

## **The Voice of Shame and the Voice of Jesus**

A version of this story appears in all four gospels. That's unusual so it must have been quite noteworthy. As a matter of fact, we even read it, in the version from John's gospel already this year during Lent. It is a simple enough story. Jesus is having dinner with some Pharisees, which is a little odd because he spends a lot of time railing against them, and by this point in his ministry they are trying to trap him in some heresy so they can get rid of him. Nevertheless, they are the spiritual leaders of the day and he is the new teacher in town, so they are having a nice little sit-down meal at Simon the Pharisee's house. They are chatting when in walks a woman that everyone seems to recognize. The Pharisees recognize her as a sinful woman – probably a prostitute or at least someone who has committed adultery. She is infamous enough that they assume everyone knows exactly who she is. To them, she's a sinner and nothing else matters. What she has done is who she is. They are synonymous.

Jesus also recognizes her, but not in the same way. Jesus sees her and thinks, this is one of mine – those sinners who know they have fallen short, that they need a savior, those longing to be forgiven, restored and made whole, those whom I can teach to truly love. He has no illusions about what she has done, and doesn't try to whitewash it. He says quite directly, her sins are many. As a matter of fact, the need for forgiveness is itself an inherent admission of guilt and wrongdoing. But instead of that being the sum total and destiny of this woman, for Jesus it is just the starting place – the place that explains how she became the loving, giving person that she is now, washing his feet and providing the gracious hospitality that Simon had failed at.

Some of you might have heard of the TED Talks. You can watch the internet videos of speakers ranging from the famous to the unknown but all based around the theme: “ideas worth sharing.” Speakers get about 18-20 minutes to share an idea – to inspire people. They are worth checking out. One of my favorites is from a woman named Brene Brown, who is a Ph.D. in social work and researcher at the University of Houston, and she is actually an Episcopalian. The video I am referencing is about shame, and in it she distinguishes guilt from shame. Guilt, she says, is the feeling we have when we know that we have done something wrong. It is helpful in society because it keeps us from continuing to hurt people. If people are not capable of feeling guilty that is a serious problem because they lack the capacity for empathy. Shame, on the other hand, is the feeling that you are wrong, in your core being. The voice of guilt says I have done something bad and I need to fix it and make it right. The voice of shame says that I am bad, broken in fact, and cannot be made right. Guilt says, I caused a rift in this relationship and I need to patch it. Shame says there is a hole in me that can never be filled and so I must hide it. Shame has no positive value. It just eats away at our well-being and undermines our ability to believe in the gospel – the good news of the love of God for each of us.

In the video, Brene Brown points out that we are the most medicated, indebted, addicted, and overweight generation in the history of our country. That might say a lot of things to me, but part of what it says is that we have a lot of shame that we are trying to cover up, quiet down, mollify and soothe in any way we can manage. In a culture that demands perfection, rather than

admitting that we have done things wrong, which would open us up to criticism and make us vulnerable, we tend to hide it, to internalize it, to make it part of ourselves, our identity and our story, and therefore to let its voice speak to who we are. It reverberates in our own heads because the breeding ground of shame is isolation. We see this in the gospel story today – the Pharisees want to make her that woman and chase her from the assembly; they want to label her as broken, inherently lacking, and force her to hide. But she dares to come in the midst of them, to let her guilt lead her to the feet of Jesus where she can express her gratitude that he sees her, that he is not ashamed to call her his own, that he will restore her. This is what Jesus is calling for – then, now, and always. He is calling us to admit our faults because the act of opening up is what allows for grace, for forgiveness, for us to learn to love more because we recognized more fully how much we have been loved by God. In this connection the voice of Jesus drowns out the voice of shame.

Paul says to us in the letter to the Galatians that we read today, that if we could be saved or justified by the law, then Christ died for nothing – Good Friday is meaningless and Easter is without purpose. But that is not the case; it is not the Christian story. The story is that we have all fallen short, but that Christ longs to forgive. However, he does not long to forgive without a purpose, so that we can go do it again. He longs to forgive because accepting forgiveness helps to make us into the people God created us to be. To be forgiven helps us to be more loving, more generous, more gracious, more grateful as Jesus says in his story – in essence, more Godly. Who will love more – the one who was forgiven little or the one who was forgiven much? I suppose the one who was forgiven much. And I would ask, which one will be closer to the forgiver – the one who was forgiven much, if he can overcome his shame, will be closer to the master. The sinner who has been forgiven much will be closer to knowing the heart of God than the one who hides his minor sins. That is the point of Jesus' story. There was not one sinner and a bunch of upright folks around the dinner table that night at Simon the Pharisee's house. There was one person who recognized her need for Jesus and knew his heart most clearly, and a bunch of people hiding their sins and trying to seem better than the person next to them.

I think back to the woman in the story. I wonder a bit at her motivation. What bravery it took to walk into the house of religious leaders, given her reputation, and to touch Jesus and know his love. Or maybe it was desperation – the isolation she had felt leading to the desire to connect with someone and giving way to a willingness to take a chance on this Jesus who she had heard about. Or maybe she already knew because she had experienced his love and forgiveness elsewhere – maybe that is why she bought the costly bottle of perfume in advance. Maybe it was confidence that if she reached out to the Christ, he would reach back to hold her, to shield her, to envelop her in his love, to lift her out of her lowly place of shame and set her above the others as an exemplar of love. That is the faith that Jesus said saved her, saved her from her isolation and condemnation. Or a better translation would actually be, it was the faith that made her whole, that filled the emptiness and restored her to the person that God created her to be.

Jesus is inviting us to cast off our shame and come with confidence, confidence in him and his love for us. We are the people who have heard the story in advance and so we know how God will react. It doesn't make it easy, especially in a world that would teach us not to expose our weak and broken places. It still takes some bravery, or maybe even some desperation, but this is what the story is about – why there is a Good Friday and Easter. It is about coming to Jesus with our guilt, with our sins, which also are many, and knowing that there we will find

forgiveness. In that act we will know more closely, more personally, the heart of God, we will break out of our isolation and be connected, and we will learn to love more deeply and more fully, with a heart of abundant gratitude.

The story ends in a slightly unusual way. Jesus goes on from there to proclaim the good news, and he takes with him not just the twelve, but some women who had been cured, who had been set free, who had been forgiven, and he calls them by name – Mary, Joanna, and Susanna. He is setting out to proclaim the gospel and he takes these people with him because they are people who have experienced being made whole in a way that could make others believe that it is true. The passage makes it clear that our being restored and made whole is not the end of the story. We must then follow Jesus out to share this gospel. Our world is full of shame. It needs us to make it believe the good news that there is forgiveness, and wholeness, and redemption. It needs people who know the good news in their very bodies to go out, and when we find the one who believes they are unlovable to share with them the love of Christ, when we find the sinner who is on the verge of letting that become their only identity we must tell them where to find forgiveness that leads to overwhelming gratitude, and when we find the one who others would cast out of their assembly, we must welcome them in to the place where Jesus feeds us and makes us whole. That is the end of the story. Not just forgiveness and wholeness and healing for each of us, but making sure that that message, the good news of the gospel, is brought out to all we meet by people who can proclaim that it is true. Amen