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HISTORICAL SERIES, 7

Honour for Shame

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(The Rev. Dr. Marlin Aadland was the first Bishop of the British Columbia Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada, serving in that ministry from 1986 to 1998. Thereafter he served as pastor of Christ Lutheran Church in Vancouver, British Columbia, from 1998 until his retirement in 2005. This sermon was preached in that congregation on All Saints Sunday, 2004.)

Text: Luke 6:17-26

Have you ever felt ashamed of anything? I'm not talking about guilt over some sin, even though that might be a part of it. I'm talking about *shame*, as when you feel bad about yourself. You feel small, diminished, a nothing, a zero, left out, a nobody. Perhaps because of something you did or did not do. Perhaps because of the way you look or act. Or because something happened or did not happen to you.

I felt great shame, as a fourteen-year-old, when I dumped a wheelbarrow of cement over my great-uncle, in full view of other workers. I wanted to run away and hide.

A child brings home a report card covered with Ds and Fs. He attempts to cover his shame with the question, "Well, Dad, is it heredity or environment?"

A student in my college speech class got up to speak without notes, and surrendered to a blank mind. He turned red with shame. He raced from the room, and never returned.

Dr. Cameron Harder, from Lutheran Theological Seminary (Saskatoon, Saskatchewan), told us, at a conference, of the many farmers on the prairies who are experiencing great shame at the loss of their farms, and shame of their bankruptcy even though it comes from high costs and low prices. They can hardly face their

neighbours. They feel like failures. They are losing what their parents and grandparents took years to establish.

Shame arises from any number of sources.

- In a world that rewards education, some are ashamed of being illiterate.
- In a world that rewards social skills, many are embarrassed and diminished when called geeks or nerds.
- In a world that rewards good reputation, some are ashamed at how they have failed parents and friends.
- In a world that rewards productivity and status, some are ashamed to be unemployed or forced to retire. They feel diminished. They mourn.
- In a world that applauds law-abiding people, persons who come out of prison face a world more difficult than the one they left behind, in part because of they are treated as shameful.
- In a world that applauds beauty and perfection, any physical, mental, or social flaw contributes to shame.

The list goes on. We can be ashamed of age, gender, status, failings, genuine sins, losses, loss of control and independence so that others must now care for us when we had always been able to care for others. Shame is the feeling and the conviction that you are a nothing, a failure, worthless.

Jesus comes not only to forgive the sins of the guilty; he comes to bring honour in place of shame. He comes to define us on *God's* terms, and not on the whims of society. He comes to set us free from diseases – not only in this life, but in the world to come. He comes to remove the demons that keep us from being real human beings.

He defines those who are truly honourable (the saints!) as the very ones who, for all the world, look to be the ones who would be filled with shame: the poor who have no status in society; the hungry who are not even able to host others to a meal; the ones who weep - who weep because of their losses, their hopelessness, their emptiness, their diminishment of true humanity.

God, in Jesus Christ, looks at all who know shame and loss in the eyes of society, and redefines their lives. He pronounces wholeness: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.” Jesus says, “You are

blessed! Now and in the future. I define you. I name you. I stamp you with honour, not shame.” We are pronounced “saints of God”! How remarkable!

Jesus is fully aware that the shamed ones are more apt to be open to God’s good news. On the other hand, there are those who are already honoured by society’s plumb lines, and therefore may well be deaf to God’s good news. Jesus says bluntly, They have got all they are going to get. After all, who needs God’s honour when your account is already full? Those who are already honoured by their fullness and satisfaction are told, “You’ve got all you are going to get. There’s a pretty good chance you won’t ever need God’s gift of wholeness, for who needs God when you have all you want?” Those who are already laughing, ignoring those who weep and live in shame, are told, “Woe to you! You have all the laughing you are going to get. Indeed, you will weep when God unveils the true value of a person.”

One more thing must be said. Jesus – here and everywhere else in the Gospels – is the shamed one. People like him initially, when he gives them what they want. But they turn against him when he gives them what they need. Everywhere Jesus walks he identifies with those who are shamed.

- He touches the leper who is the very emblem of shame and hopelessness.
- He lets the prostitute wash his feet with her tears and anoint his body with seductive oil - all this in public view.
- He talks to an outcast woman at a well, exposing her resume of shame but setting her free to face her sins and walk in the light of a new day.
- He talks to Zacchaeus, an outsider, and invites himself to his house.
- He eats with sinners – a shameful act.

And then, in a final act of turning honour and shame on its head, he is falsely accused, stripped, beaten, publicly humiliated, forced to bear his means of execution, the cross, is hanged between two other people of public shame. There he hangs, in public view, in public shame. And there he dies a shameful death. The Scriptures bear witness that Jesus, the shamed one, gathers up all the shame and hurt and loneliness and isolation that go with it, and bears it on the cross.

And then, in a dramatic declaration, the Father raises up the shamed one to a place of highest honour! Along with him are raised

up all the shamed ones, all who are joined to Jesus. All who are shamed are given new honour – God’s honour. Saints alive, marked with the cross of Christ forever.

Jesus dies for all. But is it possible that only the shamed get the point? The judgement is that all who have their own honour may miss the gift of God, their true honour. Those who are not ashamed of Jesus will cast off shame. Those who are ashamed of the shamed one will face the ultimate shame, the shame of God.

Dear saints, I have good news for you. All who weep, who are diminished, who lack honour, need bear this burden no longer. By this incredible grace, you are the honoured ones – saints of God!