

“Trading Guilt and Shame for Wholeness and Dignity”

(A Dramatic Sermon)

John 9:1–41

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It is true what they say about guilt and shame being gifts that keep on giving. I would know. As if it wasn't bad enough to spend my life unable to see anything and have to depend on the charity of others, I had the added burdens of isolation, guilt, and shame. I was cut off from community because I was considered a sinner and thus could not be among the faithful. My very presence might taint them. So, I felt guilty, how could I not? My life was covered in shame.

Even Jesus' disciples seemed to embrace this thinking. “Rabbi,” they said to Jesus, “who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Suffering was viewed to be the result of sin. So, the only question was, “Who's sin — mine or my parents?” It would be a strange God who would punish a child for the parents' wrongdoing, though parental acts can have consequences — the addictions of an expectant mother, the violence of an abusive father. But how could a child born blind have caused the blindness? Well, some contended that a baby could sin in the womb, and expectant mothers being kicked often might have had some sympathy with the view... but is this sin?

I'm not sure I bought this nonsense, but it's pretty much all I ever heard. I was known as the blind guy, not a man with blindness. And I was defined by sin. Even if I questioned this view, I had no alternative explanation, and we have a way of feeling what we feel. Guilt doesn't have to make sense. And once we feel it, it becomes deeply imprinted on our very being such that even if we change our thinking and reality, we still retain a residue of guilt.

The disciples didn't help me nor did the Pharisees, religious leaders with political influence. After Jesus healed me, their only concern was with making sure Jesus' didn't get any good press from the experience. These would-be people of God and society didn't care

about people's needs. They paid no attention to me when I was blind, and I simply became an inconvenience when I was healed.

I don't know if you know any leaders, religious or political, like this, but all they cared about was protecting their turf and making sure they got the credit for anything good. They didn't even notice I was there, much less offer to help me, when I was blind. They cared about their rules — Jesus had broken one by healing on the Sabbath — they didn't care about my needs. I was a sinner, just like Jesus.

I tried to convince them they were wrong about that. How could he have healed me if he was not from God? They didn't like that question. They reminded me I was born entirely in sins, I had nothing to teach them! But they asked so many questions, I wondered why. Did they too want to become his disciples? They didn't like that question either. I wasn't trying to get under their skin, but, apparently, I did, I don't know why. For religious leaders, they didn't seem very smart. So, why did their teaching about sin get to me? I can't explain it, it just did.

But, of course, my story didn't end with guilt and shame any more than it did with blindness. Jesus came along, and rather than answer his disciples' question about whose sin caused my blindness, he focused on what God was going to do through him — heal me! “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” he said, “but God's works are going to be revealed in him.” He wasn't saying God made me blind so that God could heal me. What sort of God would resort to such a parlor trick? He wasn't offering a diagnosis at all; he was offering a prognosis. From what I gather, he did that a lot. He focused not on who or what is to blame for a problem but how to fix it. And fix it, he did.

He spat on the ground, made mud with the saliva, spread the mud on my eyes, then told me to wash in the pool of Siloam; and when I did, I could see. I'm not sure how it worked. God must have had something to do with it! It reminded me of the story in 2 Kings 5 about the prophet Elisha healing the foreign commander Naaman and asking him to wash in the Jordan. So, when the Pharisees asked me who I thought Jesus was, I said a prophet. I didn't know, but it made sense to me.

But Jesus didn't just heal me physically; he healed me in many other ways too. I could find work and live a normal life. I could enter

the community, as long as I stayed away from the Pharisees. Even my parents had to be careful about what they said because the Pharisees might throw them out of the synagogue. Do your sacred communities do this, throw certain people out, exclude them for sin or crossing the wrong line? Anyone who talked about Jesus being the Messiah was at risk in my time, along with a lot of other people.

Anyway... I was healed not only physically but also socially, and I was given permission to let go of guilt and shame. I confess it was ever a work-in-progress. There is no switch to turn off and on. But I knew in my head that I was not to blame for my past struggles. Jesus told me this much. And I no longer had cause for shame. I could stand up straight and feel... well... normal, whole.

I was blind, but now I could see. I was outcast, but now I was included. I was able to see a beautiful world filled with possibilities, to see and not just with my eyes. I traded a world defined my limitation, isolation, guilt and shame for a new life of wholeness, dignity, acceptance, and connection... and I liked the differences in my life!

But what does any of this have to do with you? Well, perhaps you have been defined too much by your limitations or by guilt and shame or both. I know this is a different time. You are all highly educated and sophisticated. It may be that in Lake Wobegon the women are strong, the men are good-looking, and the children are above average... but you are better than that! You're not going to think less of yourself because of someone else's judgment, you don't believe suffering is caused by sin, you're not vulnerable to guilt and shame... unless you are human.

There is no sure-fire way to insulate yourself against these challenges. Even among good church folk like you who may have come from decent families, there are many people who carry heavy burdens of self-judgment. Some guilt is justified. In fact, there may be just the right amount of guilt in this world. It just needs to be redistributed, and not just between people, but within each of us, about what we feel guilty. There is such a thing as sin, Jesus says so, guilt has its place.

But that place is not to be debilitating. Grace is available, and much guilt many feel is not justified. It comes from things we were told

as children; things we learned, perhaps even at church; people who labelled us, judged us, and tried to define us. I know that just saying, “Let it go!” is not an answer in and of itself. Sometimes therapy is needed, time can be helpful, and God always stands ready to offer affirmation and love. But let it go! Allow God’s perspective to define you, and that perspective is one of love and affirmation for who you are.

But there is another message in my story. It concerns the ways you still devalue others because of their different abilities, blame others for their condition, view sin as a cause of suffering. By “you” I don’t necessarily mean that you personally intentionally engage in labelling and judgment. But many do in your culture, and you are either fighting against those tendencies or allowing them to remain in place.

What do people with different abilities experience and how do they process this? Those with mobility challenges, people with visual or hearing impairments, all with mental and emotional differences – are they welcome, I mean, really welcome, able to participate in your shared life? When it comes to the idea of sin causing suffering, you may not think you have done something wrong every time you get sick or that others with illness are therefore necessarily more sinful, but do you not sometimes wonder about yourself, and are some not labelled and blamed because of their identity, marital status, nationality, or race?

There is a lot of blindness in this world, and I don’t just mean physical blindness. There is an inability to see revealed in judgment, hatred, and oppression. This Jesus who gave me sight and so much more came to open hearts and minds and eyes. He came to bring light in the darkness. But you have to continue that work now.

I never thought of this, I assure you, but scholars considering my story – that is a strange reality in and of itself – have observed that I followed Jesus in a way. I faced criticism and resistance, just like him. I stood up for truth, just like him. I ended up in danger, just like him. You are called to be like him in all these ways, because if you are about the work of expanding people’s ability to see, really see the world and all the people in it, as God does, you will experience all these realities.

I realize you may feel I like I’m preaching to you now, and you may like that about as much as the Pharisees did. Why should you listen

to me? I'm just a simple guy who got some much-needed help from a kind, prophetic soul named Jesus. But there is a world full of people who still need help. Many of you do too. Help is available. Jesus is still about the work of healing and light. But don't take my word for it. Find out for yourself. All I know is that I couldn't see, and now I can. I was isolated and rejected, and now I am embraced in love. If this is what it means to be his disciple, wouldn't you want to be one?