

Luke 15:1-10

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

"Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Sermon: Mea Culpa, Mea Maxima Culpa

Are you ever in a situation where people behave in a way that makes you wonder how they were raised? You want to say to them: Didn't your mama teach you any manners? They're just shameless as they aggressively push their way to the front of the line and step in front of you as if you weren't even there. I mean, it would be one thing if we were starving and jostling for a cup of rice from the relief truck, but at the Sag Harbor Farmer's Market waiting for what? -- the organic garlic scape pesto -- come on people!

It's funny that culturally we don't put much value on shame, but even less value on those we think of as shameless. We've come a ways from the time when shame, guilt, and a sense of sin were preached as positive qualities necessary to bring a person to repentance, or even as an essential foundation for the development of moral boundaries and a strong conscience in children.

Timothy Dwight (1752-1817), the grandson of Jonathan Edwards and the eighth president of Yale, thought it was the job of the preacher to awake a heartfelt conviction of sin before speaking words of forgiveness, peace, and grace to the congregation. If one did not feel how lost they were, how miserable they were in spite of all worldly success, security, and pleasure, then there could never be a true appreciation of the salvation offered in Jesus Christ. Our own church covenant used to begin: Convinced of your guilt and professing unfeigned repentance for your sins.

It is only against this background that we can understand the second verse of the most famous Christian hymn: Amazing Grace: 'Twas Grace that taught my heart to fear -- and Grace my fears relieved.

Many know that John Newton, the author of that hymn, was involved in the Atlantic slave trade, and I always thought his conversion was connected to an awakening to the terrible and unjust nature of that work. But I was wrong -- Newton continued in the slave trade for years after becoming a Christian and only gave it up due to medical problems. When he writes: Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me -- he is not writing first and foremost about his behavior, about his trafficking in human souls, but about his guilt as a child of Adam, about his condition of sin as an inheritance of birth,

a condition of being human. As the Puritan children were taught in their primer, their version of Sesame Street: A is for Adam, In Adam's fall, we sinned all.

Just try and picture Big Bird teaching that to the television audience and I think you can see what a different world we live in now. There is, however, one element of this that shows itself in our culture and that is collective guilt.

We see this in contemporary apologies for historic wrongs like the slave trade. In 2006 British Prime Minister Tony Blair expressed deep sorrow for the shame of the slave trade and went further than any previous leader in seeking to show remorse for the actions of the British Empire, nearly 200 years after the 1807 legislation that led to slavery's abolition.

Blair was a little more on the spot when he apologized for the role of the English in the Irish famine – that only took 150 years, not 200. Yet the historical distance made some people feel such an apology was a waste of breath. One comment summed it up this way: I'm part-English, part-Irish and under no circumstances should the English apologize for the famine. I was born well over 100 years after the famine and the English part of me sees no reason why I should have to apologize for something that had nothing to do with me. And from my Irish point of view I would think it highly disingenuous if someone who clearly has no blame in a matter apologized for something that had nothing to do with them purely for the sake of political correctness.

Yes, expressions of collective guilt for historic wrongs can seem self-serving. Slavery and famine are very much with us today, so maybe it is safer to apologize for past abuses than to address current conditions. How much guilt do we feel that slave-like labor conditions permit us to purchase discount goods, or that security and economic considerations sometimes align us with governments that use hunger as a weapon.

My daughter stopped eating meat, in part, because she was taught in college that current habits of meat consumption contribute to global warming and world hunger. So while three in our family were enjoying the free ham samples at the Sag Harbor Farmer's Market, our one daughter said no thanks, I'm a vegetarian – to which the guy giving out the ham said, no, you're a judgmentarian.

Collective guilt is also playing a role in the controversy swirling around the Islamic center proposed for Park Street near the site of the World Trade Center. In this case the guilt is something we project on others. In spite of the fact that we know that it was a relatively small group who planned and carried out the attacks nine years ago, I can feel the emotional impulse to say: You people – you, you did this; and your religion is a co-conspirator, a springboard for intolerance and terrorism.

Of course, I didn't project this kind of collective guilt when Timothy McVeigh bombed the Alfred P. Murrah building in Oklahoma City. McVeigh was raised Catholic, but in the army and after he was known to associate with members of what's called the Christian Identity Movement, one of many militia movements that sees a Jewish conspiracy around every corner and runs on the fuel of economic decline and anti-government rage. Personally I would take offense if someone tried to lump me in with people

of that persuasion, and I imagine most American Muslims feel the same way about the 9/11 terrorists. Sometimes reason must rule emotion.

Collective guilt shows itself to be a two-edged sword, and I suspect the same is true of personal guilt. How is it constructive? How is it destructive?

I know that in raising two daughters we were very concerned that they develop a good sense of right and wrong and an inner voice, a conscience that would serve as a moral compass in life. And we were also very concerned that they have a sense of their own worth and courage to stand up for themselves. We believed the standard parental coaching to correct behavior but don't belittle the person – don't shame, don't humiliate, don't burden with guilt. We wanted the foundation of good behavior to be built on appreciation, not fear.

I don't know that from a theological perspective I could argue with the doctrine of original sin, but from a practical point of view, parents and authority figures, especially religious authority figures, who use guilt and shame to shape young minds seem to have created many causalities and a distinct distaste for the church across a whole swath of society.

In speaking of the lasting negative impact of making children feel ashamed, one book notes these patterns in adults:

Adults shamed as children are afraid of vulnerability and fear exposure of self.

Adults shamed as children don't believe they make mistakes - they believe they are mistakes.

Adults shamed as children lie to themselves and others.

Adults shamed as children feel that, "No matter what I do, it won't make a difference; I am and always will be worthless and unlovable."

Adults shamed as children frequently blame others before they can be blamed.

Adults shamed as children may suffer from debilitating guilt and apologize constantly.

Adults shamed as children fear intimacy.

Adults shamed as children feel a pervasive sense of loneliness throughout their lives.

I think that I'll take someone who pushes in line in front of me for the garlic scape pesto over all those negative consequences.

I notice that when Jesus speaks of sin he doesn't link it to shame but to forgiveness. He wants people to understand they are not without sin primarily so they will be more merciful in their judgment of others,

more ready to forgive.

"Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye." (Matthew 7:3-5, NRSV)

The sins the Holy Spirit works hardest to overcome are hypocrisy and self-righteousness. That's why Jesus so clearly illuminates the great rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents.

I think we walk a fine line when it comes to preaching or parenting on sin, shame, and guilt. We need enough sense of sin to make us merciful in our judgments and abundant in forgiveness. We need enough sense of worth to make us steadfast in our principles and protective of our dignity and the dignity of others. We need to always confess that we are not perfect, but we have been perfectly forgiven in the grace of our Lord.