

What does shame feel to you? For me it feels like my Middle School cafeteria: trying to navigate the lunch table in 7<sup>th</sup> grade as a new student. I didn't know anybody, and I had no one to sit with. I remember Mr. Knight coming over to talk to me in my first week, and he told me he could introduce me to some students if I wanted. Now Mr. Knight was the coolest teacher. He played in a band, sported an awesome mullet, but there are certain things even cool teachers can't help you with. I was on my own. Experiencing the shame of social exclusion is one of the worst and best things that's ever happened to me. It's one of the worst things because the wounds it left me with took many years to heal. It was one of the best things because it taught me empathy for the excluded and the shamed. Blessed are those who've been excluded, for they truly belong.

Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God is a Big Table where everyone is welcome and everything belongs. In a world of social hierarchies, this is a radical idea. Last week we saw how Peter thought his sin made him unworthy of someone as good as Jesus, but of course Jesus only hangs out with sinners, so it turns out Peter does belong, sin and all. But sin isn't the only thing that makes us feel unworthy, is it? Today we see Jesus address a variety of shame stories, and he reframes them all. He honors the things we are ashamed of, and then he warns us about the things we are proud of, and in doing so he levels our hierarchies and welcomes us all.

After last week's reading, Jesus has been busy making his vision reality. He eats with tax collectors and sinners. He heals a man on the Sabbath, which gets him in hot water with the religious people, but that doesn't stop him. In fact, he decides to expand the work, so he calls 12 apostles to join him. After that, he comes down from the mountain, which leads us to today's reading. Word has gotten out that Jesus is in town, and boy are crowds are ready! People have come from Judea and Jerusalem, but they've also come from Tyre and Sidon, which is really interesting because those are Gentile territories. The boundaries of who's in and who's out marvelously blur in Jesus' presence. The crowds come to hear and to be healed, and Jesus heals them all. He doesn't ask for insurance cards. He doesn't ask if they are the right religion. He doesn't check their immigration status. Jesus indiscriminately heals everyone. Then Luke says that while standing a level plain, Jesus looks up and begins teaching.

This is Jesus' Sermon on the Plain. Many of you are familiar with the more famous Sermon on the Mount from Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus says, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs in the kingdom of heaven. Luke's frames the story differently. In Matthew's version, Jesus plays the role of Moses, speaking a new law from the mountain of God, but in Luke, Jesus is on the same level as everyone else. In fact, Luke tells us he looks up at his disciples, indicating he's sitting while they're standing. Jesus doesn't talk down to us. He stoops down and takes the lower position.

It seems quite natural to us that when we think of God, we think of transcendence. We imagine that God is above us, beyond us, and we mere mortals can expect to discover God in what's above and what is powerful. But in Jesus, we are given a different way to look for God, not in what's above us, but in what's below, not in what's powerful, but in weakness. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is unlike any god we could imagine ourselves, a God of humility whose power is seen in weakness and service. If that's who God is, it should come as no surprise when Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor." For Luke it's not poor in spirit, but simply poor, those without economic resources. But there is an interesting nuance to the Greek word for poor. The word is *ptochos*, and it refers to someone who is so destitute, that they are bent over, cowering

in shame. Sin isn't the only thing that makes us feel shame. Poverty does too. Jesus blesses those who are so ashamed of their low position that they refuse to even look at you.

Jesus reframes what we find shameful, and he honors it. Jesus isn't saying that it's a good thing to be poor, as though he's saying, "I know you think it's a curse to be poor, but I've got a surprise for you, it's actually a blessing!" That's not it. Part of Jesus' ministry is about alleviating poverty, so he's not saying being poor is in and of itself is good. What he is doing is honoring those society dishonors. God honors those who have lost it all. Here's how I would translate it, "How honorable are you who are poor, for heaven is yours today." Being poor was a shameful thing 2000 years ago, and not much has changed over the years. We tell stories about how people are poor because their lazy. It's always easier to stigmatize poverty than it is to alleviate the causes of poverty, but Jesus sees through the lies of our cultural shame stories, and he speaks honor to those deemed unworthy.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. He also reframes our cultural narrative around wealth. He says, "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." Now, we might wonder if Jesus is now shaming the wealthy, even as he uplifts the poor, but that can't be right because Jesus doesn't deal in shame. Jesus' ministry was upheld by wealthy patrons, a group of women who support him and his liberating work. Luke is written to a man named Theophilus, who was likely a wealthy patron of the early church. So, Jesus doesn't shame or curse the wealthy, but he does warn them. Here I think the Message gets it exactly right, "It's trouble ahead if you think you have it made. What you have is all you'll ever get." Jesus honors what we think is dishonorable—poverty, hunger, grief, and humiliation, and he warns us about what we think is the good life—wealth, satisfaction, happiness, and popularity. None of these are bad things, but they are fleeting and unstable. If we think wealth will bring happiness, think again, Jesus says.

We live in a culture that is obsessed with wealth, and yet social science has confirmed time and again that once our basic needs are met, wealth and happiness no longer correlate. Jesus warns us that if you think money is all you need, then there's going to be trouble ahead, because wealth ebbs and flows, and it doesn't shield us from heartbreak and loss. Rich or poor, we all suffer. We all die. Jesus warns us that if you don't have something to hold onto besides your money, life will topple you.

Jesus neither shames the wealthy, nor does he romanticize poverty. Instead, Jesus reframes the stories we tell around poverty and wealth, honoring the former and warning the latter, and in doing so he puts us all on the same level. He does the same with his other blessings and woes. Nobody wants to be poor or hungry. No one wants to grieve or be humiliated. But all of us will know these states in some form or another. When you find yourself in one these places, and some of you are in them right now, know this: God honors you, and you are not alone. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is a God who knows all things: poverty, hunger, grief, and humiliation. Jesus knew them well, so when you find yourself there, God is with you, honoring you.

Whatever your shame story is, God can reframe it for you. When you cower in shame, know there is one who stoops low with you. Instead of being a source of pain and exclusion, it can be transformed into a source of empathy, a superpower that allows you to connect with people across all our social hierarchies. Whatever state you find yourself in, rich or poor, joyous or grieving, you are welcome at the Big Table. There's a seat at Christ's table with your name on

it. And the you who's invited is the whole you, including all your grief and humiliation. Those belong too. When the light of love shines on your shame, you can learn to love those parts of your story as well. You are welcome at the Table, not because of your wealth or your accomplishments, not because of all the nice things other people say about you, but because you're human, and that in the end is enough.