

SLD02.21.10 First Lent
Emory Presbyterian Church
Luke 22:54-62
Genesis 3:1-12
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“Breaking Free from Blame and Shame”

There is a complicated area of study related to the laws of heat and energy known as thermodynamics.¹ One of the more esoteric concepts of this field is called “entropy,” which describes the tendency for all things of the universe to “run down.” Take month old spinach, for example, or extemporaneous preaching. Take rotting compost, or a classroom without a teacher. Aging abdominal muscles, or neglected facilities. Or relationships. According to the law of entropy, when we leave things to themselves, they cool off or become more and more disorganized. And they’ll never get hotter or more organized until and unless we apply energy from somewhere else.

Bill Tully of St. Bartholomew’s Church in NYC describes the season of Lent as a time when the entropy of life is hauled into the lab for us to take a look at its run-down state..., to assess its performance and regard its dings and nicks sustained as we were crashing and stumbling through the last year.²

Of course, we can leave the entropic thing right there. Many of us do. Says Tully, “I don’t know what physicists would call entropy piled upon entropy, but I would call it emptiness. People criticize the church for rote worship and rote teaching, but nothing is more by rote than the unexamined, empty, run down spiritual state most of us settle for.”

¹Bill Tully, “Crossroads,” Newsletter of St. Bartholomew’s Church in NYC, Vol 5, No. 4, Feb. 22, 1999, “Lent and Entropy.”

² Ibid.

In Tully's view, the invitation to observe a holy Lent means to make an effort to apply a little energy. There are things you can do, he says, about the state of your spirit.

During the season of Lent here at Emory Church, there are any number of things available to do about the state of our spirits. Pause and visit our prayer room off the Fellowship Hall. Attend our contemplative Taize services each Wednesday night during Lent. Sign up to participate in Deedra's prayer triplets. Purchase some food for the families of CHOA's sick kids, and pray over them. Use one of Nouwen's Lenten devotionals available through Rose's generosity. Serve food at the Clifton Night Shelter on March 20th.

It may take a little energy, but there are things we can do about the state of our spirit.

Also to help us address the state of our spirit, today I'm beginning a Lenten sermon series that I've entitled "Breaking Free." Breaking free of what, you may ask. Well, I've chosen some of the yuckiest burdens to the human spirit I could think of: blame and shame, anxiety and worry, resentment and bitterness, and discouragement and depression. Four sermons focused on breaking free from those spiritual burdens.

Bet you can't wait.

But my hope is that as we look together at these gloomy prisons of the human spirit, we'll discover not only the shared reality, but the *limited* reality, of their power. For I believe that Jesus came to set us free from everything that dampens and destroys and imprisons the human spirit. And I want to explore with you why and how he goes about doing that so – you know – we can do something about the state of our spirits.

Because I do feel as if we're *called* to not just to capitulate to those ubiquitous burdens but to do something about them, to join Jesus in *conquering* these powers of darkness.

Let me share with you a portion of a "poem prayer" by Edgar Boggs of Burlington, North Carolina. It is entitled "What I hear Christ Saying:"

I love you and I accept you, just as you are, right now, even as I loved you before you knew me. Yet, you hold attitudes and tendencies which keep you from being fully human, and bar you from the enjoyment of the purpose for which you were created.

And so, because I want these good things for you, I am going to love you through a process of change. It may take only a short while; it may take many years. It may take all eternity. No matter, for I will never abandon the task.

Together, says Christ, we will overcome those obstacles which threaten the freedom I have given you.

So I am calling on Christ this Lenten season to work through this Lenten sermon series to help us, sure enough, overcome the obstacles which threaten the freedom he has given us. Let's listen to the word of God: **Genesis 3: 1-12.**

So there we have it: the first human beings break God's rules, feel ashamed of their nakedness, and when busted, point a finger at whoever's closest. Blame. Earlier we heard Tom read to us about how Peter, the rock on which Jesus builds his church, baldly denies his savior, not once but three times, and, upon realizing what he has done, weeps in despair. Shame.

