

LESSONS IN LIVING

The Problem with Shame

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Laura Westerlage
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Scripture Reading: Matthew 5: 38-42 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Well, I want to take advantage of being up here, and I said earlier this morning, my preaching professor would hate that I'm doing this right now . . .but I just want to say two things. One is, my name is Laura Westerlage and I've been a member here for about 2 years now and I haven't had the chance to meet everyone so I'm hoping that the next couple of years I will. And if you don't know, this church is sponsoring me as I go through seminary and I'm seeking ordination. And I brag at my seminary, Austin Theological, all the time that I have the best church sponsor out there, and they don't know what they're missing.

Which brings me to the second thing which I want to say, which is thank you, because this church has just blown me away with not only what Jim says on Sundays, but all of you and how you live your lives and wrestle with theology and just love and include everyone. So I just wanted to say thank you. I got to preach here last summer, and I preached on the Mary Martha story which I've never liked. And so I preached on it, and I wrestled with it, and I learned a lot in the process so I decided to do that again this summer. This passage in Matthew is one that I've never cared for. It's part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and it's one that I've heard preached on and taught in Sunday school, vacation bible school, and in my seminary. The message is kind of always the same; that we should value others above ourselves, to be a sacrifice to allow someone to shame us so we might show them that all that matters to us is being a good Christian. It sounds like Jesus is calling for a way of life that allows for you to be subject to abuse that causes one's humanity to be stricken. It sounds like Jesus is promoting his followers to experience shame for the cause of nonviolent love.

So this passage led me to think more about *what is shame*? Shame can occur whenever we believe that we are not inherently as good as another. Shame can occur in society when a group as a whole treats individuals as less worthy than the majority. For me, shame is the very thing that eats at our true spirit, our true identity as human beings; our true identity as children of our Creator. Shaming occurs in all areas and places in society. Some groups that often receive messages that they are defective or inferior compared to others can include women, the elderly, people who are overweight, those who have the disease of alcoholism or addiction, persons experiencing homelessness, the GLBTQ community – the list goes on and on. I believe everyone here is aware of these discriminations that are so prevalent in our society. I also believe that we here at St. Andrew's have an awareness of how this shaming occurs in churches.

Shaming messages that we might have heard from the mouths of Christians can include, if you aren't a good person you are condemned, or women, you must be self-sacrificing to your family and society as a whole or you aren't fulfilling your role. Or you must forgive others in order to be forgiven. I heard one

this morning that was in an email, that said if you don't send this email on, Jesus will be ashamed of you. These expectations and demands of churches set people up to fail, and therefore experience feeling judged like a failure, and the experience of shame.

This summer I have been working at a hospital as a chaplain intern. It has been quite an experience. There have been many days where I left the hospital heartbroken, frustrated, and discouraged due to patients' lack of self-worth, or their fear and shame due to their understandings of God and the church. Either their churches or individuals have taught them that they are not worthy of God's love because of X, Y or Z. For example, I cannot tell you how many women have expressed to me their guilt and shame for merely wanting to be cared for. Or the patients I've worked with in the addiction center at the hospital who are holding on to a deep sense of shame surrounding their disease because of the attitudes and feelings that have been expressed to them by their churches and families.

I want to share with you a short story of one particular patient I met this summer. Rudy is a woman in her late eighties and has been married for 50+ years. The first few minutes of our meeting together, she went on and on about her love for Jesus but also how she had been wrestling in prayer with God over her anger and frustration. When I asked her about why she was angry, she told me that her husband and best friend had had an affair many years ago. She would express a little bit of anger and hurt and then quickly dismiss it by saying things like, "well I understood, it was just one of those slight things; I had forgiven him and we are still married; I thought I was over this, why am I upset again? I shouldn't be doing this; I'm trying to do the good and right thing in the eyes of God. I have always done the right thing". She also told me that her and her husband had not told anyone about what had happened, not even their three boys, out of fear of shame and embarrassment. Here was a woman who was deeply hurt but had never been given the opportunity to express her feelings and her needs and wants. For her, it was more important to be good in the eyes of God than to be true to herself and stand up for what she deserves as a human being. I wonder if passages like this one in Matthew contributed to her understanding of how to react when someone shames or hurts us. It did indeed seem to me that she had been taught that when we are shamed, we should react in an all-loving, all-forgiving manner. This woman, in the process of trying to do the right thing, sacrificed her true feelings, her true identity and rights as a person.

