

“To Love as Jesus Loves – Reconciliation” based on John 13:31-35

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on May 22, 2022, for Shelby Presbyterian Church online

This passage today from John 13 is one that really captures the essence of all of scripture in just a few short lines. There is so much here that could be brought in, but it got me thinking about the shows that Harrison and Josephine watch and the ones we prefer because we hope it will help instill the gospel message in our kids.

You see, a lot of kids shows will automatically go to bad guys versus good guys in black and white saying, ‘these are the good guys and these are the bad guys’ and the lines are clearly drawn. While this could be an allegory for the great spiritual battle between good and evil, it applies it to flesh and Paul says in Ephesians that our battle is not against ‘flesh and blood,’ but the principalities, the leaders, the powers that rule this world. This is the fight that God is fighting on our behalf, and our role is not to fight, but to stand with the armor of God.

I struggle with these good and evil dichotomies in children’s programs because they tend to see the world in an irredeemable fashion. That viewpoint of good and evil players is the world into which Jesus speaks in today’s scripture. It is a world that sees things in terms of shame and honor. It is a world that says, if you do wonderful things, are born in the right class, and if you are achieving great things, then you are to be honored. But if you fail. If you fall from grace. If you stumble, then shame can undo all of those things.

In the Roman world there was nothing more shameful than being strewn out on a cross, nailed or bound, naked, to suffer and suffocate to death in a very public and horrifying death. Rome used the cross as a tool of shame across the empire to control people and defeat them by defining them as shamed. It was reserved for those people who were enslaved and went against the household order, the economic order of the day. It was reserved also for insurrectionists who rebelled and went against Rome’s order and authority, the peace brought by the sword.

This was the ultimate in shaming and that was its point. Don’t get me wrong, the cross is a brutal way to die, but its power was not just in suffering and death. A person might have a rightful claim that suffering 20 years with a debilitating illness or cancer is far more suffering than three hours on a cross. But it does not bear the shame that the cross carries. When we hear in the gospel that our God shared in our pain and misery, it is good news, but what is missed if we only compare the level of suffering and the death itself to our lives, we miss that part of this was God sharing in our shame.

When we read John’s gospel and we read about glory and what it means to be glorified – that the Son of Man is glorified – that glory is a code word for the shame of the cross, along with the resurrection and ascension that followed. The glory is that the Word became flesh, became one of us to bear all of our limits, and went to that shameful cross to die for us, but that did not defeat him. He rose again, taking away the power of sin and death, even the shame of the cross and shame that this world tries to put on us. John puts the glory of God present in that shame.

Rome crucified a lot of people. Probably you remember the movie Spartacus, but in the real story of 73 BC, when Spartacus was defeated, those who fought with him against their slavery were defeated and 6,000 were crucified along the Appian Way. This was a person every hundred feet or so for about 120 miles in order for Rome to send a message, "Don't do this. This will not end well for you." And yet, Jesus dies on the cross just like that. It conquers the world. It changes everything. His movement never ends.

Shame in this situation is something the gospel overcomes. We are not defined by the things this world says are good or bad, but by the love that God has for us. God's love for us is not earned by what we do, but because by grace, we are adopted children of God. By sharing in our humanity, the Son offers the ultimate honorific in the shame and honor culture – making us co-heirs to the inheritance only he deserves. As adopted children of the true King we receive the life and honor that belongs to the Son, who went to that cross to die for us.

I think we waste a lot of time in our world with shame and glory. This is not to say that there are not things that are right and wrong. That's where righteousness – sharing in God's justice – and guilt – the reality that we fall short – come in. There's a difference between guilt and shame. Shame has no room for forgiveness. Whereas guilt cries out for forgiveness. The only antidote to shame, as the late Rabbi Jonathan Sachs has said, is forgetfulness.

Shame is nullified only by enough time to forget what has transpired, or enough honors to tip the scales back in our favor. That is why many who have been shamed in history or who suffered defeat, have committed suicide as the only option to end the shame and maybe even regain some honor. Often this world wants to define people by their honors and by the shame they have endured, but Christ breaks that system and says we are beloved. We are forgiven.

The alternative to shame and honor is guilt and righteousness. When we acknowledge our guilt, we share in Christ's righteousness. That provides the ground for reconciliation. You hear me talk a lot about the ministry of reconciliation and this command from Jesus describes that ministry: Love one another, as I have loved you. This is what reconciliation is – it's coming together in mutual, self-sacrificial love.

You see, if anyone has reason or right to express a grievance against anyone – to stand above another and shame them – it is God. All of us fall short of God's glory and righteousness. And yet, God shared in our humanity to forgive our sins. When we look at reconciliation in this world and see two sides opposing each other, often one will say, 'I'm in the right here. I've done nothing wrong. They are wrong.' This one then stands in a place where God even stand, even when God has every right to do so. To say something like that is not loving as Jesus loves us. This is a stance in a place of judgment and shaming, claiming your honor over another's shame.

This is not the gospel. The gospel deals with guilt and righteousness, which offers forgiveness. Because what is interesting about forgiveness is not that it lets someone off easy, but that it convicts the person, because to accept forgiveness is to accept guilt. You don't accept forgiveness for something you did not do. Why would you? And so, God's forgiveness is not dependent on a perfect confession, but an acceptance of God's freely offered forgiveness.

Indeed, accepting forgiveness is accepting our guilt before God in order to obtain the righteousness of Christ. That's the beauty of what the gospel says over and against this world that wants to define everything as one or the other and leave us in polar opposition with each other. Whereas God seeks to reconcile us by bringing us together. Reconciliation in our community is not about telling others what to do, but it is about listening and then walking alongside others. It's interesting that in the Lord's Prayer, it says, "forgive us our debts, or trespasses, or sins, as we forgive those who are our debtors, who trespass or sin against us."

We ask God for forgiveness, but we attach to our request for forgiveness, our own commitment is to forgive others as God forgives us. It's not as though we can take advantage of this and just say, "You have to forgive me," to someone every time we wrong them. That is a power play. This is about our job of forgiving others and asking God to forgive us. Imagine we truly did that. How different would our world be?

Instead of trying to shame others who offend us, like on the Internet where this mentality is prevalent, and so much of it comes from an impulse where people think that they are doing good by shaming others. The cross offers something different. Shame is defeated on the cross. Our guilt is made visible in the cross and defeated as our righteousness is found in the cross.

When we hear "love one another as I have loved you," the love described here is the love of our God who humbly shared in our humanity, coming to us, to listen to us, to be obedient to what it is to be one of us. This is how we love others as Jesus loves us: To humble ourselves, to share in the lives of others in empathy, and love by forgiving, enduring and all that Paul lays out in 1 Corinthians 13.

As you go forward, remember that this good news means your past does not define you. Your value and worth is defined by the love that God has for you as a child of God in Jesus Christ. This is something we need to remember for our kids too because with all the shaming that is out there, on the Internet and beyond, they have to know they are not defined by their past and their shame. Yes, we tell kids to be careful because everything they put on the Internet stays there forever, but we have to tell them also that it still doesn't define who they are, no matter how this world tries to tell them it does.

We must remember for ourselves and tell our children and tell all we meet this: "You are a beloved child of God." Remember that this is not because of anything you have done, but because God shared in your humanity by the Son of God, who is one with the Father and Spirit, living as we live and dying for us. In doing so, he gave us a share of his inheritance, which is an inheritance only he deserves. This inheritance is life – abundant and eternal. This is what grace is. It is the unmerited favor shown by the gift of Christ himself. That is what defines our calling to be part of reconciliation in this world, as adopted children of God through Christ, loving as Christ loves us. Amen.