November 7, 2021

**The Shame and Blame Game**

There’s a trend online called “pet shaming.” It’s where people post pictures of their pets with signs confessing what they did. Some of them are quite funny:

A dog sitting on a couch

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

A cat holding a sign

Description automatically generated

The owners know that posting pictures of their pets and exposing their misdeeds won’t change their pet’s behaviour or make them good, but they are humorous. Shame and blame don’t create real behaviour change in animals, and they aren’t effective for real change in humans either.

For centuries in Asia, criminals were placed in cages or had to wear a cangue (a rectangular collar, made of heavy blocks of wood), displayed in front of the local magistrates or at the city gates with the purpose of publicly shaming them and educating onlookers about the consequences of moral misbehavior.

Western civilization had a similar history with such practices as the gallows march and dying speech, the branding of petty criminals, the use of the pillory, or the whipping of convicts at appointed stations through a given community.

The stocks were a common form of public shaming in colonial America, where a person had to be locked up in full view of the community as punishment.

In schools, children who misbehaved, failed tests or otherwise displeased the teachers were made to wear dunce hats and stand on a stool for the whole class to witness. Thankfully, most dunce caps were outlawed in schools by the 1920s.

In the recent past, the use of shaming to try to influence behavior has increased again. In the 1960s several conservative judges in the USA ruled that shaming was an appropriate punishment for certain crimes like drunk driving or petty theft. The stocks haven’t been reintroduced and higher courts have disputed the new enthusiasm, but many criminals have been required to put shaming signs in their cars or to stand in a public place with a sign proclaiming their wrongdoing.

And then we have the culture wars that have produced partisan camps eager to shame their opponents. Sadly, elections have come to focus more on character assassination of leaders than on the real issues and challenges facing our nations.

Social media has unleashed a torrent of shaming and hatred, with accusations of sexual impropriety, hypocrisy and racism flooding social networks. These efforts can hound victims, the guilty and the innocent, out of their jobs, force them to relocate—even drive some to suicide.

So psychologists continue to question whether shame and blame actually change behaviour. Let’s take a second to loosely define blame and shame:

**Blame** is a defense mechanism we’ve all used at one time or another:

“He made me do it, Mom.”

“It’s her fault that I acted that way. If she hadn’t done that I wouldn’t have done this.”

“It’s because I was born into this situation, to these parents, etc. etc. that I behave like this.”

“If my skin colour was different, I would have been treated fairly and wouldn’t have acted out.”

**Shame** is what tells us we are not good enough and will never be good enough.

“I don’t deserve love.”

“I’m bad so I deserve this abuse. I had it coming.”

“I’m a terrible person. I’ll never be good enough for anything.”

Hopefully, we have learned that **shame and blame are games that everyone loses.**

God isn’t interested in shaming or blaming, though some churches seem to disagree. God created humanity and he understands how we are made. **We respond to love and kindness and shut our hearts to shame and blame.** Christ’s sacrifice is evidence that **we don’t have to make penance or feel ashamed of our human brokenness**. Let’s read about it in Hebrews 9:24-28.

*For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him. Hebrews 9:24-28 NRSV*

What can we observe about this passage?

First, some context: This message is not to Gentiles, but to Hebrews—Jewish Christians who were being persecuted and temped to leave Christianity and return to Judaism.

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Verses 24 to 26 of Hebrews 9 compare and contrast Christ’s sacrifice with the Levitical high priest who entered the Holy of Holies on one day each year. The need for annual sacrifices, presented by the high priest, reminded the Jews that they needed a mediator, a go-between, someone to intercede and represent them to God since their sins had separated them and eliminated the possibility of a direct relationship.

The writer of Hebrews points out the clear superiority of our new High Priest Jesus Christ who “did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands” but appears in heaven and who did not have to “offer himself again and again” as the high priest had to offer sacrifices every year. This highlights Jesus as fully divine as well as fully human. No longer was there a need for anyone to be the mediator between the people and God. The division was eliminated, the curtain of separation was ripped from top to bottom when Jesus died as the ultimate and only perfect sacrifice.

