

REACHING IN
Sermon for Lent 3A-Jn 4:5-42
LPC, 3/19/17

What is the difference between shame and guilt? Now there's a topic for Lent!

As feelings, shame and guilt have a lot in common. To feel shame is very similar to feeling guilt. But there is a significant difference.

Guilt, according to the dictionary, has to do having done something wrong, or failed do something right. Guilt can be felt on the inside, but it also exists outside a person. Guilt can be imputed onto one person by another, rightly or wrongly. Also it is not necessary for a person to feel guilty to be guilty. One thinks of the unrepentant criminal. A crime has been committed. This particular person did it. Therefore, this particular person is guilty, whether or not they feel guilty.

Shame, on the other hand, is fundamentally a feeling. Shame is equivalent to humiliation. To be shamed is to be humiliated. To feel shame is to feel humiliated. Shame is experienced on the inside. Someone on the outside can attempt to shame you, but if you remain unmoved, you are not shamed. One thinks of Alec Guinness in *Bridge Over the River Kwai*. Mythology is full of stories of the conquered warrior who refuses to be humiliated. Though others attempt to shame him, he is not shamed, because he feels no shame.

On the other hand, it is possible to shame oneself, even without outside influences. A lot of people carry around secret shame. People can continue to feel shame for guilt that has long ago been atoned for and forgotten by everyone else. One also thinks of people who feel shame even though they are not themselves at fault: people who were abused as children; relatives of active alcoholics, rape victims, fearful, despised and exploited persons of every description. You don't have to be guilty to feel shame.

The two things, guilt and shame, are closely related, but it is important to distinguish between them. It is important not to blame the victim. Guilt often demands retribution: punishment, recompense. Guilty actions have consequences and guilt must be atoned. But shame can only be healed by love.

Not all of us are guilty of great sins, but quite a few of us carry around shame quite apart from guilt. We bury our shame deep within, but it can come out in moments of stress. Shame is a barrier to relationship, but it can be healed by relationship. The person who feels shame is sometimes too wounded to reach out and create the healing relationship, so the healing relationship for a wounded person must often be initiated by another, reaching in.

I am sure that this is what accounts for the fantastic success of Jesus' earthly ministry – how he was able to attract followers from every walk of life, and how he was able to heal them. Jesus reached in to people whose shame prevented them from reaching out.

This is what Jesus is doing with this Samaritan woman at the well, I am convinced. For generations people (mostly men) have looked at this story and confused shame with guilt. They

have interpreted those five husbands as evidence of the woman's guilt. Any woman who has had that many men has got to be a harlot, right? Now, why is that?

There is no reason to suppose, in the patriarchal society of first-century Palestine, that this woman had any say in her marriages. Women could not initiate divorce. Adulterous women were stoned to death, and this woman has survived five marriages, so adultery cannot be assumed. Plus, not to dwell on the obvious, but she has been *married*, at least up until her current relationship.

I have long felt that what this woman bears is not guilt for those five marriages plus one not-so-official relationship, but shame. This is the one explanation that fits what we know about the culture, plus what happens in this encounter with Jesus. The woman's heart is converted by Jesus immediately, completely, exuberantly, judging from how she runs to tell her neighbors about Jesus. Jesus has reached into her heart, past the barriers her shame has erected to relationship, and healed her.

Contrast this with the righteous Pharisee Nicodemus, whom we heard about last week, and who left his encounter confused and questioning. Now to be fair, Jesus' words clearly worked in Nicodemus' heart, judging from what we hear about him later in John's Gospel. For some of us it takes more time than with others. But I think the immediacy of this woman's transformation comes from the vision she was able to grasp from Jesus of the possibility of a life without shame.

There are a few points that I want to draw from this story.

First: is important not to confuse guilt and shame, and to impute guilt to the innocent who have been made to carry shame through the guilt of others.

Secondly, many of us have the equivalent of five husbands deep in our hearts and minds: some secret shame that may or may not exist because of something we ourselves did. We may have suppressed our shame so deeply that we may not even remember where it came from. We only know that there's something in us that always seems to complicate and impede our relationships, especially when we are under stress. When we lack the ability to reach beyond this inchoate barrier to relationship within us, Jesus reaches in, and shows us how to live in love, without shame.

Finally, this is why I have such a problem with those "Heaven or Hell" billboards you see on the highway. If you convert people because they are afraid of punishment, you have appealed to their basest animal instincts for self-preservation. But if you break down their shame through loving relationship you have converted their hearts: what is highest and deepest and best within them.

Whatever is in us that is shameful, rotten, not good, Jesus sees beyond it. Jesus reaches in past it. Jesus loves us anyway. And in Jesus we can leave our shame behind and love back, maybe even reaching in, in Jesus' name to someone else who cannot reach out.