or at work all dressed up in a suit... whether he was at a public event or outside cutting the lawn, Zach was a full human being enjoying life and thankful to God for the wonderful ways life had turned out for him. Wow! I was totally impressed with Zach.

On the other hand, there was Myrna. Myrna was an attractive woman. She and her husband Gopal came to church most Sundays. But one of the things I noticed about Myrna was that she wore a glove on her right hand. Every time she greeted me after church she would offer me her left hand. I thought nothing of it until I got a call one day. It was Myrna on the phone and she was crying. Gopal had had a heart attack and even after repeated attempts by the paramedics and doctors to revive him, he had died. How awful! How devastating! Myrna wanted to come in to see me. "Absolutely," I said, "Please come."

She came to my office, and as soon as I opened the door and saw her face, I could see how much she had been crying. I immediately put out my hands and held hers. I was looking at her as I did this and noticed that her eyes opened wide suddenly. Then I looked down and noticed that I was holding both her hands. She had no glove on her right hand. I saw now why she had had a glove on. Her hand was disfigured. She sat down. We talked. Gopal had been the love of her life. He was so good to her and he loved her in all of who she was. He loved her body as much as her soul. Her hand was something she was ashamed of, but he told her it was as beautiful as every other part of her. He would kiss her hand every day to remind her how beautiful she was.

But she was beautiful. Why did she need to be reminded? Yes, her hand was disfigured, but so what. Well, she said, from early in her life she was made to feel that her hand was something to be ashamed of, something that was a kind of curse. She came from a culture and family, she said, who believed this was a kind of judgement on them. People around would talk about it and see it as a curse from God. She was taught that she had to hide her hand because no one would want to be around her, befriend her and they definitely would not want to marry her with her hand as it was.

Wow! Isn't this awful?! On the one hand there was Zach who was so totally at home in his body. On the other hand there was Myrna who was made to feel totally ashamed of her body. Physically, Zach's situation was much more obvious, and yet, Myrna was the one crippled by shame. And isn't this the situation for so many in our world, and especially in a world so dominated by social media? How many people, young people and young women in particular, are body shamed because they don't fit some standard of beauty out there. "You're too short, too tall, too fat, too skinny, your eyes are not right, your skin colour is too dark, you don't fit the right gender appearance, you don't know how to dress properly..." I can go on and on, but I'm sure so many of us can fill in the blanks of ways maybe we've been shamed or made to feel self-conscious because of some aspect of our appearance. We may have started life as innocent young children totally unself-conscious, happy and free. But soon enough, within our family,

at school, in our neighbourhood or through media and social media, we are made to feel inadequate, less-than, even ashamed, and often that shame is focused on that which is most visible and manifest about us - our bodies.

Well, it will be no surprise, then, that shaming and the loss of innocence is also the primal experience of Adam and Eve, the representative humans the bible describes. Why are humans told not to eat of a certain fruit tree? We're told it's because eating that fruit will give them the knowledge of good and evil. Eating that fruit will cause them to lose their innocence. Historically, this story has been interpreted in two very different ways. One interpretation is that growing up has to involve a loss of innocence. The knowledge of good and evil is part of growing up and maturing. It's necessary. You cannot know what is good if you do not learn what is evil. So, even though the serpent is crafty and tests Adam and Eve, the fact that they eat the fruit and start on a journey toward losing their innocence and becoming aware of evil as well as good is just a fact of life they need to understand and learn how to engage. It's a necessary part of growing up.

But I would like to challenge that interpretation. When we see the kind of evil that happens and is done in our world, especially to children let alone adults... is this a worthy price to pay for growing up and learning that there is evil in the world as well as good? Do we have to lose our innocence in order to live a rich life of goodness and appreciation for the gift of goodness? Think about Zach, for example. Somehow, even though he knew all too well that there is bad in our world and people are shamed every day for their appearance as much as other reasons, it was not something that touched him personally in terms of his own self-consciousness. His family and community had protected him somehow from exposure to the cruel shaming so prevalent in our world. Did that make him deficient in his capacity to love and care for his family, to work with integrity at his job or serve his community and church because he wanted to make a difference for good in the world? No.

And think about Myrna and the shame she had lived for so much of her life. Was it necessary that she lose her innocence so early and so intensely like so many children and so many people in our world who suffer shame, abuse, mistreatment and neglect? Absolutely not! Growing up is necessary and sometimes we need to be made aware that this world is not a safe place. But without a lot of love around us protecting us and building us up inside, we can sink into a pit of shame and live a half-life because we have become painfully aware of evil.

Adam and Eve eat the fruit and what happens? They become aware that they are naked. Shame becomes a new experience for them. They need to cover over their nakedness. God comes searching for them. God asks them: "Who told you that you were naked?" Who made you feel ashamed? Who filled you with such feelings of embarrassment that you have to cover yourself up? How is it that you lost your innocence, bathed in my infinite love? What creatures around you failed to embody and express my love to you but rather made you feel ashamed for who you are?

Of course, just like so often happens around us and in us too, the shame we feel gets externalized as blame toward others. Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the serpent and mistrust, fear, threat and alienation becomes the story of the world we know all too well... But is there no other way? Is there ever a way back to innocence again? Is there a way toward healing for the shame that has eaten into us all in different ways?

There is, there is... and it's all about love. The love that bathes us in innocence is different than the love that must find us and help us heal after we have fallen into shame through the knowledge of evil... Healing love is different than innocent love... and it's healing love that our world needs and we need now that we have become acquainted with the knowledge of evil... So what does the healing of love look like when we have eaten the fruit of shame?

It was one year later... Myrna was marking the first year anniversary of Gopal's death. She had moved into a new condo. She was having over family and friends. She wanted me to come and do a house blessing and then we would enjoy food and fellowship. When I got there, Myrna was the first person to greet me. She put out both her hands. She was wearing no glove. She had a big smile and welcomed me... After the blessing and some food and fellowship, Myrna found me and took me into the kitchen. She told me she still grieved for Gopal every day. But she was also experiencing his presence with her every day. Most of all, she had made a commitment to him. She would see herself now and embrace herself as Gopal saw and embraced her. She would not be ashamed anymore. She had thrown away her glove. She was intentional in using her right hand as much as her left in public. And what she was finding was that as she lived ever more unselfconsciously, she witnessed that those around her behaved normally too. She had somehow manifested externally the shame she carried within. But now that she was radiating a new freedom to be, the world around her felt more open and freer also.

Men were also asking her out. Clearly her hand was not a factor. She radiated beauty from the inside out. And yet, she was not ready for that. She was enjoying her intimate

togetherness with Gopal, even if it was only in spirit. She had to see herself through to this new resurrection life she was being ushered into even as she was continuing to grieve his death and their embodied life together...

I've lost touch with Myrna... But I have no doubt she is living a full life. Shame is a thing of the past for her. She was forced to grow up. She had eaten of the tree of good and evil. She carried shame for much of her life. But with the steadfast love of another human being, she was opened up to her own beauty before God and the eyes of God. And others around her would find healing and acceptance also, from one who had walked the road through death to new life... May God be praised for the power of healing love to make whole again... Do you know this healing love in your life?
Amen.