

**The Shame of it all**  
Menno Mennonite Church  
March 27, 2022

**Purpose:** To reveal the shame/honor dynamic at work within the gospel context.

**Message:** God has dismantled the system of honor once and for all to embrace us.

**Scripture:** Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 [primary text], Isaiah 12:1-6 (secondary Text)

**Synopsis:** Within the Bible, we undervalue the sense of relationship that are going on. We, as have all people in all time, read the stories of the Bible from our own point of view. And we are poorer for it. We fail to see the improbability of grace in the situation of Prodigal son. We assume that those who have stepped out of line will be and must be brought back into the family system.

In the Ancient Near East, the behavior of the son reflected directly on the father, bringing shame to the house. The proper response should have been distancing from the misbehaving member, cutting them off forever. Honor demanded this; even possibly demanded that the family kill the one who has affronted the family. But the father further shames himself to dismantle the shame of the son. This primary narrative parallels how God destroys the system of shame and retribution coming to us to heal the relationship that has always existed between us. The question is are we willing in turn to embrace this radical way of relating to each other in grace?

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**Luke 15:1-3, 11b-24 NRSV**

Now all the tax collectors and sinners  
were coming near to listen to him.

2And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying,  
“This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

3So he told them this parable: “There was a man who had two sons.

12The younger of them said to his father,  
‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’

So he divided his property between them.

13A few days later the younger son  
gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country,  
and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.

14When he had spent everything,

a severe famine took place throughout that country,  
and he began to be in need.

15So he went and hired himself out  
to one of the citizens of that country,  
who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs.

16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods  
that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

17 But when he came to himself he said,  
‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread  
enough and to spare,  
but here I am dying of hunger!

18I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him,  
“Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;

19I am no longer worthy to be called your son;  
treat me like one of your hired hands.”

20So he set off and went to his father.

But while he was still far off,  
his father saw him and was filled with compassion;

*he ran* and put his arms around him and kissed him.

21 Then the son said to him,  
'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;  
I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

22 But the father said to his slaves,

'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him;  
put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.

23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate;  
24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again;  
he was lost and is found!  
And they began to celebrate.

25 "Now his elder son was in the field;  
and when he came and approached the house,  
he heard music and dancing.

26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on.  
27 He replied, 'Your brother has come,  
and your father has killed the fatted calf,  
because he has got him back safe and sound.'

28 Then he became angry and refused to go in.  
His father came out and began to plead with him.

29 But he answered his father,  
'Listen! For all these years  
I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command;  
yet you have never given me even a young goat  
so that I might celebrate with my friends.

30 But when this son of yours came back,  
who has devoured your property with prostitutes,  
you killed the fatted calf for him!'

31 Then the father said to him,  
'Son, you are always with me,  
and all that is mine is yours.

32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice,  
because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life;  
he was lost and has been found.'"

In many ways, this is our story. We know it. We love it. We can refer to it by name and most church folks, aware of the inside baseball, will know what we are talking about and why. There is all sorts of good stuff here: the disobedient, carefree son; the loving father; feasting; scandal and redemption, with the drama of a jilted, jealous sibling. It is the reality show version of the gospels. Were Hallmark in the business of writing parables, this would be it, with a crisp, clean, common message: you are the prodigal, you have or are going to go astray and God being the welcoming father will embrace you if you would only turn around, repent and be welcomed home. Be like the prodigal. It is even one of these stories that we wish, perhaps, might apply more to us than what it actually does. After all, how can we talk about surviving the evils of sex drugs and rock and roll if our paths, thankfully, contained little of the above? Where are we left if we never took the prodigal way, at least in the traditional formulation. But the prodigal message remains: turn and return to the love which was from the first, and is waiting still. That would be a good, worthwhile sermon to call us all to this work. There is nothing at all wrong with that in the slightest, and we can be on our way early.

You will note that I am not sitting down. Sorry about that. I am not because to do so would allow this story to remain what it is for us and not offer a fuller reading. There is more here than merely populating the notion of God as loving parent, though it does. More than speaking to the need to the need for repentance, though it does. Much more as a matter of fact, and it starts from the very first. This is one of those situations where we don't know what we don't know and that has a way of getting us in trouble, or at least clouding the message that is trying to be sent. We miss things because our culture—our assumptions, our notions and norms—do not match with those to whom Jesus was preaching and teaching. We miss things because of it and in the missing, we neglect some of the content within.

As is so often the case, parables are as much about God and the nature of God then about us and our human foibles. This is certainly not an exception. We correctly identify the divine with the father figure, and that holds. But what we miss is the extent to which this connection is apt, and far more salient than what we at first blush might assume. Because we drop the assumptions of the culture that it was set in—a culture of honor, filial expectation and practice, and a tight expectation around roles and responsibilities in relationships. In our culture, we have organized ourselves around how we can best be individuals free and clear of anything else. We make fun honor as the stuff of old time deep south duels 'you have questioned my Honor sir. It

will be pistols at 15 paces.’ How you are seen, while important, is not as important as the power you possess. But this is not the case in the near eastern culture. How you compose yourself, how you maintain ‘face’, that one does not bring shame to the family or clan is of primary importance. These are honor and dignity based societies. How you maintain your honor, trumps all other concerns. This was a factor in the ancient culture of Jewish Israel, and in some ways still today. It is so deeply entrenched, that is hard for us to wrap our heads around. This is a BIG deal. To be shamed was to be robbed of life, liberty, and any possibility of happiness. And it is this dynamic of honor and shame that are most at work in this story.

