

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost • July 24, 2016

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Luke 11:1-13

“Shameless”

“Shame! Shame! Shame!” Shame looks to be making a comeback in our society. Except that it isn't – not authentic shame, at least.

The popular concept of shame has played a role in the use and misuse of social media, political contests, and at least the past couple of seasons of *Game of Thrones*. “Body-shaming” is now being called out as people make negative comments about other people's body size or weight, whether they're on TV or in the halls of schools. Stories pop up in the news about online shaming campaigns waged on Twitter, inciting virtual crowds to rise up against someone's comments or wrongdoing – no matter if it's real or imagined. There's something that all these types of shaming have in common: they're all about *casting* shame.

Shame as we generally understand it today is about making someone feel bad about who they are or what they've done. There's probably a large part of the population that thinks that religion – maybe even especially Christians – are all about shame like that. Judging by what some today say, it might seem like the only way to be free from shame is to be free from religion, free from faith.

In both ancient times and today in many parts of the world, shame and honor have more to do with your relationships with other people than they do how you feel. The dynamic of honor and shame greatly affects people's lives as it governs how they're viewed by their community. In this context, what you've done impacts who you are in the eyes of the people around you. Shame comes as consequence of action, inaction, or condition, something that has happened to distance an individual from the rest of society. It's so powerful that it could carry over to the people who are close to them. At risk of oversimplifying things, shame is a recognition that things are not the way that they should be.

What is your shame? What threatens to separate you from the people around you?

Shame brings separation. It damages relationships. The powers of the world are at work to cause shame and the separation that follows. Those powers are out there, bringing disease and disaster to drive people apart. Those powers are out there, prompting you to point the finger at others to tell them how bad they should feel about themselves – all the while keeping you from thinking about *your own* faults and failings. Those powers are out there, saying that you need to be willing to go through life alone if that's what's required for you to have it your way.

Jesus' first rhetorical question in today's Gospel is about shame. Or rather, it's about **shamelessness**. It's as if Jesus is asking, “Can you imagine someone refusing to help their neighbor?”

That might not be much of a stretch for us today. The average neighborhood around here is much more insular than what you'd have found back in first century Palestine. Here, knowing all your neighbors' names is a pretty impressive accomplishment. How many of your neighbors might you ever expect to come knocking if they needed help?

But back then, neighbors lived in a way where one supported another. They lived in relationships that bound them together as a community, living within that dynamic of honor and shame. If someone came to visit, it'd be the whole village's responsibility to make sure that the guest experienced hospitality. If they failed to do so, they'd carry the burden of shame. Jesus says that while the man who was sleeping wouldn't get up just because his friend has come asking, he would yet do just that **because of his shamelessness**. We lose a bit of the beauty of Jesus' rhetoric with our English translation, as what he says is intentionally ambiguous. It could be the seeker who **lacks shame**, persistently hitting up his friend for bread even though it's the middle of the night. However, the friend in bed could *also* be the shameless one, as he gets up and provides in order to **avoid the shame** of denying the visitor hospitality. Shame will not separate them in their need.

Anyone who'd say that the only way to be free from shame is to be free from faith has it backwards. **The only way to be free from shame is *through* faith.**

God, in His grace, sent His Son to make you shameless. Whatever you've done or not done to further your separation from God has been nailed to Christ's cross. (Colossians 2:13-14) Jesus has reconnected you with your loving heavenly Father, and nothing can pull you from His loving embrace.

Jesus taught his disciples the prayer that we know as the Lord's Prayer in response to their request. God loves His children. Rather than being separated from them, He wants to be hearing from them. From us. And Jesus reiterates that astonishing fact right at the outset of the Lord's Prayer. He uses the word "Abba" to refer to God. Despite what you may have been told in the past, "Abba" doesn't mean "daddy." It's even better than that. A better English translation would be "beloved father," or what you'd say as an adult to call on the father who loves you. That's the astonishing truth: **Jesus puts his disciples into the relationship that he has with the Father.** God is your loving Father, too. You can come to Him without shame!

Jesus follows up with another rhetorical question involving a father and his son, to the same effect. A father who loves his child would not trick the child with a dangerous deception. A snake might look like a fish; a balled-up scorpion could look like an egg. It'd be like tossing the child a hand grenade when they asked for an avocado. And if people know better than to do such things to those they love, how much more so will our heavenly Father answer our petitions?

As we sing in the hymn, "Take it to the Lord in prayer!" In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus gives us a model for how we can come to our Father in heaven with all our concerns and needs. God is honorable and generous, no matter what the circumstances. Through God's grace, we have the Holy Spirit, through Whom we pray all our prayers and Who prays for us. God always answers prayer. Sometimes that answer is "yes," sometimes "no," sometimes "not yet." It might not be the answer that you'd expected; however, just as the father would not give his son a harmful gift, your Lord who loves you will give you what's needed. **Simply put, God is the giver of all good gifts.**

As Jesus' disciples, then, let's go to our heavenly Father in prayer. We can and should pray against the violence and evil that afflicts our world and drives individuals and communities apart, asking the Lord's blessing of peace wherever it is needed in our country and our world. We can and should pray against partisanship and self-promotion in government, asking the Lord's blessing of wisdom upon all those who serve in leadership roles. We can and should pray against those powers that try to drive people away from Christ, asking the Lord's blessings of protection and perseverance for the persecuted in all places.

God answers prayer, and God, who is just, will give us what we need. Ultimately, He will deliver the answer to all our need when Jesus returns and God puts to final and public shame the powers of the world that would that would accuse and condemn His people. (Col. 2:15)

Through God's grace, you have been set free and your shame has been forgiven. In its place, instead of separation, your heavenly Father would give you honor and draw you into the community that gathers around the Lord's Table this day. Christ has prepared a place for you. God gives good gifts, here, for you.

In Jesus, you are shameless.

Amen.