

Gremlin Ninja Warrior Training: Part Two

Sunday, January 17, 2021

First Congregational UCC, Gaylord, MI

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Text: Psalm 121 and John 4: 1-29

Those of you who were here last week know that this is part two of a two-part sermon on the woman at the well and her encounter with Jesus. This scripture is only found in the book of John. There's a lot going on here, and last week, I shared with you my belief that the woman was caught up in shame when she met Jesus. I talked a lot about shame and used extensively the work of Dr. Brene' Brown. This week, I want to focus away from the woman and onto Jesus. For people of faith, there is more than just psychology to our discussion of shame, there is also the faith factor: what God thinks of those caught up in shame.

In our story from the Gospel, Jesus is all alone at the well as the disciples have gone off to get food. While there, Jesus encounters a woman who has come out to the well to draw water. She is unnamed, as most women are in the Bible, and yet, she is a part of the longest conversation Jesus has with an individual person in our scripture. For me, the most notable words in this exchange come from Jesus himself very early in the story: Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink', you would have

asked him, and he would have given you living water” (verse 10). Now, I may be reading into the scripture, but here is Jesus, before the whole conversation about husbands and who she’s with and everything else, telling this woman that if she would have only asked him, he would have given her living water. There were no preconditions, no set of questions or faith statements necessary. Jesus basically says, “If you would have asked...”

This is the Jesus I know. The one who looked at the man who had many possessions, “loved him” said Mark’s Gospel (Mark 10: 21) and then told him what he must do. The same Jesus who looked at those who would stone the woman caught in adultery, asked them about their own sin, and then after they dropped their stones and left, Jesus dismissed the woman simply saying “neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more” (John 8:11). The judgment of this world and people who call themselves Christian is far more harsh and far more final than anything we see from Jesus. In fact, Jesus is most judgmental and angry with the scribes and the Pharisees. B, but to those who are ashamed of themselves for whatever reason, Jesus is full of grace, mercy and second chances. Jesus welcomes and eats with the tax collector, the prostitute, the left out and the left behind. He sees the face of God in the faces of children and tells adults who would shoo them away that to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, that adults need to

learn from and become more like the very children they try to fix all the time – especially in matters of faith.

What I'm driving at here is that if most (if not all) people are dealing with shame. What, then, is our role as Christian people, followers of the Way, when it comes to those who are ashamed of themselves? Is it more judgment? More ridicule? More ostracization? Is it heaping on more and more shame, thinking that somehow our shame leads to them doing things better? What it leads to is people shutting down ~~or shutting out~~d. We learned last week what shame does to individual people, and by extension, to society. Shame is life-draining, and Jesus is life-giving. "I would have given you the living water", he says to the woman. Of course, she had questions, and some people try to shame the questions out of us, but Jesus accepted her questions and accepted her. Jesus loves first...Christians often seem to love last. Where did we go wrong? When did we decide that judgment is our first responsibility? Why are we surprised when people run away from the church? It is because much of the church is not anything like Jesus.

We praise his name all the time. Good for us. We celebrate the sacraments. Good for us. What the world needs the is love of Jesus, the hope of

Jesus, the grace of Jesus and most of all the mercy of Jesus. So many people run around in his name shaming the heck out of people and participating in the destruction of people. I know they don't mean it...we don't mean it...but it is what we do. We have some shame around our treatment of others in the name of Jesus, and it's time we admit it, learn from it, and like all shame, our naming of it will take away its power.

There is so much violence in the world. ~~W, and w~~ we condemn it. Self-examination is required to ensure that we don't participate in it. These are turbulent times in our nation and in our world. To be the hands of Jesus right now, we need to see people as he sees people. Love them. I'm not talking about romantic, Valentines' Day, gushy love. I'm talking about the kind of love that can redeem pain, suffering, hopelessness, and loss. The Apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians (Chapter 5: 14-15): "For the whole law is summed up in the commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another". Shunning and shaming those different from us only adds to our problems in this world. We spend so much time ~~in our culture and in our faith~~ concentrating on what people do wrong, it's ~~long since~~ time to start noticing what they do right. As Richard Rohr reminds us, "God created the world and called it

good six times, including calling humanity very good.” Why do we only seem to know the story of Adam and Eve (and even that one not very well), and we don’t know the story of creation—? We don’t hear the words of God, “very good”, or “created in the image”, or even in Abraham’s discussion with God who would destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, when Abraham convinces God that even one righteous person is enough to save the cities.

The same God who, from the cross says, “Forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.”

That doesn’t mean we drop guilt. Remember, guilt is, “I did something wrong” where shame is “I AM something wrong.” We can call out wrong action, but we don’t need to make it about bad people. There is a difference.

Friends, if I’ve learned anything in the past four years of my life (no, this is not about American politics, at least not directly), it is that humanity is far better served by people who follow the Way of Jesus Christ. And it is the way of forgiveness, hope, reconciliation, redemption, even redemptive suffering, for the sake of a hurting world. As Kingdom people, let us begin to look at ourselves and others with the eyes of Jesus. May they love in our eyes before seeing anything else~~see in our eyes first love~~. May we look in the mirror and with our eyes look

upon ourselves first with love. Jesus tells us to love one another as we love ourselves, that's true, but he also tells us to love one another as he has loved us. That includes we ourselves. Shame is robbing us of the ultimate freedom of truly being children of God, not because we're perfect, but because we're loved. Real freedom comes when the world around you no longer has the power to determine how you feel about yourself.

Our task is naming our own shame, dealing with it, and in our dealing with it, see the eyes of love that Jesus is using to look at us. Feel God's grace. Experience God's mercy. Know God's love. When you do all of that, I think you'll find that you are less judgmental of others. I believe that it is true that you can't love another until you first learn to love yourself. It took me 50 years to figure it out, so don't be ashamed if that seems new to you. Love for yourself is not arrogance, it's necessary. Arrogance usually arises not from one who loves themselves, but from those trying to convince themselves and others that they are worthy. You are worthy. You are loved. You are good. You are children of God. God loves you. God sees you. Jesus said to the woman, "If you only knew...you would have asked and received the living water." If we only knew...I mean really knew...how much God loves us, what a difference it would make.

If we only knew...

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.