It is the shame of the son who has disgraced himself, yes. But even more so, the shame of the father who accommodates the other in remarkable ways. First the son. It has to be said, asking for an early inheritance is bad form, even today. Basically you are asking for someone to hurry up and die already. Rude today; unforgivable then. Going off and spending the money in ways that were less the honorable reflects not poorly only on Junior, but on the character of the family as well. To be unclean, and to take work with pigs—the uncleanest of the unclean animals—was to make yourself beyond the pale, and to completely, utterly, and finally disgrace one self and one’s family. It’s about as far down into the gutter as one can go, and you take your honor with you. If our parents really want us to straighten up and fly right they will demand that we ‘remember where we are from’. He had not and was demonstrably unfit for the title of Son. ‘My Son was dead’ is more than just a colorful turn of phrase on the part of the father. The path of honor demanded that the family completely and utterly disown the offending member. Wishing on dead, or insisting on it is not too far in some cases.

But that is not enough. As bad as the son was along the way, the father also gets in on the act in the shame game. Society dictates the appropriate response of the insulted to the insultee, An appropriate response is expected, indeed required. The father not only has the compassion to see the son in error and to respond in grace, but to shame himself along the way. Elders were to be approached with reverence and respect in all things. Old men do not, under any circumstances run and embrace in public anyone, especially one who has been deemed unworthy. But here he goes running to the horizon, I like to think staff forgotten, leaving the help to stagger on behind in a shameful display of affection. The father does far more than just embrace and forgive here: he enters into the shame, and shames himself along the way to welcome the lost one home. He demands that the finest robe and the ring, both symbols of

family and house that only those who were kin were permitted to wear. He demands that the best calf is prepared—the calf which may well have been considered first fruits to be sacrificed in the temple. He does all of this simply in the name of a son that doesn't deserve it. The father sacrifices his honor, his dignity, his self to bring the son back into the family. He becomes shameful, just like the son, in order to repair the shame that has ripped them apart. And this comes after 2 other tales of people acting with abandon for the sake of finding that which is lost in the parable of the sheep and the coin earlier in this same chapter. The Pharisees who were listening to Jesus explain all of this would have understood this context in all its consequences, and they would have been blown away by this. Even more so the tax collectors and sinners to whom he was directly speaking—likely people who themselves had been declared dead and without honor in their lives to hear that this is what God then does.

Because if we, as we properly should, understand the father as the metaphor for the most righteous and holy YHWH God, whose name is too holy even to be spoken, what does it mean for God to come to embrace those who have strayed even at the cost of honor and respect? We can understand the older brother whose protest may have not been purely one of self-possession but also of speaking to the honor of the situation as well, looking out for the family's interests along the way. This is not how we expect God to act. This is not who we expect God to be, nor are we comfortable with God occupying this role. We cling to our own sense of shame about who we are, about our failings, about what we SHOULD be doing because we have so thoroughly recreated God in our own image that we struggle to understand what God is really doing all around us. God is not just restoring honor to us, not merely forgiving our slights as we ourselves are, but God is entering into the whole messed up system of honor, guilt and shame and taking it apart piece by bloody piece. God is declaring a unilateral cease fire in the war of who is good and who is bad, and is declaring that you, and you, and you, and you, and me; every last one of us is a child of God, and that no matter what has come before, nor what comes after, we are worthy and worthwhile having been invited to the banquet table to celebrate our return. It is we who maintain the systems of shame and guilt; it is us who are keeping records of right and wrongs because we, as Paul contends, are seeing the world through the eyes of the world. God has abandoned the walls that would keep us away and invited us all to come in, no matter what, no matter who, and not matter how. God does not remain distant and aloof, waiting for us to get

it right, or to hit the right sacrificial formula to be satisfied, but sends his Son into this pig sty of a world to labor with us in building the kingdom.

God is recreating the world, is recreating us to be new creations, new people, to inhabit a new world. We, like children who have colored on the walls, try to hide ourselves from God's embracing, welcoming love. We know when Anna has been up to something because she often ends up hiding and proclaiming that she is scared. Step one is convincing her not to be scared, even if there is some punishment coming. God walks with us even into that which is shame-filled within us, those pieces of offense that would just refuse to let us go. It might be who we have been told we are—the evil others placed within our souls—that scars us still. It might be the obligations that we know go untended that we feel disqualifies us from being part of the kingdom. It might be the shame of that which has come before, guilt for that which we cannot forgive ourselves that keep us away, far off in the lands of shame and sorrow. Whatever the thing that keeps us from God may be, God enters into it WITH US, beside us embracing us for who and what we are, not by our action, but by God's.

God has come to be with us and the system of demands, sacrifice and honor has been destroyed once and for all. Jesus has walked before us, known us and known life, and made all things new. But we need to allow ourselves to release the sense of shame that binds us to the vision of this world so that we can declare with boldness the coming of the next. It's not easy. It's not always welcome. But it is good.

God invites us to come, eat, drink, and be filled with that which would liberate us from that which binds us, whatever that might be. It is the scandalous love of God that is reaching out to each and every one of us, each and every day. The question is, are we ready to have God step even into our shame? May we be given the courage, grace, and peace to allow God even into that which we would hide from ourselves.