
No Shame – No Honor

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Lent 1 – Year C

In the name of God: “Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend.” Amen. —*The Hymnal*, 388, v.5

“The scripture says”—in our epistle appointed for this first Sunday of Lent—“The scripture says, ‘No one who believes in him will be put to shame ...’” And this reference to shame reminds me of something about us Southerners for which we may be inclined to feel defensive. It’s something that sociologists have been telling us for years: that we’re a culture based on shame and honor codes. That’s right, they say, from Appalachia to the Deep South we’re motivated by issues of shame and honor. That’s why, they go on to tell us, the South has the highest murder rate compared to other regions of the U.S., or more precisely the highest rate based on arguments and insults.

Only for argument-related homicides are Southern rates higher. Southerners do not endorse violence more than do Northerners ... but are more inclined to endorse violence for protection and in response to insults. ... [with] feuds, duels, lynchings, and bushwhackings [etc.]. (Richard E. Nisbett, “Violence and U.S. Regional Culture,” *American Psychologist*, Vol. 48, No. 4, p. 441; <http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/92174/ViolenceAndUSRegionalCulture.pdf?sequence=1> accessed 2/14/2016.)

Now I’ve been paying attention to this nexus between shame and honor lately because of my own research. As some of you know my field of expertise as a university professor is religion and violence studies. Recently I caught up with the best-selling book by philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, a Ghanaian-American professor at New York University (NYU). In his book from 2010, *The Honor Code*, Appiah addressed the questions: “How does moral progress happen? How are societies brought to repudiate immoral customs they have long accepted?” He then proceeds to explore “a long-neglected engine of reform. Examining moral revolutions in the past—and campaigns against abhorrent practices today—he shows that appeals to reason, morality, or religion aren’t enough to ring in reform. Practices are eradicated only when they come into conflict with honor...” appiah.net/books/the-honor-code/

Dueling, foot-binding, slavery and “honor” killings were once considered honorable practices but today most people find them repellent ... Appiah analyzes these four examples to illustrate how traditional beliefs about honor came to be in sharp contrast with evolving views of morality. In each case, arguments against the practices were well known long before they were given up, but knowledge alone wasn’t enough. “Honor” killing has not been completely eliminated, but for each of the other practices Appiah details how the development of an expanded ... world view or “honor world” changed cultural beliefs and overthrew these long held customs. With this book Appiah is hoping to help spark modern moral revolutions ... Just as we look back with horror at slavery and foot binding, people in the future may condemn one or more of our current practices. To determine what might cause our descendants to wonder “What were they thinking?!” (Jaylia review of *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* by Kwame Anthony Appiah, W.W. Norton, 2010, at Amazon.com accessed 2/14/2016)

Indeed, we may ask today, ‘What are we thinking?’ That question came to me yesterday as I listened to Dr. Catherine Meeks at our annual Absalom Jones service at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church. Dr. Meeks chairs our diocesan taskforce, the

Beloved Community Commission for Dismantling Racism (www.episcopalatlanta.org/Dismantling_Racism/). During her sermon she challenged us to end homelessness in the city of Atlanta, and she used the shame and honor framework to motivate us. 'We have enough resources in this city,' she declared, 'to eradicate homelessness by housing instead of providing services in shelters or leaving people on the streets. But we would rather spend less money on services and keep feeling good about that rather than do what it takes to end homelessness itself.' As you can hear in Dr. Meeks' prophetic preaching she knows how to invoke our sense of honor by accessing our sense of shame.

In that connection I've been impressed by a YouTube video called, "[Listening to Shame](#)" by the social researcher, Brené Brown (that's spelled "Rene" with a "B"). Her TED talks are viral on the internet (as we say), particularly her talk called "The Power of Vulnerability." In particular she makes the point that "vulnerability is the bridge to build connection," even on the job and work settings. In the video Brown describes how her presentations on showing vulnerability in the workplace and overcoming shame became so successful that she was approached by a corporation to provide executive coaching and training. 'When I called them back,' she jokes, 'they said we really like what you say about team-building and leadership, but could you leave out the part about vulnerability?' (www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability?language=en). Apparently, we may also remark humorously, what that company really wanted was executive coaching and training on invulnerability!

Well, Christian friends, I wonder: when we hear our scriptures appointed for this first Sunday in Lent, I wonder if we could be courageous, bold and daring enough to also be "listening to shame"—our own shame and that of others? In that connection our gospel about Jesus' temptations in the wilderness suggest that it is only by listening to shame and then defying that shame that can get to honor. Indeed where the apostle Paul in our reading from Romans focuses on shame the Psalm appointed for today likewise focuses on honor.

"No one who believes in him will be put to shame" ... For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Romans 10:11, 13)

Notice the key elements here: believing on Jesus and not being put to shame; calling on his name and being saved. And our Psalm appointed for today is like it: Psalm 91 (vs. 15-16). At the very end of the Psalm God says to the Psalmist, "those who call to me I will answer; I will honor them and show them my salvation." It's as if Paul writing in Romans is quoting the Psalm, since he repeats the key elements: calling on God and being saved. Except there's this one difference: where Paul says, "No one who believes on him will be put to shame," the Psalmist hears God say, 'I will honor them...and show them my salvation' (Psalm 91:15-16).

Here our scriptures appointed for today's beginning of our Lenten journey also bring us to the shame-honor nexus. For, as the epistle to the Hebrews declares,

Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith ... for the sake of^{*} the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:2)

Yes, as Jesus showed in his 40 days of fasting and praying in the wilderness, we too must listen to shame in order then to despise it and find the way to honor instead. And so may we also keep a holy Lent this year by letting ourselves face ourselves, in all our temptations and insults, and still keep faith in the one who alone can grant us the honor and salvation that we desire and yearn for, Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.