Blame and Shame. As in every human story, as in you and me, the Bible's full of it.

And who's to say they don't have their purpose, their place, blame and shame? What is blame, after all, other than assigning responsibility? And if someone's clearly in the wrong, why shouldn't they be blamed? Shame, on the other hand, is the

uncomfortable internalizing of a negative judgment. But when a person or a society inflicts harm on others, why shouldn't they be made to feel ashamed? Surely in any civilized society, blame and shame have their role to play

At the same time, have you ever noticed someone quickly, almost reflexively, assigning responsibility to others in order to avoid it themselves? Have you ever seen or experience anyone using negative judgment to shape or control another? Blame and shame may have their place in human commerce but how often they seem to harm more than help.

Have you ever wondered what behind our impulse to shame another? What makes us humans so quick to assign blame, or to avoid it?

A psychology of blame speculates that the root of these behaviors may boil down to the edge of survival itself. If we humans really are descendants of plains apes, it could be that out on that largely treeless savanna with only the plains grasses for cover, survival may have depended on a readiness to move whenever anyone picked up the scent of a predator. Imagine groups of humanoids wheeling about like schools of fish, rippling with anxiety any time somebody detected a threatening smell. Survival of the individual would have depended on everyone doing exactly what the group does, while maverick behavior would lead to abandonment, equating to absolute vulnerability.³ "Group norms," this line of thinking postulates, thus became woven into the very fabric of human survival.

"Group norms" dictate which experiences the members of a group are able safely to have (i.e., feel entitled to, be comfortable with, embrace, enjoy, make part of

³ http://www.bapfelbaumphd.com/Shame_Blame_Reflex.html

ourselves), and which they are not able to have. From this perspective, shame becomes a useful instrument of conformity, a means by which individuals internalize the group consensus, the internal tribal mentality. You can see why if one is always on the edge of feeling cast out by a group, it becomes quite urgent to know what is okay and what is not. Thus we humans came instinctively to mold ourselves and those who depend on us to fit and follow the group consensus. Stray from that consensus, which some always do, and you become subject to the norms established by the group, the rules by which one may or may not remain a part of the group. Think, for example, the levitical laws of the Hebrew scriptures. Or the Book of Order of the PC(USA). Or, whatever mama an' 'em say you had always, or had never, better do.

Only Jesus kept challenging the general consensus and “group norms.” He was pesky that way, to the point that Paul later concluded that “in Christ there is no slave or Greek, no man or woman, nor Jew or gentile,” or any of the other human categories and qualifiers and hierarchies, at least in any ultimate sort of way. In fact, sometimes it looked like Jesus'd go out of his way to touch an untouchable, or address an unaddressable, or otherwise do the right thing but at the wrong time, as if to drive home his alternative way of seeing things. On the whole, Jesus just didn't seem to have a lot of time for blame or shame, either one. Even when he predicted Peter's betrayal, he allowed as how it wasn't going to exclude Peter from the faith rally. Even on the cross he was taking up for his executioners.

To be sure, if the group norm is what's most important to you, then blaming and shaming can be helpful to restore the equilibrium. But for Jesus, there seemed to be a higher order of norm than that of the humanity community. The laws of humanity had

their place; he didn't come to change them. He said as much. But the One who created him, and us, was and is evidently not limited to, or by, any human code of honor.

You or I or a court of law, for example, can find a defendant guilty, but before God, the defendant remains a beloved one. This appears to be a divine choice, a holy inclination, a sacred eccentricity of the One revealed through Jesus. And Jesus forever acted as if it ought to be a holy inclination for those of us who choose to follow him.

Not that blame in general is to blame; it's just penultimate before God. Nor was Jesus suggesting that disciples ignore rules to be followed in a well-ordered society, community or relationship – “render unto Caesar” and so forth. He just seemed forever pointing toward the non-blaming, non-shaming ultimacy offered by a God who chooses to love us anyway. And to suggest that perhaps cultivating an active awareness of this higher order of acceptance and love could infuse a measure of humility in our own blaming behavior. I mean, how deeply, really are we willing to believe that sin and brokenness was and is being redeemed by Christ Jesus?

