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Shame on us?

The cross features prominently as we travel the road to Easter and beyond. It's also a frequent image used in our Christian identity. The cross has also taken on a cultural meaning, even becoming a fashion statement that is now distant from the associations of the cross that bore Jesus' dying body

For me, the cross has had several meanings. The cross represents *pain*; it was an instrument of torture and death. It represents the lethal power of the empire, *signifying injustice*. The cross represents *sacrifice* and atonement for sin; it is by Jesus' death that we can be reconciled to God. And the way of Jesus leads to the cross and calls us to bear our own crosses, and so the cross has also represented *discipleship* to me.

This Lenten season my thoughts turn to a significance of the cross I have yet to explore: shame. Jesus could have suffered or been killed in any number of ways, but the cross put an exclamation point of shame on his death. Is shame something we associate with Jesus' death? As followers of Jesus and cross bearers, are we also shamed? And if so, how do we navigate between shame and honour in our world today?

Cultural anthropologists describe three basic types of social control or "moral emotion:" fear, guilt and shame. Fear cultures often involve the avoidance of fear; this appeals to the manipulators of power. In guilt cultures, guilt is assigned based on laws that seek justice or forgiveness to address a wrong. Shame cultures have often been associated with more collective societies where people act in ways that fulfill group expectations in order to avoid shame and maintain honour.

While all societies contain elements of each "moral emotion," our broader, Canadian society has often been described as a guilt culture. Our legal system is predicated on law and guilt, of being right or wrong. This readily filters into our discussions (and debates) on everything from climate change, to faith and science, to sexuality, to our child rearing practices, etc. We have certain understandings of what is right or true. We take great pains to either promote or enforce our

understandings through argumentation, sanctions and violence of various types. I have noticed however, that in the midst of assessing guilt or inaccuracy, another dynamic is happening regularly: We shame one another. I am shamed. And I shame others.

We are increasingly becoming a shame culture as readily evident in social media. With the erosion of agreed upon bases for authority, our differences and debates become ever more heated and less convincing, and our communities, families and relationships become more fragmented into an assortment of "affinity networks." In our passion and rush to justify our views we all too easily shame the other and in the process add hurt to mistrust, and further dilute our witness.

Unlike historic shame cultures where there were commonly shared understandings of what was and was not shameful, our individualism has multiplied the possibilities of what it means to be shameful. Further complicating the situation is that shame is not static but ever changing. It's possible that I can change my mind and do tomorrow the thing that was shameful today.

What are the implications for us as God's people in a context of shame? One suggestion is that we look to **honour** God as our primary relationship. God is our reference point regarding what is and is not shameful. The Lord's prayer models this by beginning with a call to "hallow" the name of God, and closing by blessing God with authority, power and glory. In turn, we seek God's favour as given to Jesus: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased." (Mt. 3:17) Scripture is consistent in indicating that God is in a unique position to either shame or bless creation. The beatitudes helpfully distinguish whose shame is on us.

A second suggestion is to be warmly **hospitable** to all, especially the most humble. Jesus interacted with children, Samaritans, tax collectors, lepers and other persons of questionable social esteem. Jesus shows a remarkable ability to be shamed by many, but not to shame those he relates to.



Equipping

A resource packet for equipping Mennonite Church Canada pastors and leaders

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A third suggestion is to **embrace the gospel**, and not be ashamed by it. Currently, evangelism does not appear to enjoy the same value that Jesus and the disciples gave it. While we can debate methods, the good news of God's reconciling activity is something to bless and share with others.

Finally, Jesus' return to earth is regularly mentioned as a motive for **living blamelessly** and

to not being ashamed of him. Our waiting is to be filled with witness and worship that demonstrate an eagerness and awareness that Christ is near.

May Paul's words to a young Christian leader (2 Tim. 1:12) encourage us to explore what it means to live in a way that says "I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed..."