

THE SHADOW OF SHAME

Genesis 45

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Our spring CrossTraining session ended this past Wednesday. I led a class on sabbath, which is our focus for the year. Each week we talked about a different aspect of the spiritual practice of sabbath. What we learned together is that incorporating Sabbath into our lives requires being very intentional. We live in a fast-paced 24/7/365 world. Our culture doesn't value anything that is slow, anything reflective, anything that doesn't produce a tangible result. Practicing Sabbath-keeping, setting aside time regularly for spiritual growth, is therefore counter-cultural. We discussed how challenging it is to find time and make time, how challenging it is to live without our favorite distractions. Yet we also all yearn for more serenity in our lives, an inner peace that has to be cultivated. On the last week I shared some brief readings. I want to share two of them with you now.

The first is from the scholar Joseph Campbell: "You must have a place to which you can go in your heart, your mind, or your house, almost every day, where you do not owe anyone and where no one owes you – a place that simply allows for the blossoming of something new and promising."

That last phrase is so appealing - "the blossoming of something new and promising" - those words are about a quality of life that is vibrant and abundant.

Here's the other quote I want to share with you: "Children live in a world of dreams and imagination, a world of aliveness...There is a voice of wonder and amazement inside all of us; but we grow to realize we can no longer hear it...It isn't that God stopped speaking; it is that our lives became louder."

Again, I'm drawn to words like "dreams," "imagination," "aliveness," "wonder," "amazement" - those are words that point towards the kind of life for which we were created. Lives that thrive instead of merely survive. Lives that are full of joy and meaning and purpose. Children live with a sense of wonder and amazement, which shows us, doesn't it, that that's how God wants us to live? That's the way we enter the world - but somewhere along the line, we leave the bright sunlight that allows for thriving and we lurk instead in the shadows.

Many of us find, from time to time, that our lives feel stuck. We say we're in a rut. There's no movement in our lives if we're stuck in ruts; there's no growth, no blossoming, no aliveness. Shame is one of the ruts where we sometimes find ourselves.

There are entire books written on the topic of shame; we will only skim the surface today and think together about how shame affects us spiritually. Let's start by differentiating between shame and guilt. Shame is feeling badly about who we are. Guilt is feeling badly about something we've done.

Guilt is a little more removed, in other words. Guilt can cause us to feel badly about ourselves, but shame goes more deeply. Guilt has more to do with what we've done; shame has to do with how we feel about who we are.

Let me give you an example. I'm tired and I'm irritable, and instead of taking a nap or taking a walk, instead I say something hurtful to my husband. When I realize what I've done, I feel guilty. I apologize. I say, "I am so sorry that I said something hurtful. I wish I hadn't. I truly regret it." That's guilt. I'll still feel badly for a while, but I can move on. But if what I feel is shame, I say to him and to myself, "I'm a terrible person and a terrible wife. I don't know why anyone puts up with me." That's the rut of shame.

Some people live in shame's shadow for their whole lives and it robs them of all vitality. It keeps them from experiencing God's forgiveness and the fullness of life God wants for us. If you want to read more about shame, I highly recommend the work of Brene Brown who is really a guru in this area - here's her definition of shame: "I define shame as the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging – something we've experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection."

Both guilt and shame can be useful if we don't linger in them too long. If we truly feel sorry about something we have done, those uncomfortable unpleasant feelings of guilt and shame can make us decide we want to behave differently in the future.

So, to go back to my example, I would go to bed that night with that feeling that something wasn't quite right...I would have to dwell on the fact that I'd behaved in a way I didn't like, that some damage - even temporary - had been done to my relationship. The next morning, I'd be aware of it too. I journal every morning, so I would write about it, reflect on the fact that I hurt my husband's feelings. Spending time in that place of discomfort is healthy. Enough time to learn from my mistakes. But then we move on. Shame and guilt can be those pricks of conscience that teach us something. Don't ignore them or bury them. But don't let them become ruts you fall into either. Learn, and then grow.

The story of Joseph from the Hebrew scriptures is the story of one of the more dysfunctional families in the Bible. The very short version is this. Abraham, the patriarch of the Hebrew people, and his wife Sarah, had one son, Isaac. Isaac had two sons, Jacob and Esau. The story of their sibling rivalry is a sermon for another day. Jacob wanted to marry Rachel, but was tricked on his wedding day into marrying her older sister Leah instead. He eventually does marry Rachel. Jacob ends up having twelve sons with four dif-

ferent mothers. (So the next time someone tells you that we need to just live our lives according to good old biblical family values, keep this story in your back pocket!) Jacob and Rachel have two sons and they are their father's favorites. Joseph and Benjamin. The other ten brothers despise Joseph; they're jealous of him and the fancy coat his father gives him. He makes the mistake of telling them about a dream he has in which the brothers are bowing to him. You can imagine how that goes over...they have had enough of Joseph, and one day they decide to sell him into slavery in Egypt.

Fast forward a few years. Joseph has the gift of interpreting dreams, and eventually ends up interpreting dreams for the Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. His life changes dramatically. He goes from being a slave to a prisoner to one of the Pharaoh's trusted associates. When a famine strikes the region, the Pharaoh is in charge of rationing supplies of food and Joseph is assisting. One day Joseph sees his brothers arrive to ask for food. He recognizes them, but they of course don't expect to see him working as a trusted assistant to the Pharaoh so they don't recognize him. When finally he reveals himself to them, he and the Pharaoh arrange for Joseph's family to move to a better place where they will have food and plenty of everything they need. The brothers go back to get their father, telling him that the son he thought was lost for good has now become their source of salvation. It must have been truly a walk of shame, as they contemplated that the brother they sold into slavery is the one who is protecting them.

We don't know what they were feeling, but we know that their relationship was restored. If they had been living in a rut of guilt and shame, and even physical hunger, there would be reconciliation and abundance in their future.

No growth is possible in the shadows. We have to have light in order to grow. In the light we see ourselves as we really are. Taking the time to reflect, sabbath time, allows

us to decide what it is about ourselves and our relationships and our habits that we want to change. Sabbath time, when it includes prayer, meditation, study, reading, helps us ask ourselves the deepest and most important questions like, “Who do I really want to be? What values do I hold most dear? Am I living up to and into the qualities I want to embody?”

I can only remember one time when I felt really ashamed of something that happened here at church. It happened in a small group, a group of people who were together because they shared a common interest. One person in the group started gossiping. It wasn't casual gossip, like, “Did you see what the Kardashians did?” It was gossip about other people in the church, and it was brought to my attention. I heard about it on a Thursday night and I stewed on it, chewed on it, prayed on it all night. The next morning I called the woman involved and asked if I could see her. I went to her home, dreading the conversation but knowing it was the right thing to do. With a knot in the pit of my stomach, I said to her, “This is what I'm told you said.” She didn't deny it. I then said, “We don't do that in this community. It's not who we are. It's not how we behave. I will not allow it in our building or in any group that is sanctioned by our church.” And to my knowledge, it hasn't happened since. Shame allowed me to see clearly and articulate the values of our church community.

Moving through shame can help us change for the better.

If you're stuck in shame, you are denying God the opportunity to forgive you. God doesn't want us to live in the shadows. God wants us to become new creatures, full of life, wonder, amazement, imagination, dreams, energy. God needs us to live in the present moment and be a part of the work of building a better world.