

Welcome to the Table

I'm going to take you all back to your college Western Civilization classroom. This is what happens when you hire a historian. The setting is 1914 and the outbreak of World War I. No, you don't have to take notes, but might I remind you of the series of alliances set up between the military powers. These alliances would ignite the world in what was to be known as the War to End all Wars. When a Serbian nationalist assassinated the Duke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungry, like dominos the countries declared war on one another. If you recall, the Serbian nationalist shot the archduke, then Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, then Germany on France, Germany on Russia, England on Germany, Austria-Hungary on Russia, Austria-Hungary on England, France on Austria-Hungary, Japan on Germany, Japan on Austria-Hungary, Russia on the Ottoman Empire, the Ottoman Empire on Russia, The Ottoman Empire on France, the Ottoman Empire on England. BY 1915 the European powers, Japan and their colonies around the world were ablaze. Now, who started the war? At the Paris Peace talks in 1919, the allied nations blamed Germany alone for the start of World War I. The reparations or war punishments were so harsh that Germany fell into depression. The people of Germany felt shame. It was a national shame. Citizens harbored feelings of self-hate, dread, desire to escape, wanting to fight back. What was the result? German theologian Martin Niemoeller wrote that the result was a shame "that found its awful expression in the National Socialist regime of violence."¹

What does this history lesson have to do with today's scripture? Afterall, today's scripture seems to be about "good manners." On first reading, this scripture tells us how to be a thoughtful guest and a good host. But, let's have another look. Today's scripture is also about shame. If national shame can lead to the rise of Nazi Germany what happens to the individual who endures personal, individual shame?

Luke tells us that Jesus shares this parable after watching the Pharisees jockey for position at the table. The story is, in part, a reprimand to those who are thinking of themselves and their reputation before considering others. When I read it, I thought, oh yes, I should not assume that I am in a position of honor. I should consider the others around me and humble myself. It is a good lesson

¹Martin Niemoeller, *Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt, 1945*, in Hockenos, Matthew D. (2004). *A Church Divided: German Protestants Confront the Nazi Past*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. pp. 75–90.

in humility. But, when you read the text in the Greek, the parable moves beyond a lesson from Emily Post. It draws out the human experience of shame. This is my translation, the host says “Give up your place.’ And, then, afterwards, you give up your seat, you go with shame to the last place and occupy it.”² This journey to the last place is not a command by the host. It is collective blame that leads this guest to the seat of shame. Also in telling the parable, Jesus did not have the overzealous guest leave the party. Jesus only described the social phenomenon of shame. In other words, this shame is the result of internalized worthlessness coming from the judgment of peers. Occupying the seat of “shame” is as much internal as it is external. You all know the saying, “Sticks and stone may break my bones but names will never hurt me.” That is wrong, isn’t it. We know that what is said, texted or implied contributes to internalized pain. This is shame.

We have all experienced shame sometime in our life. It is a place that we do not want to go. It makes us fully aware of our inadequacies, makes us question our self-worth. If collective shame can lead to Nazi Germany, then what can happen with individual shame? When we talk about sin in the church, we often talk about something we do. In the Lord’s Prayer, we Presbyterians reference sin as debts and others use trespasses. These words all imply things that we do. These are things for which we feel guilty. Asking for forgiveness from mistakes implies that we are in tune with God’s forgiveness. Unfortunately, these words do not account for shame. This shame is the deep sense that we are not worthy of God’s love. That we are so fundamentally broken that God cannot forgive us.³

Shame is part of our human experience. It can and will keep us separated from living a life of hope and peace. Shame takes over our well-being and leaves us broken. But, we can be restored through Jesus Christ. Think about this. Jesus died the most shameful death on the cross. He took on not only our guilt but also our shame. In dying for us, Jesus has made us whole. If only we can live into that faith. But, in our faith journeys, fully embracing God’s radical love for us is nearly impossible to understand. And, many of us here, sit, wondering if we are worthy of God’s love.

I taught confirmation for nearly ten years. I worked with some of the most amazing young people. They saw the world with open eyes, accepted others, embraced each other with joy. I was taken by surprise when two of my beautiful children told me that they did not feel worthy of joining the

²καὶ ἐλθὼν ὁ σὲ καὶ αὐτὸν καλέσας ἐρεῖ σοι· δὸς τούτῳ τόπον, καὶ τότε ἄρξῃ μετὰ αἰσχύνῃς τὸν ἔσχατον τόπον κατέχειν. (Lk. 14:9 BGT) Emphasis here is on the word αἰσχύνῃς translated as “shame.”

³ See: Philip D. Jameison, *The Face of Forgiveness: A Pastoral Theology of Shame and Redemption* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic Press), 2016.

church. They saw the church filled with perfect, saintly adults beyond their grasp. What they did not see was the journey of each and every person who came with their own experiences of doubt, guilt and shame. My young confirmands did not understand that the people in the pews joined the church not because they were perfect but because they had accepted that they were not.

We are here because of the radical love of God who sent Jesus Christ for us, who loves us while we are still sinners. This is God who loves us despite our shame? How do we invite those living in shame into our fellowship? How do share with them the love of Christ who embraces them?

Jesus has an answer for us. Let us return to our passage. This same parable has a response for our neighbors who are alienated by shame. After the first part of the parable where the overzealous guest is shamed, Jesus offers a new way of honoring people. He does this by encouraging the host, the one who has now tasted shame, to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. These are people who otherwise would have been left out of the party altogether. Like in the first half of our scripture lesson, we tend to overlook the radical message of Jesus Christ. Here, in our current social context, we tend to look at the poor, crippled, lame and blind as folks that need extra help, or have come upon harsh circumstances. This is not the reality in the ancient world. The poor, crippled, lame and blind were left out of mainstream culture.⁴ While Jewish law made provision for them, they lived shunned by society. They lived with collective shame. What does Jesus do? He tells the host to invite them to the banquet. He is saying to the marginalized: you are whole and you are worth being at the table of God.

God through God's radical love has invited those to the table who have never been invited. But do we as God's people respond accordingly? As the universal church, we do a pretty good job of reaching out to the marginalized, but do we necessarily invite them to the table? When working at a soup kitchen a few years ago, I noticed great zeal for serving the meals to the poor, but no one seemed willing to go and dine with them. Likewise, there is money for women who have survived human trafficking, but there is little to help them overcome their overwhelming shame.

And if shame is having this impact on our fellow human beings, our brothers and sisters? Our neighbors and friends? What is it doing to our world? When we live in a world where suicide is on the rise, mass shootings a daily event, and extremist governments are on the rise, I wonder that if our problem stems from a sense of inescapable shame.

⁴James R. Edwards *The Gospel According to Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 418.

And perhaps that shame is crippling some of us, right here? Are you sitting here like my young confirmands wondering if God can really love you? Are you afraid that you don't belong here?

Friends, remember that Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior took on the ultimate shame, bore it for us that we might live without this burden. Remember that God sent Jesus to us and God said, "You are my son, The Beloved, and with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3:22) And that beloved son, came to us and for us so that we might live in the freedom of Christ to love and serve and care for one another. My friends, if and when you experience that sense of shame, that feeling of isolation, remember that you are beloved and know that you, all of you, are welcome at the table.