Could nurturing an awareness of a loving God possibly mitigate the shame we feel when we are blamed? Could it diminish in any way that destructive, internalized shame that begins so early in our lives to shape our self-understanding?

We all have it, we all carry it, we all broker this tension between who we are and whom we, and others, think we ought to be. And, individually and as a community, we routinely feed and nurture and grow that tension. Can we who worship God through Jesus even imagine, never mind orient our lives toward a blameless, shameless existence? Can we even imagine, never mind embody, an existence beyond blame,

shame, threat or sanction? If so, what would it look like to embody it a little? What would change? What would shift? What would diminish? What would grow?

We here at Emory Church call ourselves an intimate and caring faith community that's seeking God's will. We say we're open-minded, that we dare to pose borderline-irreverent questions, that wherever you are on your spiritual journey, you're invited to travel along with us. I hear some notes of humility and acceptance and tolerance in those declarations, don't you?

To be sure from time to time we disappoint and anger one another but we work through it. Or wait it out. Or, with experience, find the disappointing transaction of lesser import than the larger fond relationship, an inclination in which I hear a ring of steadfast endurance.

Still, as one blogger remarked⁴, "I don't know about you, but I have a terrible tendency to play the blame game. If something goes wrong, particularly if I do something wrong, I have a part of my brain...that delights in pointing the finger elsewhere. I suspect that the shame game is part of the same phenomenon: when I cannot avoid the blame, then I feel a shame – usually disproportionate to the problem. Both of these games – blame and shame – play into our troublesome notions of duality, of good and bad, of right and wrong, and of that unfortunate conviction that if you – or I – exhibit the one, we cannot exhibit the other. For example, she says, if I have done something wrong – and admit it to myself – I find myself falling down the rabbit hole of 'I never do anything right and I am a terrible person.' And if someone ELSE does

⁴ <http://woodenhue.blogspot.com/2009/12/moving-from-blame-and-shame-into-light.html>

something wrong, I have a truly unfortunate tendency to 'otherize' them, to want to condemn and separate from them."

Sound familiar to anybody?

Frankly, I don't know if we ever break free of blame and shame in our lifetimes but I'm pretty sure Jesus teaches that God is not the Source of either one.

In his book, The Naked Now, Richard Rohr remarks that "when we face the contradiction that we ourselves are, we can sometimes become a conduit of what we ourselves have received." Indeed, he says, it's most often when we see, and accept mercy for, (that is, forgive ourselves) our own inherent contradictions that we are able to pass that mercy on to others. When we are concerned with either attacking or defending, manipulating or resisting, pushing or pulling... when we are preoccupied with enemies, we are always...using knowledge, even religious knowledge, for the purposes of ego enhancement, shaming, and controlling.

"But when we use knowledge for the transformation of persons and structures, especially to change ourselves," says Rohr, "we become able to see reality with a new eye and heart, to hold and 'suffer' the conflicts of life instead of passing them on or projecting them elsewhere, to endure life's pain until we have learned its necessary lessons."

"Things happen against your will," he says, "which is what makes it suffering. But over time you can learn to give up your defended state... the situation is what it is, although we will invariably go through the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, resignation, and (hopefully) on to acceptance. The suffering might feel wrong, terminal, absurd, unjust, impossible, physically painful, or just outside of your comfort

zone...Remember, though, that if you do not transform your pain, you will surely transmit it to those around you -- even to the next generation." Becoming such a holding tank that agrees to hold it all, eliminating nothing, is what Rohr means by living in the "naked now."

Perhaps this is what the season of Lent is largely about: living for a season in the "naked now." A time for Adam, Eve, Peter, Judas, you, me, to make a stab at breaking free of our blame and shame long enough to see ourselves as we really are. And then to see ourselves through the eyes of our loving God.

It may take a little extra time, a little extra energy, but there really are some things we can do about the state of our spirit.

To the glory of God. Amen.