



“Ain’t That A Shame?”

Psalm 25, Matthew 26:31-35, 69-75

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O God –do not let me be put to shame. The word *shame* leaps out of this psalm with all of the intensity of that very emotion. We don’t talk about *shame* very often, so let’s start a conversation. We’ll start by watching this short video clip of a woman walking by herself through a shopping mall, texting her friend:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_9wAJXipiaM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_9wAJXipiaM).

Cathy Cruz Marrero walked straight into that fountain. She wasn’t hurt and maybe you could tell she looked around to see who saw her and then left the scene. It was certainly embarrassing but no harm, no foul, right? No harm, no foul until the next month when that video had been viewed millions of times, set to music, made into internet folly in memes and GIFs, and laughed at from every angle. Ms. Marrero’s embarrassment turned into shame. She felt 100% publically humiliated and hired an attorney to sue the mall because 1) no security personnel came to her aid in a timely manner and 2) the security tape was leaked.

Experts say shame makes you feel “undeserving of love.” Let’s look a little harder at defining shame.

Cultural shame—we could call it “horizontal shame”—shame in front of your peers, has changed dramatically in definition over the years. Those who grew up in the Andy Griffith era remember Gomer Pyle comically saying, “For shame! For shame! For shame!” when Barney Fife made a stupid mistake in Mayberry. Maybe you remember getting scolded by a parent or teacher with a “Shame on you!” because you spoke rudely or acted inappropriately. I remember my 8 year old self wincing from the horror of being shamed by our choir director Mrs. Heisey for acting up during choir practice.

Years ago it was pretty clear just what our society considered shameful. Boundaries were well defined: so well defined that some unwed young women were sent out of town, away from any source of emotional support, to have their babies so they didn’t bring shame onto their family.

Times have changed, some for the better: you don't hear about young women being shipped out of town for childbirth anymore. Some would say times have also changed for the worse.

"Shameless" is a popular television show. Shocking behavior for many has become the norm. The clothes you wear (or choose NOT to wear) can bring instant fame. There is now a job title called "shock jock" where a radio show host like Howard Stern is encouraged to say outrageous things and is rewarded with big contracts. Howard Stern, shock jock millionaire, would not have received Aunt Bea's approval on the Andy Griffith Show. This year we've listened to politicians and political pundits try to top one another with outrageous comments and instead of being shamed they've garnered more media attention. Shame has become difficult to define because what brings great shame to one person doesn't bother another person a bit.

This morning we're not talking about "shame light"—outrageous attention seeking behavior—but real shame, the deep kind. Shame that Carl Jung described as a "soul eating emotion." Close your eyes. Keep them closed as I read to you writer Kirsty Eager's description of shame in her novel *Raw Blue*: "*Shame isn't a quiet grey cloud, shame is a drowning man who claws his way on top of you, scratching and tearing your skin, pushing you under the surface.*" Can you feel the water pouring in, closing over top of you?

Shame isn't tripping in public; it is the feeling of utter humiliation that comes from being ridiculed. Shame is what makes us feel unworthy of love. It causes us to hide our true selves. It can be from unseen inadequacies like learning differences that render us helpless in class. Shame may come from being the victim of abuse. It can be from our past actions in hurting others, or from the sheer humiliation of "losing face" that impacts our sense of identity.

Writer Brene Brown says, "Shame derives its power from being unspeakable." And that's exactly why "O God, do not let me be put to shame" leaps from the page of Psalm 25. We are used to drowning as shame climbs on top of us and silently pushes us under the water. We aren't used to naming shame.

When someone shares in an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, they begin by saying, "Hello, I'm Ellen, and I'm an alcoholic." And instead of the shame of alcoholism making that person instantly disappear, the others sitting in that meeting say, "Hello, Ellen." Richard Rohr says that humble and honest admission of a deep need is the only entrance requirement to acceptance in the group. By speaking out loud, by sharing shame in a safe space, the power of shame is broken.

"O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me." Scholars suggest that this psalmist's shame may be "in being afflicted and receiving no response from God."<sup>1</sup> Shame comes from receiving no response from God. The psalmist needs to know when he says, "Hello, I'm a psalmist, and I'm afflicted" that God will respond so all can hear, "Hello, Psalmist." But in Psalm 25 the psalmist feels shame. He feels that he has disappeared.

