

I Have This Confidence
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University Congregational Church
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Reading: Romans 1: 14-17 (NRSV)

I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish – hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”

Did you hear about the Methodist minister who fell down the stairs? He picked himself up and said, “That was an experience, how do I learn from it?” When the Presbyterian minister fell down the stairs, he picked himself up and said, “That was inevitable, I'm glad its over.” The Baptist minister fell down the stairs. He picked himself up and said, “Which one of my deacons pushed me?” When the Catholic priest fell down the stairs, he picked himself up and said, “I must have done something really bad to deserve that.”

All of us have experienced guilt, that conflict that rises up in our hearts when our actions betray our values. As Mark

Twain once said, “Man is the only animal that blushes, or needs to.” Guilt is about what we did. Shame, on the other hand, is about who we are. Shame eviscerates our sense of worth. In modern psychology people are encouraged to discover the roots of self-loathing and recover their sense of personal value. Thus, shame is often understood in modern psychology as a personality crises and its social dimension is often underplayed.

Shame in the ancient world was very much a social and cultural phenomenon. Shame and honor were foundational values that shaped entire classes of human beings. It determined their place in society, their roles and responsibilities. Shame and honor were relational values that played out in the daily lives of women and men, peasant and patron, slave and free. Honor and shame were claims of worth and worthlessness that were socially recognized.

Now any scholar who might read this sermon will know that I am not even scratching the surface on the place of honor and shame in the first century. Furthermore, I am only glancing at the complicated issues of sex and gender and the

ways in which shame and honor were appropriated to women and men. Suffice it to say that women's behavior defined the honor of social groups. "And like all ideologies, honor and shame complement institutional arrangements for the distribution of power and the creation of order in society."¹

I am curious about the fact that Paul declares that he is not ashamed of the gospel, the good news that God took the role of the suffering servant in the person of the Carpenter. Jesus of Nazareth played that role with unswerving obedience, even unto the cross. Now think about the challenges of this one sentence.

Paul is writing to Rome, the heart of the Roman Empire. We know that Caesar presumed the persona of Jupiter. Caesar was god. The honor of the empire was lord and master over his domain. Such a god rose above all human suffering and limitation. This god presumed all of the power of a potentate, including the power of life and death over children and subjects far and wide.

¹ Jane Schneider, "Of Vigilance and Virgins: Honor, Shame and Access to Resources in Mediterranean Societies," quoted by John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 14.

Do you begin to see the contrast? Jesus came from Nazareth, a tiny village near the larger city of Sepphoris. Outside of the New Testament the village is not mentioned by any other ancient writing until the year 70 of the Common Era. It is not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, the Talmud, or by the historian Josephus.² Nazareth is not even a mite in the consciousness of Rome. How could salvation come from Nazareth? In John's gospel Nathaniel asks, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46) Having no status and bearing no power it must surely have no honor!

And what worthy god would appear as a peasant? We expect such an incarnation in the emperor, not the carpenter. Jesus bore no title, diploma, commission, or portfolio. His trade was chairs and tables. His message was conveyed in simple wisdom and stories. He never wrote a sermon, printed a religious tract, or wrote a book. Jesus could not be appointed by a bishop or called by a congregation because he did not graduate from an accredited college and seminary.

² Crossan, p. 15.

The message that Jesus delivered was a shameful message. He not only used women as protagonists in his parables, he shows them as the true vehicles of his gospel. Think about the woman who hid the leaven in the dough; the woman who lost a coin; the woman at the well; the woman who suffered chronic menstrual bleeding; and the woman who washed his feet with her hair. When you ask people to identify their favorite parable they typically answer with “the prodigal son” or “the good Samaritan.” But in both parables the leading characters, the father who had two sons and the Good Samaritan who cared for the wounded traveler, play the roles of women. The father who divides his inheritance and gives it to his wayward son would have been scorned by his neighbors. In the ancient world a man would not distribute his wealth until the last moment of his life if that were possible. It would be considered a sign of weakness and foolishness. Like a mother he worries and waits anxiously for the boy’s return. I can imagine him running out to the mailbox hoping for a postcard that read, “Wish you were here.” See him sitting on the front

porch scouring the roadside for the slightest rise in dust that signaled the approach of a traveler. And when the boy finally appeared he abandoned all male decorum, raced out to his son and hugged him around the neck.

The Good Samaritan was a surprise character whose religion and culture were considered filthy. He became the hero in Jesus' story, not a conscientious layman or woman that the audience might have anticipated. He played the nurse and bound the wounds of the foolish traveler. The Samaritan loaded the victim onto his own animal and walked like a stable boy to the nearest inn. There he paid for the man's continuous care.

In these and other parables the *persona dramatis* play the roles of women. They act the household maid in service to family and neighbor. They do not play the part of manly honor. Likewise, Jesus told other parables that suggest the common, the weak, and inferior such as the parable of the mustard seed and the weeds that are sowed with the vegetables. His sermons hardly suggest the stately and noble power of the Roman Empire.

What is more, his death is the slow and painful crucifixion that asphyxiates a man to death. The Romans might not have thought about it, but for a Jew to die by asphyxiation would be an unclean death. To be the subject of public scourging and taunting was ignoble and dishonorable in any culture. The Romans could not imagine their Savior or their God murdered in such a fashion. Indeed, such a death could only prove that a figure like Jesus was not God but also not even a man. You see, in the ancient world when you lose your honor you lose your manhood.

Now I am not claiming that Paul had all of this in mind when he wrote his letter to the Romans. You would not look to the writings of Paul for commentary on the parables of Jesus. I am just playing with the irony of Paul's writing and what might be an unintentional meaning. Certainly Paul would not have imagined the role that his fledgling movement would play in the eventual collapse of the Roman Empire.

The gospel that Paul is not ashamed of is a gospel that turns the common values of the ancient world upside down.

Jesus declared that the kingdom of God is found in what is generally understood to be shameful. God's movement of salvation is as common as a mother baking bread, over grown zucchini at the end of the summer garden, and the housekeeper that makes your bed at the Holiday Inn.

God moves like a waitress, taking orders, filling coffee cups, and cleaning up the dishes. This is the profile of the Savior. This is the movement that will save the world from the violence and heroics that historically attends "honor." Salvation does not come by accident of birth or peerage. It is not titled. Salvation is not conquered. There is no display of shock and awe military unilateralism. Salvation is not prestigious. Salvation is the work of the servant who puts the needs of others above one's self. This is the way that human beings are transformed from ignominy to dignity.

This is the message not only of Jesus of Nazareth, but also the Mahatma Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Mother Theresa, and the Dali Lama. It may not be the message of the entertainment industry, the political worldview, or the military worldview.

But it is the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is not cause for shame or embarrassment. Indeed, I am confident it is the way of wholeness and peace for the world.

I am so confident I dare say that only the path of loving service will save us from the evils of blind materialism. Only the path of loving service will ultimately close the curtains on violence and terrorism. Gandhi wrote, “When I despair, I remember that all through history the ways of love and truth have always won. There have been tyrants and murders, and for a time they can seem invincible, but in the end they always fall. Think of it – always.”

Of this I am confident. While there are many things in the Christian tradition that I do not understand or do not believe, I have no doubt that salvation comes to us through the gentle path of service to love and truth.

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