

1 - Sermon, April 6, 2003

Text: Matthew 27:27-36, Isaiah 53:1-12

Title: "The Nakedness of the Cross"

1. Nakedness of Cross was meant for shame
2. Jesus transformed the shame to healing, hope, salvation
 - a. Edmond Gilbert, homeless
 - b. Terry Anderson
 - c. Poor/shamed often first converts - Wesley, India
 - d. Stephanie Fast
3. Communion as place of healing

1. Nakedness of Cross was meant for shame

Today is that last sermon on the theme of nakedness in the Bible. And in keeping with the season of Lent, when we remember the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, it's good to think about the cross.

For there were two occasions that we know that Jesus himself was naked. The first, of course was at his birth, as a tiny, vulnerable baby, far away from home.

The second was on the cross, when he was hung up, naked, at a major intersection, for all the passers-by to see.

The practice of crucifixion was not just capital punishment. Crucifixion was meant by the Romans to shame and humiliate. Those on the cross were bleeding, naked to the weather, and to everybody walking by. Those who were crucified were hung on the cross by their hands, or with nails driven through their wrists -- to slowly suffocate as the weight of their bodies made it harder and harder to breathe.

Crucifixion was an example to the occupied population; if you cross us, we will *cross* you. Literally. It was intended for deterrence.

But here the first bit of good news already creeps in. We know, as I mentioned earlier, that the Jews believed that being naked was not shameful in itself. It was the act of uncovering someone else's nakedness that was shameful!

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So already, even powerless on the cross, Jesus was not the one shamed. It was the high priests, and Pontius Pilate, and the Roman Soldiers that were shamed. Jesus' crucifixion condemned the sin of the world.

2. Jesus transformed the shame to healing, hope, salvation

But there's more good news.

Because the Christian story is one of turning shame into healing.

From the very beginning, Christian faith has been about snatching victory out of apparent defeat! Jesus was not defeated on the cross. It was painful. It was a spiritual struggle, as Jesus asked the Father if this cruel death could be taken away from him. But, bowing to the Father, saying: not my will, but thine be done.

It was painful, but he was not defeated.

Jesus' story is our story. We may be shamed, but we are not defeated.

Edmond Gilbert, of Little Rock, Arkansas, was shamed. After the company he had worked for closed, he found odd jobs, but he and his family were falling behind in their rent. Soon a fire severely damaged their house, and they had to move in temporarily with relatives. Then their furniture was stolen from the damaged house.

And soon, they had to move out of the relatives' house, because it was just too crowded. So they had nowhere else to go but a homeless shelter. Mr. Gilbert was deeply ashamed of this. He had been raised to work hard and provide for his family. He was bitter, and very angry at himself for having fallen so far. He hated being seen at the shelter, and eating with the other residents. But his bitterness became unbearable when, after his first paycheck from a landscaping job, he found that he could not buy new clothing for his daughters. He had to put 70 percent of his paycheck into a savings fund managed by the homeless shelter for their family. The shelter would provide them with clothing.

So he went to the shelter director, Mrs. DeFoggi. "You shouldn't be giving my children clothes, Gilbert said. "It isn't right."

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“No, it isn’t, Mr. Gilbert,” said Mrs. DeFoggi. “Nothing is right about being homeless. I know that you don’t want to be here. But the fact remains that you *are* here. While you are, let us help you.”

That night, Gilbert took out his Bible and read and prayed. “I am here, God. And so are you. Help me.”

The shame began to melt away, and soon Gilbert found himself reaching out to other residents, and easing their burdens. When an old man went to the shelter, angry at being there, Gilbert offered him a glass of water, and then just listened for an hour as the man poured out his troubles. That old man became his special charge.

Gilbert’s nine months in a homeless shelter started out as an experience of shame, but was transformed into an experience of healing.

Have you experienced something shameful that God turned into something healing? Have your weaknesses turned into God’s strength in a way that helped other people?

Sometimes, a shameful experience is a great teacher. Always, God can help us to overcome the shame, and turn it to good.

You may remember Terry Anderson, the reporter who was released in 1991 after being held hostage in Beirut for more than six years. He looks back on his ordeal and remembers cruelty and pain, with only mice for companions.

But he says: “Before my capture I was a brusque, arrogant, restless man. Now I like to think that I have changed.”

He learned a lot in his captivity, much of it from a worn red Bible that his captors gave to him.

Could it be that freedom from shame is Christianity’s greatest asset?

The greatest number of conversions to Christianity have occurred in the lower classes of each society where it was introduced. In India, many of the untouchables have been converted to Christianity, because they were offered dignity and freedom. Their shame was turned to healing. So, too, John Wesley’s revival began among the poor, who were offered the hope of the good news of Jesus.

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One more story.

Stephanie Fast was born in Korea, conceived by a Korean Woman and an American Soldier. She never knew her biological father; her mother abandoned her about age four. She learned to grab scraps from food stalls and sleep under a bridge.

Noone knew her name, she was called "Toogee" in a cursing manner by those who saw her. Toogee means half-breed. She was once thrown down a well simply for being a half-breed, and rescued at night by an old woman who didn't want to be seen helping a "toogee."

At about age seven, she caught Cholera, and was found and brought to an orphanage run by World Vision. At that orphanage, she was found and adopted by an American couple. They named her Stephanie.

She worked very hard at school, and got very good grades. She taught Sunday School, sang in choir, and had many friends. Deep down, despite all her success, she still felt like a worthless Toogee. She never, ever talked about her life as a street child, afraid that her parents would not want her.

One day, in high school, Stephanie's mom confronted her about her sullenness at home. Stephanie ran to her room. She looked in the mirror and said to herself, "You haven't changed anything. You're still nothing but a dirty toogee, a piece of trash."

Her door opened, and her father gently called her name. Stephanie feared the worst and thought she would be asked to leave. Her father said to her:

"Your mother and I want you to know that we love you very much, but you seem to have a hard time accepting that love. The time has come for us to release you to God. You know the Bible; I don't have to tell you that God loves you..." "Think of Jesus, Stephanie. He has walked in your shoes. He knows exactly how you feel. He's the only one who can help you." He hugged her and left the room.

That was the turning point. Stephanie wept for Jesus, wept in relief, coming to the realization that she was truly loved. Her anger and sullenness grew less and less over time. And one day, she was able to look in her mirror and say to herself, "God thinks you're beautiful, Stephanie, and so do I."

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3. Communion

Let's gather at this Communion table accepting ourselves. Leaving God to transform our shame, our regret, our pain into something much better, much greater. Something that God wants for us.

For Christ was naked and wounded, overcoming the shame, that we too might be set free. Amen.

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him. As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross.

And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; then they sat down there and kept watch over him. (Matthew 27:27-36, NRSV).

Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression

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of my people. They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the LORD shall prosper. Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. (Isaiah 53:1-12, NRSV).