

“On Proper Self-Love: The Difference between Guilt and Shame”
Sermon based on Rom. 13:8-10, Rom. 8:1, Psalm 34:4-5,18, and Proverbs 19:8

Rev. Paul E. Capetz
Christ Church by the Sea (United Methodist), Newport Beach
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Sometimes I meet new people, and when they learn that I am a minister, they feel a need to explain to me that they don't go to church anymore. For some of them, the church used to be a very important part of their lives, but bad experiences led them to leave their churches. When I ask for more information about what happened to them, what I frequently hear are variations on a single theme. Somehow their churches conveyed to these people that they simply weren't good enough, that they just didn't measure up. One man reported that, after having attended a church for some time, the attitude of other members toward him changed when they found out that he had been divorced. A woman told me she stopped going to church when her unwed daughter became pregnant. Others had similar things to say. There are all sorts of people like these who feel that their lives are too messy for them to find acceptance in a church. If you happen to be talking with former Catholics, they may even refer to themselves as “recovering Catholics” who are trying to get over the “Catholic guilt” they imbibed through their strict religious upbringing at the hands of priests and nuns. So, better to leave church behind than to live under the weight of all that guilt!

It always saddens me when I hear stories like these. Having had a very positive religious upbringing myself, I feel that these people are missing out on the real deal. Yet I do believe they are pointing to a real problem that exists in many churches. That problem is *shame*, but it goes unnamed and is left unrecognized because it is confused with something else, namely, *guilt*.

Those recovering Catholics shouldn't be talking about "Catholic guilt," but about "Catholic shame." Guilt and shame are not the same thing, yet they can be hard to distinguish from one another. So, it is important for us to try to disentangle them since, in my view, a healthy church is not in the business of trying to make people feel shame. Given how much people suffer from shame in our society, an essential part of our ministry should be to help those who are burdened or crippled by shame to become freed from it. But in order for us to be able to do this, we have to understand the difference between shame and guilt. Before trying to define them and how they differ, let me tell you a story that I think will enable you to grasp the difference right away.

The story is about a little boy. By all accounts, he was a very happy little boy who liked to play and laugh and do all the things that small children like to do. But then he started going to school and suddenly he became very unhappy. The other kids teased him and called him names. Each afternoon after school he would run home crying because of all the mean things the other kids had said to him; and then the next morning, he wouldn't want to go back to school again because he was afraid of what would happen there. Why were the other kids so mean to him? Because he looked different. This little boy was born with a birthmark on his face. Before he started school, he had never really been aware of it or even taken much notice of his face at all; but once he went to school, the other kids pointed out to him that there was something terribly wrong with his face. They told him he was ugly. His face was something to laugh at and make fun of and so they didn't want to play with him. The little boy was heartbroken but there wasn't anything he could do about it except to learn to live with the insults and the humiliation inflicted upon him by the other kids.

Now, let's get back to the distinction between guilt and shame. Had this little boy done anything wrong so that he should feel guilty? No, obviously not. And yet he felt intense shame. He felt that there was something terribly wrong with him, even though he had never done anything wrong. And therein lies the crucial difference between shame and guilt. Guilt is the awareness that we have done something wrong and we ought to own up to it and take responsibility for it. But shame is the intense feeling of being unacceptable, of being unworthy of the love and acceptance of others, even if we have done nothing wrong. Guilt is how our conscience alerts us to our own wrongdoing. But shame is not necessarily a reliable indicator of anything real about ourselves because shame comes from outside of ourselves. In the case of the little boy with the birthmark, his deep sense of shame was the result of having internalized the message of the other kids that there was something wrong with him and therefore he didn't belong, he didn't deserve to be included among them. But his shame was not a reliable indicator of anything about his actual worth or value as a person, yet he was too young to understand this. Psychologists would say that he didn't yet have the "ego-strength" to withstand their bullying. So, his sense of himself was warped, distorted by the cruelty of others who wanted to demean and belittle him.

The gospel that the church proclaims is very often focused on the forgiveness of sins, and thus with guilt on account of sins. God's offer of forgiveness is good news because it promises the guilty person a new start, an opportunity to repent of past sins, to make amends, and to move on. Without a proper sense of guilt, there could be no forgiveness. Guilt is actually healthy for this reason. For without the capacity for feeling guilt, we could not take moral responsibility for our lives. A person who never feels any guilt at all is not a model of psychological health but,

rather, a sociopath. Such people have no conscience. They are incapable of guilt and thus of any sense of moral responsibility. They are exceedingly dangerous to the rest of us. So, then, guilt is a necessary component of what it means to be a morally responsible human being. Guilt is the way my conscience alerts me to having done wrong. Asking for forgiveness is the humble acknowledgment of my guilt. There is nothing pathological about any of this.

