

Sunday, February 28, 2021
Sermon: Overcoming Religious Shame
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Friends, sermons don't have to be long. In fact, some say, I think it was Pope Francis even, said that the shorter the sermon the better. So Pope Francis said to keep it about 10 to 12 minutes. There are preachers that I know, like our beloved worship assistant today, Charlie Hinkle, who goes for a little longer than that and I hang on every word, so it all depends on the preacher. But I bring that up to you because I believe that Amber has already preached a sermon this morning which was short and to the point, "I'm just feeling a lot of anger and bitterness today. I'm tired of dealing with people who use religion to hurt others. I'm just weary and angry today. I want to love people and show compassion but today I'm just not feeling it."

I identify with that, Amber, and I'm glad you gave me the words to start this sermon because that is how many of us have been feeling over the events of the last few weeks and the last few days even. So it's okay to be angry. It is okay to have some bitterness, especially when our religion, this thing that we call Christianity, is often weaponized. It has been weaponized throughout Christian history and, Amber, I am so glad that you wrote your comment because we are here to transform Christianity so that it is not used as a weapon against those who are vulnerable. So that it is not used as a weapon against our black siblings, our LGBTQIA+ siblings, that it is used as Jesus taught us to use it as a motivation to love not to harm.

We see that today in our passage (Exodus 20:1-17 and John 2:13-22). Amber, I want to be as upfront about this passage as you have been in your comment because this passage is often used by religious people to hurt others and I need to get that out of the way here at the beginning. Because it is a misuse. It is always a misuse of Christianity when we use it as a weapon against others. This passage where Jesus says to take up your cross and follow me has been used as a justification to shame people, to keep people in a place of suffering for suffering's sake. It has been used by pastors to tell women to stay in, and some men to stay in, abusive relationships. It has been told to tell women this is the cross that you must bear in this relationship. No. That is a misuse of this passage.

As a pastor, I have to say if you are in an abusive relationship you have every right God wants you to get out of that relationship because it is not a relationship of love, it is a relationship of abuse. And whenever we use religion in that way, we need to repent because Jesus calls us to love and what happens when we love in this world? What happens when we, like Jesus, enter into a world where there is oppression, where religious, political, and economic power structures are built to promote, to benefit the rich and the powerful. What does love look like? It looks like Jesus. This is what Jesus has done throughout his ministry.

Earlier in the Gospel of Mark, he goes into the religious establishment of his day and he breaks the Sabbath law in order to heal another person. What does this tell us? This tells us that Jesus, along with his Jewish prophetic tradition, says that mercy, love, and healing are more important

than following religious laws. Even laws that are found in the Bible. If they become a stumbling block to us loving our neighbor, including our black and brown neighbors, including our LGBTQIA+ neighbors, if we interpret any religious law in a way that harms others then we are the ones who need to repent.

You see, the word “repent” is also one of the religious words that are used as a weapon against others. Religious people, as Amber has pointed out, use it to hurt others who are already vulnerable. Religious people will say you need to repent of their lifestyle. The only lifestyle that needs to be repented from is using religion, or politics, or economics, or whatever, using our religion as a lifestyle to accuse and harm others. That's when we need to repent. That's the message of Jesus and so, this whole “take up your cross and follow me” language is the language that Jesus uses to say in a religious world that is Hell-bent on dividing the world up into good people and bad people, righteous and unrighteous, you are to enter into that world and not play that religious game. Peter wants Jesus to play that game. Jesus says that I'm going to enter into that system and I am going to challenge the status quo and when I challenge the status quo, the leaders are going to turn against me and they may kill me. That's what take up your cross and follow me means. It doesn't mean suffering for the sake of suffering. It means challenging the systems, the powers in the principalities in this world that set up a world of good guys and bad guys, holy and unholy.

For Jesus, those categories don't exist. Why? Because for Jesus only love exists. Only justice exists. Jesus went into that system he knew was corrupt. He goes to the temple and he's not happy. There are people who say Jesus wasn't angry when he went to the temple. Oh yes, he was angry! He saw the injustice for what it was and he was motivated to do something about it. And that's when the powers and principalities united to hang him on the cross.

This whole shame language at the end of this passage is problematic, too. Jesus says that there are those who are ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them, the son of man will also be shamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the Holy Angels. I wish he hadn't said that. That is hard language. This shame. What is it when we are ashamed of Jesus's words? I can tell you there are a lot of Christians who are ashamed of Jesus's words, who do not follow Jesus's words. They are the ones who say our LGBTQIA+ siblings are living in sin. Why? Because they don't take Jesus seriously. They want to divide the world into good guys and bad guys. Jesus doesn't do that. They are ashamed of Jesus just like Peter was ashamed of Jesus. Peter wants Jesus to use religion of power over and against others and Jesus refuses. He wants to change the whole dynamic and so what does he do? Jesus himself goes to the place of shame which is the cross. The cross was the Roman Empire's weapon against people who challenged the status quo.

It was a shameful weapon. People like Jesus were hung up there naked and shamed in a shameful death. Jesus goes to that place as someone who is seen as a criminal, both on a religious level and a political level. Jesus takes the place of shame. Why? So that we will stop shaming one another. So that we will stop using religion as a way of pointing fingers against one another. And if we continue to do that, then we show ourselves that we are ashamed of Jesus. When we use religion to be against our transgender siblings as we have seen in the last few

days, we have shown that we don't get Jesus. We don't understand Jesus. Why? Because we're continuing to shame, use religion as an excuse to shame, and Amber is exactly right, we should not stand for that. And I'm not going to and neither are you. Neither are we. Why? Because Jesus leads us in a different direction and so if we come to Jesus and our life has been full of intentionally shaming other people in the name of Jesus, especially those who are already marginalized, Jesus is going to say to us that I've got some shame for you because you didn't get the message.

The good news is that Peter didn't get the message either. Peter continued to misunderstand Jesus's message and in the resurrection, Jesus comes back to Peter and tells him that I know what you did. You abandoned me. You were ashamed of me. And Jesus comes back to Peter in the resurrection and tells him that I haven't given up on you, there is still a mission for you, Peter.

And so friends, the good news is that Jesus may come back and say that yeah, you missed the point. You missed it and we may have a sense of shame because of that, but Jesus always comes back also in the spirit of forgiveness and the spirit of saying you are not defined by your mistakes. You are not defined by the way that you may have harmed other people. You are defined by God's love and there is still a mission for you.

As I said earlier, no matter what you have done, no matter what you have left undone, God comes to us in the spirit of love and says there is more work to do. I still have a mission for you. God has not given up on you. God will not give up on you because God loves you eternally. And because of that love and because of our journey together, and because of Amber's anger, we can enter into the unjust systems together knowing that it might shame us and knowing that shame doesn't have the last word. Because it shamed Jesus and Jesus knew that shame didn't have the last word on his life. That God's love has the last word. And so we continue this Lenten journey towards Good Friday, towards Easter Sunday, knowing that we are in it together, challenging the status quo moving towards a more loving and just world. Amber, thank you for your anger. It is holy and we are in it together. Amen