

## “The Words that Cover Our Faces”

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Based upon Esther 7; John 8:2-11

As I said before the reading, the *Book of Esther* is filled with all kinds of lessons for us to ponder about faithfulness, spiritual identity, resilience, and resistance. How do we respond in situations where genocide and ethnic cleansing are taking place? Do we have the courage to risk our lives to defend our own faith or a persecuted community? These are important questions to consider. But this week, instead of considering them in the context of ancient and modern politics, I want us to think about faithfulness, spiritual identity, resilience, and resistance in a much more personal way because a verse in today’s text has had me thinking all week about how our faith affects our understanding of guilt and shame.

Chapter 7, verse 8 says: “As the words left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman’s face.” The poetic phrasing of this verse is so unusual that some people have argued that there must be a typo in the text. They argue that what was meant, and probably got edited out accidentally, was that once the king spoke, his guards came in and put a pillowcase or something over Haman’s head to lead him off to be hanged. That’s certainly possible. But like Old Testament scholar, Dr. Carol Betchel,<sup>1</sup> I prefer to interpret the words more figuratively because the image is both evocative and spiritually provocative. We all have words on our faces put there by others or ourselves, labels we flaunt or hide: “award winner,” “black sheep,” “popular,” “damaged.” How do those labels affect the way we see ourselves and interact with others? How do they affect our resilience and inform our resistance to the people and forces in society which would tear us down?

In this story, one can almost imagine that in that moment when the king caught Haman with Esther, and mistakenly thought he was attacking her instead of pleading for his life, the king’s words of outrage and condemnation actually appeared like a big red stamp on Haman’s forehead reading “Guilty,” or maybe, “Dead man walking.” In an instant, without an investigation or trial, the king had tried, convicted, and sentenced him to death. Haman knew it; the guards knew it. Whether Haman felt personally convicted about all the evil he had done we will never know. But thanks to the king, his face was still covered with doom. Repentance and resistance were futile. All that was needed was for the king’s guards to make the sentence a reality using the gallows that Haman had built for Mordecai.

It’s not hard to imagine the words that were covering the face of the woman in the New Testament story either. The scribes and Pharisees who brought her before Jesus had clearly already tried, convicted, and sentenced her too. As far as they were concerned, the woman was guilty of adultery, and therefore deserved death by stoning according to the Law. But there is an additional dimension to the New Testament story which is missing from the *Esther* story, and

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<sup>1</sup> Betchel, Carol, *Esther: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 66.

that is the dimension of shame. Haman was a bad guy. He tried to commit genocide. So, although the king's turning against him might have made him feel upset, it seems unlikely that he felt personal shame for having been a manipulative villain. The woman's situation was quite different, however. Adultery in Jesus' day was a shameful crime. The penalty for it was not just death, but death first by public shaming, and then by violence bestowed by "righteous" elders willing to cover the shameful sinner's face and body with rocks, not just their words.

I think that the woman must have felt some of this shame because she did not immediately run away when she had a chance. Even after all her accusers had skulked away with their stones still in hand, she remained. Was she just paralyzed with fear, or did some part of her truly believe that she deserved death? We don't know because we also don't know if her adultery was committed willingly. She could have been in love, or just in lust. She also could have been seduced or sold against her will. There's no way of knowing because she lived in a time when adultery was typically a charge brought against women not men. Married men could sleep around with social impunity. Women couldn't. They were property, whose personal value was tied inextricably to their sexual purity, over which they had little control. So, it's anyone's guess whether this woman's morals were pure. But given the reality of how women were treated then, I still can't help wondering if in addition to the stain of the guilty stamp that the authorities had put on her face, there were other words there that were stamped from within: "sinner," "victim," "slut," "unwanted," "betrayed," "worthless." I wonder if in that moment before Jesus freed her to go, whether she felt she deserved to be set free. If she could have thrown the stones at herself, would she have done so?

Shame can do this, make one self-destructive and filled with self-loathing because as shame expert and social scientist Brené Brown has argued in a couple of amazing TED talks and at least three books, shame is not the same thing as guilt.<sup>2</sup> In our culture people tend to use those words sloppily as if they are synonyms. But psychologically speaking they are not. Guilt, according to Brown, is a feeling tied to our behavior; shame is a feeling tied to our sense of self-worth. So, for example, if you were to break a lamp you weren't supposed to touch, guilt would make you think, "That was a bad thing to do," but shame would make you feel, "Since I did that I am a bad person." You can feel shame even if you have done nothing wrong if someone else has given you reason to think that your personal value depends upon meeting a certain standard you can't quite meet, like always being strong, beautiful, perfect, successful, or selfless.

Knowing this, families, social and religious groups, and whole societies have used shame as a tool to make others adhere to certain accepted moral parameters. "Good people don't do such things," parents convey to their children implicitly or explicitly thousands of times as they grow up. When people cross these lines, we call their behavior "shameful." If they do this and do not appear to feel guilty for doing so, we call them "shameless," which is another reason they deserved to be shamed all the more, and another reason why we are entitled to be morally outraged by them.

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<sup>2</sup> See e.g., Brown, Brené, Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead (New York: Avery, 2012), 58-111.

A modern example of social shaming at work is the website [Passengershaming.com](http://Passengershaming.com), popularized by the TV talk show host Ellen DeGeneres. People post on this website pictures they have taken of other people on airplanes behaving in gross or socially inappropriate ways. For example, on the website you'll see a picture of a large man sitting in his airplane seat without a shirt on; you'll also see lots and lots of people putting their dirty bare feet in places they have no place being, like practically in the food of the people sitting in front of them. The pictures are posted by flight attendants and passengers who hope that those people guilty of the bad behavior will be so humiliated by the millions who will see and comment on their pictures, that they will stop behaving in socially inappropriate ways when they travel.

