

You may remember that the video we had last Sunday about creating the hymn *When Peace Like a River*. It was certainly a tear-jerker. Singing that hymn right afterward was very moving. It was an effective way of showing how God continues to hold us even when all is going wrong. We started it all by talking about suffering and bearing crosses.

After worship last week someone wisely pointed out that the suffering there was suffering that was just happening from the outside. It wasn't caused because the hymn's author, Horatio Spafford, was doing anything particularly Christian. And then this person said, "Well, I guess that's next week's sermon!" I laughed, but indeed that is to be the case; bearing the cross because of being a Christian. In our gospel this week we again read Jesus talking about suffering and death, greatness, and bearing the cross.

I think we can best get at this by starting at a place seemingly far away. Let's look at the difference between shame and guilt. They are similar, but distinctly different.

Guilt is when you do something wrong and you feel bad about what you've done. Shame is when you feel like who you are is wrong; that there is something fundamentally wrong with you.

One of my seminary professors taught that for centuries Christians have wrongfully interpreted the New Testament thinking that it was talking about the guilt of sin. But that isn't the case. The New Testament is about the shame of sin. Indeed, that gets to the heart and the power of grace. If you are guilty for doing something and then you are forgiven, you might be thankful and relieved. But that forgiveness is not as strong as forgiveness for shame. If *who you are* is wrong, but despite that, God still forgives and loves you despite that *who you are is wrong*, that's a much deeper and more powerful form of forgiveness. That is grace. Before you can ever really understand the power of grace, and before you can ever really understand the New Testament you have to know shame. Shame is an immensely powerful force that can drive every aspect of your life.

Many of you have heard of Brene Brown, probably the best known expert on shame in the present day. I think Brown rightfully understands that shame is a cultural thing, and what is shaming for a woman is different than what is shaming for a

man. She lists ten things that she finds cause shame in women today. They are: identity, appearance, sexuality, family, motherhood, parenting, health (mental and physical), aging, religion and a woman's ability to stand up and speak out for herself. However, Brown points out that body image is the most universal shame trigger and it often interweaves with the rest. She writes, "What we think, hate, loathe and wonder about the acceptability of our bodies reaches much further and impacts far more than our appearance. The long reach of body shame can impact who and how we love, work, parent, communicate and build relationships." Body image shaming for women can come from both men and women - it is not just men alone that cause shame in women.

Brown suggests that shame triggers for men are different. In fact, there is one and only one shame trigger for a man - and that is weakness. A man in current American culture can never truly appear to be weak, out of control, totally beaten by a situation. Brown points out there is a paradox that happens when women coax men to be more honest and vulnerable. Because while men can show vulnerability to other men, when a man is truly vulnerable in front of a woman she is usually repulsed.

I'll propose as a thesis that avoiding shame is the single most powerful driving force in our culture today. What your car says about you, what the college your kids attend says about you, what your house says about you, what your clothes and electronic gadgets say about you, what your kids grades are, and how they do in extra-curricular activities says about you, what your weight says about you, what your household income says about you, and on and on and on goes the list.

In our gospel reading the disciples are arguing about who was the greatest. Don't imagine them actually having a literal argument over who's better than who. They're trying to one-up each other with whatever was going on in their lives. If it was today they'd be saying things like, talking about their kids grades or how early they made the varsity team. They'd be comparing cars and the square footage of their houses. This sort of thing.

How often do you really reflect on why you do what you do? If you are a "normal" person I'm going to suggest that avoiding shame is more influential in how you make decisions than what you actually truly like and want.

But there's more. I think there's more than just cultural shame. I think there is faith shame too. And cultural shame and faith shame slam head-first into each other every moment of every day.

What is this term, "faith shame"? It is what you feel before God because the forces of cultural shame draw you away. Have you ever received something from church asking for your increased help in something and you feel bad because you can't? You can't because your resources of time and space and money are already all consumed in fighting off cultural shame. Why don't most people tithe ten percent of their household income? Because that's lot of money! You're going to feel it if you do. As C.S. Lewis pointed out, if Christians are giving properly they'll have a noticeably lower standard of living than non-believers of the same income.

I think most people pass off these feelings as a little guilt. It is something they will get to later. It is something that is caused by temporary circumstances that will change. The change never happens. There's always an excuse, and it's always shame based.

Being at a person's death bed can be a horrifying experience, especially when the reality of their faith shame really kicks in. That person's spent a lifetime effectively ashamed of Jesus, and now he or she needs Jesus. Eternity is on the line.

We talk about God being gracious and merciful. We talk about God's love ultimately winning out always. But what did we read last week in the gospel? And notice this isn't guilt language; like my seminary professor said, this is shame language. "For whoever is ashamed of me and my words... of them will the Son of Man also be ashamed."

In other words, if you're too ashamed of Jesus and the salvation you need from him, then he's ashamed to count you among his own.

Your whole life will be consumed by fending off cultural shame. So when Jesus calls on you to take up your cross and follow him, you don't need to be physically persecuted or legally punished for your faith. The fact that you are significantly applying yourself to the work of your Savior means that you won't have enough to effectively fend off the cultural shaming that you'll get. Martin Luther said Christians don't

have to go looking for a cross to bear. The cross will find them. Indeed it is true.

You are caught in a tension: the shame of the world or the shame of your Savior? Both are powerful forces. One leads to burn out and death. One actually leads to wholeness of life. I don't have to tell you which is which. Amen