

Let Me Not Be Put to Shame
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Psalm 25:1-10
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On the front page of the *New York Times* today is an article titled, "After Combat, the Unexpected Perils of Coming Home": *Capt. Adrian Bonenberger made plans for his final patrol to Imam Sahib. But inside, he was sweating the details of a different mission: going home. Which soldiers would drive drunk, get into fights or struggle with emotional demons, he wondered. What would it take to keep them safe in America?*

What would it take to keep them safe?

A soldier returned from war. He thought he was safe at last, but no. The insurgency sneaked up on him in nightmares. He bolted from his bed, soaked in his own sweat. He grabbed the weapons closest to him: a sleeping pill and a shot of whiskey. The enemy drew back briefly, allowing for fitful nights of rest. The inner enemies became bolder and crossed over into his waking hours. He was angry, jumpy at the slightest sound or quick movement. His leg throbbed with pain. A machine gun burst had almost taken that leg. The painkillers were not enough to numb the pain. He was not himself. He wanted his old self back.

But the war had changed him. Once a religious man, he no longer went to church services. He had been through hell, and no one could understand his pain. He was weighted down with guilt and shame, so he decided to take a chance on seeing a chaplain.

Sitting in the chaplain's office, the soldier said, "I can't sleep at night. I'm not myself. I killed dozens of people. I can't get them out of my mind. I'm so ashamed. I don't know what to do."

The chaplain said, "You were following orders. You were an obedient soldier. You are forgiven."

The soldier left, but the shame did not. Weeks went by before he went to a pastor. He told his story again. "I killed dozens of people. I can't get them out of my mind. I'm so ashamed. I don't know what to do."

The pastor said, "The past is the past. There is nothing you can do about it. It is time to move on with your life. There is nothing to be ashamed of. You are forgiven. Go in peace." But the soldier did not feel at peace.

Months went by. His torment grew worse. He decided to see another pastor. Once again the soldier told his story. "I don't know what to do. I'm ashamed."

This pastor listened to the pain pouring out of the young man. There was a long silence. Then the pastor held her head in her hands and shook it back and forth, saying "I don't know. I don't know." She burst into tears. The soldier joined her and together they wept for a world much too tragic for only one person's tears. It was the beginning of his healing.

This is the weekend in our country when we pause to gather as much courage as we can muster to look at the truth about war. We look as daringly as possible at the human cost of war. We remember all who have died, both soldiers and civilians. We remember all who are living a horror as a consequence of wars: the children orphaned, the women raped, the people exiled, the men and women traumatized body and soul, the earth ravaged. We grieve.

We grieve the three wars that our own country is presently engaged in.

O God, put us to shame. We have not found Your way to peace.

One Viet Nam veteran named the consequences of his killings in war this way: *...I felt my soul plummet, just like an angel thrown from paradise into hell...God help me! The long arm of that war just keeps reaching out over the decades, grabbing people by the neck and strangling them where they sit. O the horror! O the horror!* (From *War and the Soul*, by Edward Tick, pp. 130-132)

O, the horror!

Hearing the testimonies of people who are veterans and survivors of war has been awakening to me in my walk with prisoners. Our personal and communal wars hold a clue to the wars that rage around the world. The wars are all of a piece. We name it spiritually as the violence within us and the violence around us.

All wars are holy wars, for they reveal to us what we really value, what we truly fear, and where we ultimately place our trust.

So many of the men and women who are incarcerated in our prisons grew up on a battlefield. Violence was a daily and relentless part of their young lives. Too often, they grew up and perpetuated the horrors. What if we had a memorial day to remember all the lives lost or battered from those home-front wars?

Naming that they have post-traumatic stress disorder is useful, but not fully adequate to attend to the body and soul work necessary for healing. They carry shame. Sometimes they carry shame from their childhoods, shame that belongs to another. Then they find themselves in an institution that perpetuates the shaming.

O, God, let us be put to shame for perpetuating the shaming.

O, God, let us not be put to shame.

And yet we are. Don't we all carry shame of one kind or another?

Tony was abused by cousins and uncles when he was in grade school. His mother gave him a daily barrage of wounding words: "You are nothing. You are no good. There's not a good thing in you. You are a devil child." When he couldn't save his brother from the same fate, he sank deeper into shame.