But here's where things get a bit complicated, according to Brown. Although religions, organizations, families, and other social groups have long used shaming to try to force or embarrass people into changing, piling words on their faces day after day, multiple studies have shown that shaming people rarely works to motivate change.<sup>3</sup> Instead, shaming makes people adopt either self-destructive or neighbor-destructive defense mechanisms. Typically, women respond to shame the first way and men the second. Women develop eating disorders, become depressed or anxious, or drive themselves into exhausted frenzies as perfectionists because of shame. They try to hide their unworthiness or fix it. Men, in contrast, who are most often shamed for appearing weak or vulnerable, typically manage their shame by lying, lashing out, or blaming others, "It's not my fault; it's that guy's fault. He made me do it." They may also seek as much glory and power for themselves as possible to hide the weak label they feel is on their foreheads.

The oft-talked about "narcissistic personality disorder" is an extreme example of this shame-driven behavior. People often accuse narcissists of being shameless because their behavior breaks so many social norms. But shame is actually the underlying wound which creates the personality disorder in the first place. The reason they behave badly is not that they don't feel shame, it's that they feel a very deep shame. But they lack empathy and therefore do not feel guilt in the way others do. They will do whatever behavior is necessary to make themselves look good and others look bad, even if it is socially inappropriate or hurts others.

Guilt, unlike shame, is a good motivator for change because guilt isn't about a flawed soul, it's about a flawed behavior. If you feel guilty for breaking the lamp, the odds are good that you will be more careful around breakable things in the future. This is one reason why we confess our sins in church. The act of acknowledging our wrong-doing leads to repentance, which fuels our desire to change. The way to make people feel guilty is not to shame them for who they are or what they have done, but to help them to feel empathy for those they have hurt. If a person feels empathy for the old woman sitting in front of him on the plane, he won't stick his smelly, dirty feet in her face.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

We see this kind of shift from shame to guilt taking place in the Gospel lesson. Although the Pharisees were all ready to kill the woman for her shameful behavior, Jesus wasn't. He did not see her as valueless or disgraceful because of her alleged sin. He saw her as someone who has been accused of behaving in a way that was contrary to the will of God. He saw the men in the crowd the same way, which is why instead of condemning them, he told them that the one who was without sin should throw the first stone. "You all have done something that was against the will of God," Jesus said. "I know it, you know it, God knows it. So why are you shaming and condemning to death this woman for doing the same?" After they wisely dispersed, he said to the woman, "Who condemns you? Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more." He removed her shame, changing the words on her face from "condemned" and "deplorable," to "forgiven," "worthy," and "freed," and then focused her attention on her behavior instead.

Jesus does this for all of us through the cross. We are used to thinking about the cross in terms of how violent it was, or about how Jesus was crucified to "pay for our sins." These interpretations paint God as a wrathful being who had to be paid-off or appeased by someone's blood. But there are many other ways to understand his sacrifice that have less to do with what God needed from us, and more to do with what we needed from God. One of these theories of atonement focuses on how Jesus took on human shame to destroy its power. Death by crucifixion was one of the most shameful ways someone could die in his day. Because he insisted on loving and hanging out with shameful people, he was publicly shamed himself. Then he was killed like a common criminal, naked, betrayed, and rejected. By doing this, he illustrated that God's love is more powerful than all human shame. So, in the same way that we affirm through the Apostle's Creed that Jesus descended into hell in order to proclaim that there was no place beyond God's power to redeem, we also affirm through Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection that by dying a shameful death, Jesus destroyed the power of shame by proclaiming everyone worthy of God's love. In other words, as far as God is concerned, Jesus has washed the words off our faces.

Author/pastor Grace May has written about the impact this understanding of the cross had on her as a Chinese American.<sup>4</sup> She was raised in a troubled home, where her parents fought often, and her father was violent. But she was also raised with traditional Chinese values which emphasized the importance of family honor. So she learned from an early age to hide the dishonorable behaviors that happened in her home. But she was ashamed that her home was torn apart by domestic violence. She was ashamed that her parents divorced. She was ashamed that her mother had to work as a housekeeper after the divorce. The shame crushed her for many years. It wasn't until she was older and went to a church where the pastor said before communion, "If you feel unworthy, then this table is for you," that she was able to feel God's grace and begin to let go of her shame. She gradually came to accept that God doesn't love us because we are worthy; we are worthy because God loves us. She stopped hiding her reality and embraced God's grace instead. "God had an answer to my shame and guilt," she wrote, "and named him Jesus."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> May, Grace Y., "The Family Table," in *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross: Contemporary Images of the Atonement*, Mark D. Baker Ed., (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 135-144.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid* at 141.

Think about the words that others have put on your face over the course of a lifetime. What are the words that you have also put on your own face? Are they words like this, [**Slide of woman's face with negative descriptions on it shown.**], or words like this? [**Slide of woman's face with positive descriptions on it shown.**] If there are more negatives than positives, then it's time to wash your face with God's grace because the only word that really needs to be there is "beloved." That's what we all are to God. God has much to say in Christ to us about which behaviors are good and which are bad, so embracing the Gospel does not spare us from feeling guilt. But since we are all sinners, there is no shame in admitting where we have gone astray. All that awaits us when we confess is merciful divine grace, which helps us to move forward with greater faithfulness. Who is it who condemns you? Not God, and that's really all that matters. Accept the freedom that you have been given in Christ to be your true self without shame, and love yourself as you are. Then put down your stones and love your neighbor as you love yourself, so that we can show the world how much better it is to change the sins of the world with love. Amen.