But in my own emotional and spiritual struggles as a person as well as in my pastoral work with others, I have to come to believe that the church's message can come off sounding overly one-sided. In our emphasis upon forgiveness of sins to the person with guilt on their conscience, we have overlooked the person who may be wracked with shame. In calling people to repent of their sins, we may not have done a good job of tending to the wounds of those who have been sinned against by others and whose soul is poisoned by shame. In calling for love of neighbor, we may have underemphasized the need for a proper love of oneself. So, let's look anew at what the Bible teaches in order to rectify these shortcomings of previous preaching and teaching.

In his Letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul gives us a summary of the entire moral law as it is found in the Old Testament: "Owe no one anything except to love one another, for the person who loves another has fulfilled the law." This is the whole point, Paul is saying, of all the various individual commands found in the teachings of Moses and the prophets. And then he lists a few of the commands found in the Ten Commandments: "Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, etc." Each of these commandments is an illustration of the one great commandment: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Paul explains that this is the one great

commandment summarizing all the others precisely because “love does no wrong to a neighbor,” our neighbor being any fellow human being. By definition, what is loving can never be harmful *if it is truly loving*. Hence, love is the proper way to summarize what God requires of us morally, for what else is adultery, stealing, murder, and the like if not ways of harming others. In conclusion, therefore, Paul declares: “Love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom. 13:8-10).

Paul has given us an excellent statement about love and what God requires of us morally. Yet everything he says is focused on how we are to treat *others*. But there is something here in what Paul says that is left unspoken and underemphasized, which is nonetheless vitally important, namely, we are not only to love our neighbors; we are to love ourselves *as well*. Think about the great commandment, “Love your neighbor *as yourself*.” What do the words “as yourself” mean? These words imply that there is such a thing as a proper love of ourselves. To be sure, we are to love and care for our neighbors *not less* than we love and care for ourselves. This is the point of the “Golden Rule”: Treat others as you want them to treat you. But, how often have you heard a sermon in church about how much God wants you to love and care for yourself? And yet, a proper self-love is implied in the very commandment to love your neighbor as yourself.

We usually think of self-love as “selfishness.” This, of course, is what the Second Letter to Timothy means when it warns us against “lovers of self” (selfish people). For centuries, the church has warned us against self-love as though it were the same thing as selfishness, but this has only compounded our problem. In our own time psychologists have shown us that selfish people really don’t love themselves at all. In fact, they loathe themselves. Selfish people are

actually lacking in genuine self-love and their selfishness is a symptom of this lack of self-love. In their efforts to take from others, they are trying to make up for the deficiencies they feel inside themselves. Selfish people are like a black hole in outer space, sucking up everything around them in order to fill up the emptiness inside them. So, we need to be clear that self-love in the proper sense is not selfishness at all, but rather its opposite.

Think about this: If we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, then that means we should not care for them less than we care for ourselves. But it also means that *we should not care for ourselves less than we care for others*, either. Sometimes those of us who genuinely do care for others and who are the least selfish people have a difficult time learning to extend this same care to ourselves. In my pastoral work with others, I often have to urge them to take care of themselves and be kind to themselves, to love themselves at much as they love others. I think our churches would be much healthier communities if we were clearer about the need to encourage one another to take care of ourselves, to love ourselves properly. After all, each of us is one of God's creatures whom God dearly loves. If we do not love ourselves, then we are guilty of disdain for God's work of creation. Loving yourself may sometimes be the most difficult task you have on account of the shame that you carry around inside, yet it is no less important than loving your neighbor. While you are not more important than your neighbor, you are certainly not less important than your neighbor, either.

We have all heard about the reports of rampant sexual abuse of children and youth by Catholic priests, though this problem is not confined to the Catholic Church. Right now, one of our own Methodist ministers in this annual conference is in prison awaiting trial on the charge of

abusing a young girl under his pastoral care. Aside from the deep betrayal of trust that occurs whenever a representative of the church takes advantage of the vulnerability of someone younger and defenseless, the victims of sexual abuse invariably feel deep shame afterwards and blame themselves for what happened to them. They mistakenly think that they are guilty of a sin when in fact they have been made to feel shame on account of someone else's violation of their personhood and bodily integrity. In one of the more horrific stories told to me by a woman who no longer attends church, she shared with me that her husband once hit her because she didn't want to have sexual relations with him that night. She left the house and got in her car and drove to the pastor's home and asked for shelter since she was afraid to go back home. The pastor refused, telling her that her place was with her husband. Hopeless and despondent, she meekly returned home to her husband. That pastor failed her; not only did her husband shame her but so did her pastor. Years later, she left her husband and left the church, having realized that she was of far more value than either of them had ever led her to believe.