Though the repetition of the annual sacrifices reminded the people of their sinfulness, it also reinforced blame and shame, and it created a “sin rut”, one that they could see no way out of. Blame and shame do not show the way out of the rut. Christ’s sacrifice, made in love, was done ONCE, and our “repetition” of it, found in our ritual of Communion, now reminds us that **love showed us the way out of the sin rut.**

*[But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. (*[*Hebrews 9:24-26 NRSV*](about:blank)*)]*

In verse 26, the word translated “sin” is *hamartia* in the singular, not plural. Because the letter is addressed to a community, it appears that this is talking about sin in the collective sense, as if Christ’s sacrifice was intended to dismantle systems of sin that are participated in by many people collectively, either knowingly or unknowingly. God is concerned about human-made systems of oppression that create suffering for humanity.

In addition, the passage makes us think about how we still scapegoat, shame and blame people. This is particularly true for people who differ from us—as in race, gender, belief systems, and political views, to name a few. In some respects, it’s as if we have our own “sacrificial system” that places blame on others.

Christ’s sacrifice, “once for ALL”, means we don’t have to sacrifice each other in a negative shame and blame. We are ALL sinners, yet all are image bearers of Almighty God. Jesus died for every human being.

Verse 26b uses the Greek perfect tense to show that not only was Christ’s sacrifice important at that moment in history, but it is still in force today and into eternity. It’s as if humanity is being lifted out of the sin rut of shame and blame by the arms of love in an ongoing effort. Praise God for that!!

Look at verses 27-28 in Hebrews 9:

*And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him. (*[*Hebrews 9:27-28 NRSV*](about:blank)*)*

These verses remind us of our mortality and impermanence, something that we often try to forget or feel as if it is something we need to apologize for. Our elder brother Jesus Christ was also mortal—fully human AND fully divine—and it was his mortal humanity that made his sacrifice possible. Who better to understand our weaknesses than one who “has been tested as we are, yet without sin” as it says in Hebrews 4:15.

Here we are reminded that Christ promised to return, not to deal with sin but to “save”—or usher in salvation in the form of God’s kingdom or system on earth—for those who love him. Christ’s second coming is not about sin, shame, or blame. It’s about love, a transforming love that looks forward to establishing God’s righteous rule on earth.

So how does all of this apply to us today?

**1. Remind yourself of your value in God’s sight, and let love transform you**.

When we understand that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit know us intimately, the good and the bad, yet love us without reservation (remember Christ’s sacrifice, once for all), it’s as if our “cup of love” is filled and can overflow to others. We are not known or identified by sin or sinful behavior; that is all taken care of in Christ.

God doesn’t look down and say to Jesus, “Look, there’s that murderer, slanderer, liar—fill in the blank sinner-- praying again.”

Because of Christ’s sacrifice, He looks down and sees each of us in our TRUE identity, as a beloved child. We participate with Jesus and through the Holy Spirit he will lead us to change; he transforms us into better people as a result of God’s love flowing in us and through us.

**2. Celebrate Communion by understanding how we have been set free from the sin rut.**

Each time we participate in the ritual of Communion, we are reminding ourselves and each other that we are not shamed or blamed by God for our shortcomings. Instead, we are held as precious, worth the very life of Jesus Christ, “once for all.” Love has lifted us up out of the sin rut, and loving others is how we participate with Christ in helping set them free.

**3. Examine yourself for ways that you still engage in patterns of shaming and blaming others.**

Our culture encourages us to point fingers, compare ourselves, and engage in shaming and blaming behaviors. By remembering who we are in Christ, and by remembering others are also image bearers, God’s beloved children, we can express transforming love to others even in situations where holding them accountable is necessary. We remember that shame and blame don’t change people; love does.

Even though the pictures of guilty pets we saw in the beginning were funny, shame and blame are not funny. Shame and blame are used to put others down—the opposite of what God calls us to do—and are ineffective means of getting someone to change. That is why the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit reached out to humanity in loving sacrifice, “once for ALL”, that we could be transformed by love and then extend that transforming love to one another.

May God help us share his love and life with others through the good news that Jesus removed our shame, and therefore is no reason to blame.