I recently heard a different interpretation of this passage by a man named Walter Wink. One that I feel is more life-giving and more true to the message of the gospel. And I have to say that the translation that I read to you is a little different than the one I was working from. But I want to begin with the first example Jesus gives of, if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. Back then, a backhand slap was the usual way of admonishing inferiors. Masters backhanded slaves, husbands their wives, parents their children, Romans to Jews. Retaliation by the inferior would bring worse punishment, so the usual response would be of cowering submission. So then why does Jesus, while preaching to these very people subjected to this abuse, tell these already humiliated people to turn the other cheek? Walter Wink explains that it's because this action robs the oppressor of the power to humiliate and shame. He says that, in a sense, the person turning the cheek is saying, try again. Your first blow failed to achieve its intended effect. I deny you the power to humiliate me, I am a human being just like you and you cannot demean me. The striker is then left with a predicament. He cannot use his right hand to backhand the left cheek; one only needs to try this to see how that's not possible. He cannot use his left hand because that hand was used for unclean things. He also can't use a fist instead of a backhand, because fist fighting was only used when it was someone you saw as an equal. And again, the point of the backhand is to reinforce institutionalized inequality. The point has been made. This inferior is in fact a human being, and in a world of honor and shaming the striker has been rendered to instill shame in its subordinate.

Let's look at the second example. Jesus says if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well. The second example is set in a court of law. But who would sue someone for their coat, and why? Walter Wink suggests that by looking at other clues in the Hebrew Scriptures we can understand that only the poorest of the poor would have nothing but a garment to give as collateral for a loan. This situation that Jesus is speaking to is very familiar to his hearers. The debtor has fallen so far into debt, they are left with nothing. Jesus' hearers have a shared hatred for a system that subjects them to humiliation by stripping them of their lands, their goods, finally even their outer garments. Something that is crucial to their survival. Perhaps this sounds all too familiar with us here today, with what is going on in Washington and in our country. Or it reminds me of those auto title loan places you see that prey on single mothers and immigrants who cannot get bank loans. They charge unthinkable interest and are quick to take someone's car from them if repayment is even a day late. So then why does Jesus tell them to give their undergarment as well? This would lead them to strip off all of their clothing and leave the court stark naked. Imagine the reaction that would have evoked. The tables have suddenly been turned on the creditor. Wink says the debtor had no hope of winning the case. The law was entirely in the creditor's favor, but the poor man has transcended this attempt to humiliate him, he has risen above shame, he has said, in effect, you want my robe? Here, take everything. Now all that I've got is my body, do you want that next? This is a way of unmasking, it is a way that offers the creditor to see, perhaps for the first time in their life, what their actions and practices cause for others. Jesus is giving a bit of how to take on the entire system by unmasking its essential cruelty. Here's a poor man who will no longer be treated as a sponge to be squeezed dry by the rich. Rather he is revealing what the laws have become; unfair and inhumane.

Finally, I want to look at the third example that Jesus gives. If one of the occupation troops forces you to carry his pack one mile, carry it two miles. The Roman soldiers had the practice of enforcing labor onto Roman citizens, which frequently involved making them carry their packs for up to a mile. Historians are unsure whether there was this restriction of up to one mile, but there is evidence that there were regulations and restrictions and that a soldier could be punished if they enforced too much for a citizen. So why carry the pack a second mile? Like in the two previous examples, the question is, how can the oppressed recover the plan and assert their human dignity? Imagine the soldier's surprise at the next mile marker - he goes to reach for his pack and the civilian says, oh no, let me carry it another mile. Why would he do that? What is he up to? Is he trying to get me disciplined for seeming to violate the rules? Will he file a complaint? The civilian has taken back the plan, taken back the power of choice; the soldier is then thrown off course and confused on what to do. Wink says Jesus does not encourage Jews to walk a second mile to build up merit in heaven, or to exercise piety, or to kill the soldier with kindness. He is helping an oppressed people find a way to protest and neutralize a burdensome practice despised throughout the empire.

Jesus' ideas were clever and radical. Jesus did not want people to be dehumanized at the cost of following God, rather Jesus was trying to empower his listeners to stand up for their personhood, to stand up against shaming. I believe Jesus knew all too well the effects and the problem of shame. I hope and pray that people facing experiences like my patient Rudy, and for us all to be aware of what is life-giving, and what is not. I hope and pray that we can all find ways in our lives to stand up to the shaming in society. We all need to remember when we are feeling ashamed that we are all worthy of love and equality.

And we will never stop saying it. We will never stop insisting that those voices be heard. We will not let anyone be denied or excluded from ministries of grace, love, and compassion. We will never stop advocating for love over fear. We too are God's children. And that cannot be denied.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.

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By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who...

- Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus,
- Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us,
- Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples,
- Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable, including, but not limited to:
 - believers and agnostics,
 - conventional Christians and questioning skeptics
 - women and men,
 - those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
 - those of all races and cultures,
 - those of all classes and abilities,
 - those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope;
- Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe,
- Find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty – more value in questioning than in absolutes,
- Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do:
 - striving for peace and justice among all people,
 - protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and
 - bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers,
- Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.

(Developed by the Center for Progressive Christianity)



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