When we are guilty for having sinned against our neighbor because we haven't loved our neighbor as ourselves, we can repent and ask for forgiveness. But what about the shame that prevents us from loving ourselves as we should? How do we let go of that? Remember: whereas guilt is how our conscience alerts us to wrongdoing so that we can become mature moral agents who take full responsibility for our actions, shame cripples us by keeping us in bondage to lies that other people have wanted us to believe about ourselves. Recall the little boy with the birthmark on his face? He hadn't done anything wrong so guilt was not the issue; he had bought a pack of lies that others had told him about his lack of worth. As a result, he was crippled by shame. I was that little boy with the birthmark, and fortunately for me, my parents eventually

found a plastic surgeon who assured them that he was capable of performing a successful skin graft to remove that birthmark even though that was still a very risky surgery in 1965. I was in third grade when I had that surgery and it changed my life. Yet, to this day, when I look at my face in the mirror, I sometimes wonder how those early experiences of being shamed and humiliated by the other kids still affect my own sense of myself. On a positive note, I do think these early experiences gave me a heart for other outcasts in the world who are humiliated and shamed by others. Each year I donate a few hundred dollars to an organization called “Smile Train” that pays for American surgeons to travel abroad to poor countries in order that they may perform plastic surgeries free of charge to children with facial deformities so that they won’t have to live with the shame of feeling ugly and repulsive.

Last winter I was a counselor at our Methodist Youth Camp in Wrightwood in the San Bernardino mountains. Since I had had so many great experiences at our church camps when I was young, I was delighted to be invited to return as a counselor. One morning I was to give a talk in front of a hundred boisterous teenagers based on Romans 8:1 (“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”). This verse was projected on a screen except that instead of the word “condemnation,” we replaced it with the word “shame,” so that the verse read: “There is therefore now no shame for who are in Christ Jesus.” After all, shame often feels like a form of condemnation, doesn’t it? We have been judged and condemned by others as being unworthy of their acceptance. And then I told them the story about the little boy with the birthmark. Before beginning with my remarks, I had been wondering how I was ever going to get these rambunctious young people to sit still for ten minutes so I might have their attention while speaking to them; but as soon as I started talking about shame, you could hear a pin drop in

that room. These kids knew all about shame since that is what they are most afraid of: being seen as unacceptable and unworthy in the eyes of their peers. To those for whom shame is the major issue, the message of the gospel has to be the assurance of their unconditional worth in God's eyes despite how other human beings might view them.

Many people in our society are wracked with shame: a sense of not being worthy of others' love, respect, and acceptance. Psychologists tell us that there is an epidemic of shame in our culture and that shame is what fuels addictions to alcohol, drugs, sex, and pornography. For this reason, if the only way we can preach the gospel is by talking about guilt for sin and the need for forgiveness, we may be missing what many people most need to hear from the church nowadays. Don't get me wrong: There is plenty of sin for which people need to repent and ask for forgiveness. I don't want to minimize that by any means. But people whose major problem is shame are those who don't love themselves properly; they are those who don't know their proper worth as human beings created in God's very own image and loved by God. For these people, language about sin and guilt can easily be misunderstood as reinforcing shame and the sense of unworthiness they already carry around inside. Besides, too many churches and too many Christians have not yet learned to distinguish clearly between shame and guilt, so that they compound the problem rather than helping to solve it. The gospel, the good news, can assume many forms, depending on the situation in which it is to be proclaimed. To those who are rightly afflicted with a guilty conscience on account of wrongdoing, the gospel proclaims forgiveness. But to those who are wracked with shame, the gospel proclaims God's acceptance and healing of the wounds that inflicted shame. The world needs more guilt and less shame. That is, we need to foster greater moral responsibility without inducing or reinforcing shame. If you are guilty of

sin, God offers forgiveness. If you are filled with shame, God offers you the truth about your worth that exposes the lie that someone else led you to believe about your lack of worth.

The apostle Paul reminds us that love is the fulfilling of the law because love does no wrong to the neighbor. We should add: love does no wrong to the self, either. We are to love our neighbors no less than we love ourselves and, conversely, we are to love ourselves no less than we love our neighbors. An ancient rabbi named Hillel once said: “If I am only for myself, what am I? But if I am not for myself, who will be?”

At the youth retreat last winter, another counselor told the kids as we were about to pray before the meal that they didn’t always have to bow their heads in prayer, but could lift them up to God in heaven while praying. Just as the Psalmist said, “Look at God, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed.” For there is no shame for those who belong to Christ. Amen.