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Grace and Holy Trinity Church
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Luke 15:1-10

I have carried a lot of shame and embarrassment about this thing that I want to tell you all about this morning. I am going to share it with all of you because I trust you and trust that you will hear my experience with grace and love which is part of why I am able to share it with you all now, 20 years later.

I was a “red ticket” kid. In my school growing up, there were kids who packed lunch, kids who bought lunch, kids who had reduced lunch and kids who got free lunch. In the checkout line after you picked up your meal, you either paid with cash, produced a blue ticket and cash, or provided a red ticket. This was back in the 20th century before technology made this kind of systems obsolete. But because of this system everyone knew that I and my other red ticket classmates were below the poverty level, we were the poor kids.

As far as I was concerned there was nothing worse than being a red ticket kid, We had to have the planned menu, couldn't have “special” meal options, couldn't go through the ala carte line, couldn't go to the snack shack and we certainly couldn't use our tickets for ice cream.

The only thing worse than having a red ticket was losing the red ticket—which somehow I did about 2-3 times a week. The lunch lady would always try to be nice, but she needed the ticket or she needed money or she needed both to balance her drawer at the end of the day. She did see a lot of kids I guess, but those dang tickets always got lost between homeroom and lunch, it was so embarrassing to be marked as different than my peers.

I know intellectually that needing help, living below the poverty line, benefitting from assistance programs is nothing to be ashamed of, and that being poor is not a sin. For those who suffer in poverty, accepting the help of this kind does carry with it a kind of social stigma that I think is reminiscent of that we hear in the Pharisees of

today's Gospel. "The sinners and tax collectors" knew who they were, they had their own "red tickets" which made them outsiders in this community. Everyone knew who they were, and knew that they did.

These were the notorious sinners, not the everyday kind of secret sinners. They heard what the Pharisees were saying about them and about Jesus who was willing to fraternize with them, and they still found their way to Christ. And Jesus welcomed them into a relationship that didn't hold them hostage to what they did for a living, or a choice they made which may not have been the wisest of choices. But instead, Jesus embodied what Bryan Stevenson reminded us in his book Just Mercy, "Each of us is more than the worst thing we have ever done."

Jesus isn't looking to hold those who have committed sins back from a relationship with him. When sins are confessed they are forgiven. Instead of holding shame over the heads of those at his table, he responds to the Pharisees by sharing these parables- the lost coin and the lost sheep.

Consider what it felt like to hear the Messiah teach this lesson as one of the sinners or tax collectors who had undoubtedly heard many sermons and lessons about how their own sins kept them out of God's good graces.

Anyone who has ever been considered an outsider can understand how completely, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually debilitating shame can be. I say this to you out of my own juvenile experience which is laughable in comparison to the vitriol that has been hurled at our Queer, Muslim, Jewish, Latinx, Black, Indigenous, and differently-abled siblings.

Shame hurts. Rates of suicide, addiction, homelessness, hunger, and arrest for minority groups who are labeled in some Christian circles as sinful, are drastically higher than for Caucasian, heterosexual cisgender males.

This is not to say that straight white men don't face hunger, homelessness, addiction, and depression. But there is a correlation to being seen

as a sinner and suffering socially, economically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Jesus' intended audience in these parables isn't the powerful Pharisee. Instead, Jesus teaches this lesson to those called "sinner." Jesus asserts that the sinners and tax collectors are valuable.

They are not only valuable as part of the collective nation of Israel- but are individuals to be sought after- searched for- because they are actually important to God, more important to God than the 99 sheep who stayed put.

Jesus by telling this pair of parables explains to his honored guests, who are dishonored by the temple authorities, that God loves them, that God seeks to be in relationship with them, and that nothing they can do can separate them from the love of God.

So what does this have to do with us? Episcopalians aren't particularly known for being out there proclaiming that everyone is a sinner, that "those folks" are damned. That we are right and you are wrong and Jesus loves us most of all.

What this has to do with us is how we as members of the Episcopal Church understand sin. I often summarize the catechism to folks in this way. Sin is anything that separates you from the love of God or the love of your neighbor. I'm not sure where I picked that up, it might be a Bishop Curry-ism. Bishop Curry being Michael Curry the Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church. What the catechism actually says is that "Sin is the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation."

If we apply this understanding of sin to today's Gospel, it is not the tax collectors or the notoriously poorly behaved individuals who have committed sins that separate them from the love of God, one another, or creation, but the Pharisees. They are separating themselves literally from the love of God and the love of others by refusing to join Jesus at the table. Instead, they choose their own will and trying to shame others into behaving the way they would like them to behave.

Shame works wonderfully at separating us one from another. There is a reason that societies use peer pressure and shunning to regulate who is in and who is out of a group. It works without physical violence, self-policing is much more effective than other accountability. We do this often when we judge others who do not live up to our expectations. This divides us one from another especially when we don't explain what we expect from each other.

It is easy to fall into patterns of behavior when we are in a community which seem normal to members but odd to visitors or guests we are invited to consider the messages that we are sending to one another around behaviors that we may be either intentionally or unintentionally shaming individuals by calling out.

Consider for a moment what the congregation of Grace and Holy Trinity values? How we talk about one another, how we interact with one another, and how we behave around one another is indicative of how we value one another, and how we value our relationship with Jesus. Human beings

separate ourselves based on age, gender, sexuality, marital status, socioeconomic status and so many other ways. This is part of the culture we live in but all these divisions starkly contrast the world which Jesus wants us to bring into being.

We are not supposed to be building up silent walls of shame for arbitrary offenses like the amount of noise one makes in worship, not silencing ones cell phone, wearing white after Labor Day, wearing sneakers to worship, etc. When following Jesus' teaching and living into the oft-repeated statement - whoever you are you are welcome here we remember that at this table, God's will be done, that this is not my table or your table but Christ's table.

When we call one another out for not meeting human expectations we are not calling attention to the other person's sin, rather we sin ourselves. We are separating ourselves from another member of God's beloved creation. In judging one another either silently or aloud we become like the Pharisees in today's Gospel.

So how do we address the sin of shame? We address all sin the same way- confess, repent and return to the Lord. Or as the modern theologian Daniel Tiger teaches children—Say you're sorry. Then, ask how you can help. God is searching us out all the time like a lost sheep or a lost coin. When we choose to place our own desires above God's desire we sin against God and against our neighbor. Always we are welcomed back into a relationship with the Holy Trinity. This is the lesson that all of us sinners, tax collectors, and Pharisees learn today and need to be reminded of time and time and time again. Your will, O God, on earth as it is in heaven. Let us not shame one another, judge one another, and when we do allow us to recognize our own fault, admit it, and address our behaviors.

It is when we are able to do this that we break down the barriers of shame and judgment that divide us and then Jesus, the angels, and the great cloud of witnesses celebrate at our reunification with the beloved creation.

It all starts not by saying how dare Jesus have a meal with a sinner, but instead saying "Have

mercy on me Lord, a sinner." and taking a seat at the table.

Amen.