

Ashamed
Mark 8:31-38 (Isaiah 53:1-5, Romans 1:16)

In my first pastorate, I had the privilege of knowing a wonderful elder. He grew up on a farm. Part of their income came from selling chicken, which it was my friend's job to pluck. He plucked so many chickens, that he never eats chicken anymore. I grew up in the suburbs and always admired folks who lived on the farm. They had to get up early and work hard all day long. Unfortunately many do not share my feelings. Just listen to those Texas A&M jokes, and you get an idea of what I am talking about. Every time my friend went into town, he was reminded of this. There was only one high school for this small community, and everybody went there. Both people who lived on farm, and those city slickers. They all went to the same place. Problem was, city slickers were not very tolerant of farm boys. They made fun of my friend. They made fun of his clothes. They excluded him from their friendship groups. He had a choice. He could have let that ridicule rub off on him. He could have let it sour his soul. He could have tried to hide who he was and become someone who he was not. He could have become ashamed of his parents and be kind of let me be in the popular group wannabe. But he didn't. He joined the navy, married, opened a hardware store, loved and worked with his parents until their deaths. He was not ashamed of the love of his parents, or their thrift, of their hard work, or their clear sense of what is right and wrong. Not ashamed. He still orders anything on the menu but chicken, but he is not ashamed of where he came from, or who he is.

I think what we are and are not ashamed of tells a lot about us. In college, and even in high school today, some young people are ashamed of those who do not have an expensive powerful car. They are ashamed to be seen with those who are poor. Even smart, students who work hard, get good grades and are generally nice to anyone who cares to turn their way end up on their list of people not to be seen with, because they do not play sports or run with the popular crowd. Word has it that in East Jordan it was the thing to do for popular kids to shoplift. Of course drinking and being sexually active was also a part of that life for many. It was a subject for boasting. I understand that many young people today are ridiculed if they do not engage in this kind of lifestyle, which I find baffling because I would have thought that a person would be ashamed to be caught shoplifting, or being sexually promiscuous, or drinking when it was still illegal for them to do so. But no, they ridicule anyone who does not care to join in.

In a town called Caesarea Philippi, Jesus for the first time revealed to his disciples that he was going to die on a cross. He didn't use the word "cross", he said that it was going to be necessary for him to "undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed." This idea was so totally foreign to the disciples that they couldn't begin to grasp it. Peter rebuked Jesus, scolded him for even considering such a thing. At the end of their dialogue, Jesus said some hard words, "Whoever is ashamed of me. . . of them [I] will be ashamed." Why was Jesus saying this to his disciples? Wasn't it

unbelievers that needed to hear words like this? It was Peter, after all, who was so fiercely loyal to Jesus that when they tried to arrest his Lord, Peter drew his sword and cut off the ear of the servant of the temple guard. And when Jesus said that everyone would desert him, Peter said that he would never desert Jesus. Why would Jesus think that it might be possible that one of his own disciples would be ashamed of him?

Well, Peter and the disciples of his time were waiting for the messiah. They believed they had found the messiah in Jesus. Messiah and cross were a contradiction in terms. Messiah and suffering did not belong on the same page. Messiah was by definition the leader par excellence who would conquer enemies and make God's people number one again. No one in their right mind could ever be ashamed of the messiah. Messiah was power. Messiah was strength. Messiah was victory. What a shock then for Peter to hear the man he had just proclaimed to be messiah tell them that the Son of Man must "undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed." All of a sudden Peter was ashamed. He was indignant. He was angry. He was self righteous. He rebuked the Lord of the universe. Peter could never be ashamed of a powerful messiah, but he might be tempted to be ashamed of a suffering messiah. Ashamed of a Christ who didn't have the guts to stand up for himself. Ashamed of someone who was talking like he would lie down like a doormat and let someone nail him to a cross. Could you be proud of a pastor who would let someone do that to him? Peter could not. It was a travesty on who Jesus was, and Peter told Jesus so.