Ahh, if only the psalmist knew about Advent. If only he knew that today we begin a season of anticipation of God's ultimate response to us: the choice for the Word to be born here and walk among us and experience the ultimate shame of the cross. Talk about God responding! To be fully human, fully God among us is so very much more than a reply of "Hello Psalmist." God's response is complete--Emmanuel—God with us.

Last Christmas, my first Christmas in ministry, in spite of getting a flu shot I somehow managed to get the flu. Maybe you've forgotten but just ask the staff here who covered all of my work—I had the flu. This year I've gone with the preemptive sinus infection to ward off the flu—it works that way, doesn't it?—so I ended up in my doctor's office last week. I've known my internist for 25 years and he's great. He's what I want in a doctor—smart, nerdy, and straightforward. It's just a bonus that he also happens to be straight out of central casting as "a good Jewish doctor"—he gives me advice, he throws in a bit of Yiddish from time to time, and he's brutally honest. He's the son of a rabbi so when he asked me what I was preaching about this week he of course gave me some Hebrew wisdom that helped shape today's sermon. As I walked to the receptionist to settle my co-pay I wondered, "Should I slip a few extra dollars onto my bill as a tip?"

Dr. Goodman reminded me that in Hebrew, there is a distinction between burglar and robber. The burglar who sneaks into your home while you're gone is shameless before God . . . but ashamed and fearful of people. The robber who confronts you for money is shameless both before God and people. Cultural shame—that horizontal shame—is what separates the burglar from the robber. But they are both breaking Old Testament law #8, "Thou shalt not steal."<sup>ii</sup>

Here's how I see it: I don't think burglars and robbers get this whole God thing. They don't KNOW God. If they truly knew God, if they understood God's relationship with us, they couldn't act shamelessly before God. If you really understand God you can't act shamelessly before such a white hot intense pure powerful holy creative love.

As terrible as they sound, I'd still rather be a burglar or robber than the disciple Peter at the end of the 26th chapter of Matthew. Just 10 chapters earlier, in Matthew 16:16 Peter is the disciple who identifies Christ, saying to Jesus, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God." You see, unlike the burglar and robber, Peter KNOWS God. Yet in the scripture Janice/Laura just read we heard Peter swear his allegiance to Jesus and then, before the cock crows three times, deny even knowing him.

This puts Peter in his own category. He isn't burglar or robber, shameless before the God that they don't even know. Peter is instead so desperate for people's approval, so ashamed of his affiliation with the newly arrested Christ, he acts as though he doesn't even know Jesus. That fills him with vertical shame, shame in front of God.

How do we act like Peter in our own lives? How do we deny knowing God and experience that vertical shame? After claiming to know God--making statements of faith in church, saying “I do” at confirmation, praying and attending worship, we still find a way. We deny God in acts of selfishness and in poor stewardship of the earth. We deny God when we treat people as “less than.” I often think, “What if God happened upon me—wandered into my conversation . . . or into my voting booth? Would I be ashamed? What if you glanced over and realized God was sitting on one of your kitchen stools watching and listening when you spoke to your family that way, your words making them feel unworthy of love? Would you, like Peter, go outside and weep bitterly? What if God was standing next to you when you said “yes” when your heart knew you should say “no?” I can almost feel the hot red blush work up my neck and burn my face. Oh, the shame in denying that we even know God by the way we live our lives.

Ahhhh, if only we knew about the promise of Advent. There is a baby coming not to bring shame to you but to be with you and know you. That baby will predict that you will deny Him over and over and He will still love you without question. He’ll tell you we are all worthy of love. That no matter our source of shame, there is no need to let shame claw on top of you and push you under the surface. That baby shows up and throws us a life preserver. This is a time of promise, when we can speak out about shame in front of our God and the power of shame is broken!

That man, Jesus Christ, will give you the great command to love others as you love yourself.

Hear the good news! In Psalm 25, the psalmist suffers affliction and needs a response and GOD SHOWS UP. Jesus took all of that shame and let it die on the cross. He forgives us.

He loves us through it all and he forgives us!

So if we choose not to forgive ourselves, if we refuse what Christ did on the cross and argue against God by claiming we are still unworthy of love—if we turn away from the promise of Advent—well, that would be the real shame.

A real shame.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Harper Collins Study Bible, NRSV, Revised Edition, 2006.

<sup>ii</sup> Exodus Chapter 20 lists the 10 commandments God gave to Moses.