In his mid-30s with a life sentence in prison, Tony had become an expert in hiding his shame...so to speak. He blamed, he blasted, he bashed, and he bolted in every relationship that did not go his way.

One day another prisoner reached into Tony's shirt pocket to borrow the pen tucked in it. Bam! The guy was thrown to the ground with one giant swing of Tony's arm. We never know what minefield we're walking into with people, do we?

Later I asked, "What was that about, Tony?"

"Nobody touches me! And nobody reaches into my pocket!"

"Okay. What is it with your pocket?"

Tony looked away; then he answered, "It's where my uncle put candy after he did things to me."

O God, let us not be put to shame.

And yet we are. Shame is isolating. It can make us feel completely alone in our pain. Shame reveals the most vulnerable part of us. No wonder we go to such great lengths to try to hide it.

What has brought shame to you? Childhood traumas? Feelings of failing as a parent, a spouse, a friend? Escape measures that bring no relief?

At best the family teaches the finest things human beings can learn from each other: generosity and love. But it is also, all too often, where we learn the nasty things like hate, rage and shame. (Barbara Ehrenreich)

Jesus offers us a way through. He was always seeking out the people who were shamed, by religious people or families or the community, and bringing them into the light of healing. He saw them. He did not shame them.

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Not even Judas, the good friend who betrayed him. When Judas realized that he had made a mess of things, and that his actions of betraying Jesus in the garden were going to go further than a just a run-in with the religious leaders, Judas tried to make amends. He repented. He rushed to the temple and brought back the thirty pieces of silver. But it was too late.

The religious leaders shamed him some more: "What is that to us? See to it yourself."

That was the exact problem for Judas. The one place he thought he could go for help was no help at all. Not only that, it brought further wounding. "See to it yourself." See to it yourself, indeed.

Clearly Judas had tried to see to things himself, and made a mess of things. "See to it yourself."

His greatest fear was realized. He was alone. Guilty. Shamed. He could not see a way through. The shame was too great. So he did himself in.

O, God, let us not be put to shame!

Friends, the church of Jesus Christ exists for all of us who have known failings. This community exists for all who have known the damning voices of shame. It exists for all who have not been able to see to our lives by ourselves.

We know Jesus, and every time we gather at this table, we are able to confess our failings, and our shame. We know the most important thing to know, a truth that Judas was unable to discover. We are not alone. We are not left to our own inadequate devices.

We know Jesus, and we are in a community that seeks to practice mercy.

We have failed each other and ourselves from time to time.

We have not been able to stop wars devastations from within us or around us.

But here in this circle, we can know the healing power of forgiveness. We can practice our ability to slide up against each other with a tender presence that brings solace in sickness and sin, in sorrow and grief.

I invite you now into a moment of silence. Please close your eyes. For a moment, picture someone you know who has known the suffering of being shamed...shamed by society or shamed by a particular actions from which they feel no relief. See them bent over and unable to stand up.

In your imagination, place your hand on their shoulder and say, "Mercy. Mercy. Christ have mercy." Take your hands and gently raise their shoulders tall. Help them to stand.

Now picture yourself for just a moment. See yourself bent over from shame. Let your body bend forward in your chair. Now see Jesus or someone who represents Christ's healing presence to you. Picture their hand on your shoulder. Hear them say that you are beloved.

Still bent over, hear this prayer from Psalm 25 and let us make it our own:

*To you, O God, I lift up my soul,
O my God, in you I trust.
Do not let me be put to shame.
Do not let my enemies exult over me.
Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame.
Let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.*

*Make me to know your ways, O God.
Teach me your paths.*

Lead me in your truth, and teach me.

*For you are the God of my healing;
For you I wait all day long.
Be mindful of your Mercy, O God, and of your steadfast love, for they have been of old.*

*Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions.
According to your steadfast love remember me for your goodness' sake.*

*Turn to me and be gracious to me,
For I am lonely and afflicted.
Relieve the troubles of my heart and bring me out of my distress.
Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins.*

*Guard my life, and deliver me.
Do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in you.*

Open your eyes, and sit up tall.

In the name of Jesus, our sins are forgiven. Walk in mercy. Walk in mercy, and offer it to any and everyone in the midst of the wars, until there is no war and everyone beneath their vine and fig tree can live in peace and unafraid.

Amen.