Who is it that, in every instance, argues for power and against weakness? Who argues for wealth and position? Who argues for an easy way to sway people's hearts and minds? Who thinks one ought to manipulate others by performing miracles or by providing bread? Who says that it is not ever necessary to be hungry, or to hurt; that God will never let a toe be stubbed, or a hair be put out of place? Who says, "If your hungry, just turn stones into bread." "Jump off the temple, God will save you." "Look all the kingdoms of the world, they're yours." Who is it that temps saying, "Don't take the hard road of the cross?"

Did you ever wonder what things God might be ashamed of? God is not ashamed of God's son for dying on the cross. I think that God is ashamed when power or coercion or violence are used to manipulate people. In the inquisition the church turned away from the way of the cross and thought that by pain and power they could bring faith. Some have turned the gospel into a get-rich scheme. Why should the devil's children have all the goodies and God's children go without? Name it claim it! Is faith the way to become one of the rich and famous? Is God a vending machine giving goodies to people who push the right buttons? I don't think that there is much danger of people being ashamed of a victorious Jesus who comes in triumph and crushes his enemies under his feet. There is a huge danger that people may forget that Christ is the one who prays forgiveness for his murderers, and who argues against vengeance. That is the Son of man people are likely to shy away from. There are things that we ought to be ashamed of. We ought to be ashamed of the way the way the church

during the inquisition tortured people. We ought to be ashamed of the way that Spanish conquerors in the name of the faith tortured and killed and stole gold. We should be ashamed of the way that native Americans had lands stolen, families killed and tortured. We should be ashamed of the way men and women with power, impose their will on others, steal what is theirs, take away their dignity. We should never be ashamed of the gracious God who identified with the suffering, with the oppressed, with the afflicted and shows that love by dying on the cross. People can be so convinced that power, prestige and glory are the marks of success they tend turn away from the cross, which is the mark of God's suffering love. "Whoever is ashamed of me," said Jesus.

The Greek and Roman world saw suffering as weakness. A God who could suffer was not a perfect God. The cross was an embarrassment. Some Christian apologists tried to say that Jesus didn't really suffer on the cross, he just seemed to suffer. And some Christian interpreters try to say that his words on the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me!" were not a true expression of abandonment. He was just reciting the first words of a Psalm, which taken in it's entirety, is actually an expression of faith that God will not turn away from the afflicted. No wonder Paul had to stand up and say, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is God's power to make people whole." I read about a missionary who worked in a leper colony. Although this work of compassion provided food and clothing and a place for outcasts to live, the words and preaching of the pastor never really were accepted. And then he came down with leprosy. Those to whom he had ministered for years, who but who had rejected his word, now found that their hearts were soft.

Fred Craddock tells the story of an artist of modest reputation who painted a portrait of Jesus of Nazareth. The picture was not your typical Vacation Bible School rendering. Fred and some other ministers went to look at an early showing. "I was absolutely shocked at first. The colors were all very dark: purples and blacks and grays. The figure was strange and very homely—ugly with a misshapen face. On a little easel next to the painting, the artist had placed what was a justification for this painting. It was based on the prophecy of Isaiah 53: 'He had no beauty or comeliness that any should desire him. He was one from whom people turned their face. A man of sorrow, acquainted with grief.'" This messiah was one you made no eye contact with. Too ugly. The church was scandalized wherever the painting went. Finally someone put it in file 13 and it has never been heard of again. "Whoever is ashamed of me." Hard words.

Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." Why the cross? Why hardship? Why pain? God is not one who buys into the no pain, no gain mentality. Pain is not payment for heaven. The cross is not a test we have to take, or a deed we must do to win God's love. The cross is an attitude of suffering love. The cross is the resistance people meet who seek to display and live the grace of God. The cross is identifying with those who suffer, who are oppressed, who hurt. The crosses in our lives are what bring maturity of faith. "What does it profit," Jesus

wonders, for a person to “gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” That’s possible, isn’t it? To invest a whole lifetime in something and then look back and see that it was nothing but junk.

Jesus said, “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed.” He was talking about the cross. Peter scolded him, because when he saw a cross he saw, weakness. He saw defeat. He saw shame. By God’s grace we do not weakness, but the power of God. We do not see defeat, but God’s unstoppable victory. To the eyes of faith, the cross is not shame, but God’s incredible love.