

bread for the journey

Shame

Most of us have experienced shame. Some of us live with it.

Shame runs deeper than guilt. We deal with guilt on a day-to-day basis. We have made mistakes along the way. But we are learning to right the wrongs we have done. We make our apologies, set the record straight, make our amends, and move on. That is the way it is supposed to be. Fourth and fifth step work help heal the brokenness incurred after we have hurt others. Overcoming guilt is the bridge to the future—a long bridge indeed, but a crossable one.

The classic tale of overcoming guilt is the Jewish story where King David confesses his guilt of deceit, adultery, and murder. He repents in dust and ashes and makes his amends to whoever will listen. God listens and God forgives David after a terrible price had been paid. We know about consequences for wrongful behavior and learning something about repentance and restoration.

Our stories may not be as melodramatic as David's story and—thank God, they are not written up for the ages to discuss. Our stories, however, are just as real and painful to us and those whom we love. All of us can testify to the relief we experience when we move away from guilty pleasures and secret sins that once were exposed. It is embarrassing and humiliating, but we get past it when we confess it and fix it. The rewards of sixth and seventh step work include the capacity to overcome nagging defects that cause recurring guilt. We learn to address nasty habits and successfully put the past behind us.

Shame is not nearly so accommodating to healing as is guilt. Shame dings the soul with a deeper wound. Shame is the

experience of knowing who we are and not accepting who we are which is somewhat less than what we know we should be and far less than what we pretend to be. Shame is toxic and can seriously damage our self-esteem as well as cloud our perspective on life, and dampen our zest for living.

I heard an old friend preach a sermon the other day. He read a familiar story from the Gospel according to Luke. The disciples were out on the lake fishing. The fish were jumping but they weren't biting. The disciples were losing their patience and were about ready to call it a day when their friend, Jesus, showed up on the shore, telling them from His land perspective to fish in deeper waters. Peter assertively reminded Jesus that they were the professionals and were fishing all night. They knew what they were doing. Jesus was merely a lowly carpenter-turned-philosopher who knew little about the complexities of commercial fishing. Jesus' suggestion to Peter may have been similar to ours if we decided to show up at a Chicago Bear practice session following still another humiliating loss and urged Coach Lovie Smith to bench the entire offensive line and defensive backfield and bring up the practice squad. Of course, Lovie would politely tell us to take the first bus out of town.

Peter didn't tell Jesus to get on the bus. He knew better. He knew once Jesus had made up his mind about how to fix something, he was not about to change it. So he said, "Because you said so, we will do it." So they fished in deeper waters. The result was fantastic. They caught some fish. They caught a lot of fish.

What do you think Peter's response was? Did he jump for joy and rejoice? Did he throw his arms around his pal and profusely thank him? None of the above. What he said was: "Go away. Get lost. Depart from me." What's the deal? Why would he tell Jesus to get lost? This fellow saved the day. Peter not only told

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Jesus to leave, he declared in no uncertain terms, “Get away from me—I am a sinful man.” Those of us who have been in deep trouble understand this response. When we are not ready to make a change, we want do-gooders to take a hike.

Unless we are complete sociopaths—which most of us are *not*—our addict behavior eats us up. We sometimes conclude we are bad people. We are not fun to be around. Mothers don’t want their kids playing with our kids. People cross the street to avoid us. The stink of our past lingers and sticks. The shame is palpable. Peter was coming from a shame-based perspective. Some of us were raised on spiritual junk food. We learned early and were convinced of our unworthiness. We are less than what we ought to be. We are far less than what we want to be. Shame on us.

Peter was a devout religious man. He was raised in an orthodox Jewish home. He learned to duck lest God give him a holy thwack upside the head. Upstart Jesus does something wonderful before his eyes and Peter immediately feels inadequate. Some of us duck when we are in the presence of greatness. We shy away. Ever get awestruck? Struck dumb in the presence of holiness? It’s not a bad thing to be awed. Our souls are talking back to us when we feel awe—but then we take this experience of awe and

turn it to shame. Good and great people inadvertently cause deep resentment within us; their adequacy reminds us of our inadequacy. Greatness exposes our weaknesses and our vulnerability. We feel unworthy to be around them.

This is why many of us shy away from God and His holiness. It makes us want to duck for cover—much like Adam and Eve hid from God. They felt their nakedness. The holiness of God exposed the unholiness of their humanity, but God re-dressed them, told them to come out from hiding so they could live another day.

Let us re-vision what a holy God does on our behalf in the face of our unholiness. God invites us to come to the light—come forward so God might bless and embrace us. “Come, let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your sins are red like crimson, they shall be as white as snow,” (Isaiah 1). Jesus simply said to Peter—“Get over it—from this point on, you shall be a member of my merry band.” Peter got over it. And he became one of the great ones. We are worthy. God said so. 



The Rev. Dr. William Lenters, Chaplain

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is a bi-monthly news and views letter from Rev. Dr. William Lenters, Chaplain at Rosecrance. Bread for the Journey is written on behalf of people who live with addictions. Together, and by God's grace, we will try to make a difference.

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