

The Cross in a Shameless Society

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“Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’”

– Mark 1:14-15

The color purple. Not the book or the movie or the musical. And not the ubiquitous description of churches with an admixture of red and blue political opinions. The color purple is the liturgical tint of Lent, a season of penitence and preparation. This is a time for preachers to call for repentance and to point toward the climax of the spiritual journey at the cross of Christ.

The purple on our stoles and paraments drapes the season of Lent regally. Purple is the color of royalty, and the Lenten question is what royalty demands our loyalty? We must choose between conflicting kingdoms with colliding values.

What is noble in the kingdom of heaven is sometimes shameful in the kingdoms of earth, and vice versa. But even talking about shame in our time is fraught, as it has become more of a psychological than sociological category.

Preachers have a duty and dilemma when preaching the cross in a shameless society. We read our biblical texts and follow the prophets and Jesus in calling for repentance. But the culture has changed under our feet. Right and wrong are contested now, not assumed. We lack a common narrative that commands or commends moral behavior. And yet, the call to repent of evil and to do good remains, whatever that might mean.

The Gulf between the Honor Culture of the Biblical Text and Our Own Time

In his important work, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture*, David A. deSilva summarizes how personhood in the first-century world was tied to group values. “That which is honorable is held dear for no other reason than because it is honorable,¹” wrote the Stoic philosopher Seneca. The fact that he didn’t need to go further to prove why that was so only demonstrates how this honor culture was taken for granted. But if honor is self-evident, so is its shadow side, shame. A person who violates the community’s standards is shameful or disgraced.

Both Greco-Roman culture and Jewish culture had social values by which individuals were measured. These sometimes clashed, requiring faithful Jews to choose between fidelity to Torah and praise from the prevailing culture. Christian values were closer to those of Jews, although, as the Apostle Paul said, the preaching of the

cross was “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles.” And yet, the New Testament takes pains to connect the internal logic of the cross to the narrative of Israel and at times calls upon the church to behave in accordance with the highest standards of the surrounding culture.

When people sit in our pews on any given Sunday, the gulf between ancient honor cultures and ours is hard to bridge. The challenge is to connect disciples today, who live in an individualist culture, with the story of the gospel in such a way that they adhere to community standards informed by the cross itself. This will require that disciples see themselves in solidarity with a community that values things like compassion and vulnerability that look like weakness to outsiders. Because the wider community lacks that story, it cannot be counted on to support the understanding of virtue required to live into it or up to it. This is why our task is to reinforce what the gospel calls us to week in and week out.

Distinguishing Healthy from Unhealthy Shame

DeSilva cites the work of Robert Karen in distinguishing among three kinds of shame. The first is a feeling or experience of shame that results from doing something that provokes public disapproval. The second is a sense of shame that is tied to “healthy attitudes that define a wholesome character.” Both of these are present in first-century honor cultures but are largely lacking in our own. A third kind of shame is, however, persistent in our otherwise “shameless” culture. It is that “repressed but hounding shame, something activated to the level of gnawing self-doubt, occasionally reaching the intensity of fully inflamed self-hatred.” This is the kind of shame the church should work to heal rather than reinforce.²

Genuine care needs to be taken when preaching repentance to those whom the church has wrongly shamed. Women who have been abused or raped too often bear shame for being violated, even though the sin has been committed against them, not by them. Gay and transgender persons too often carry assigned shame from the church simply for being who they are. The church needs to proclaim freedom from this kind of pathological shame.

At the same time, the church must call for repentance and repair when people have failed to live up to the demands of the gospel. Not to do so leaves people with the impression that being Christian brings no decisive demands in the face of the prevailing culture.

Preaching the Liberating Gospel

To begin with, then, we preachers need to remember the plot and unmask the underlying assumptions of biblical culture versus ours. The gospel has a culture of its own to which we are called to conform. In the gospel culture, reinforced by thick relationships within the community of faith, fear of shame can be a healthy motivat-

ing factor in encouraging faithfulness. And repentance, when we fail, can restore us to the joy of our salvation.

When Jesus first appears in Mark's Gospel, he provocatively announces the arrival of the kingdom of God. This good news comes with the exhortation to repent. But why do we need to repent if this is such good news?

The coming of God appears with a kind of angularity that invades our space. It doesn't emerge from our collective efforts. It comes as an unexpected alternative reality to anything we could have conceived or achieved.

Entrance into that new reality comes by the kind of faith that feels at first like death. Which is where the cross comes in, of course. We are so enmeshed in the kingdom of this world that first we have to break free of its grip upon us if we are to embrace the good news of the kingdom of God. We are presented with a choice of what kingdom will shape our souls: the one we die to by renouncing the Devil and all his ways, or the one we enter into by the resurrection power of new birth.

Repentance, then, is less about contrition for occasional minor offenses—errors of commission or omission that require our acknowledgement and amends (although these are hints of the larger reality)—than about the perpetual reorientation of heart and head and hands from service to one kingdom to service to another. This wholehearted, full-bodied *metanoia* is epitomized by the cross of Christ, which is the culmination of the Lenten season and the heart of the Christian life.

The ancient church used the season of Lent for catechumens to receive instruction in the faith. This culminated with baptism on Easter Eve, followed by the celebration of resurrection the next day. New disciples were initiated into solidarity with the people of God by pledging to join the story of God made known in Jesus Christ.

Some churches retain that practice in Lent, while most of us baptize any time during the year. It is harder to retain the call to repentance in seasons of liturgical celebration. Lent helps us to renew our vision and sharpen our call. That call will inevitably and necessarily focus upon the cross as central to Christian discipleship.

The Centrality of the Cross

To understand how the cross stands at the center of the Christian life, we have to revisit its significance in its original context. The cross was an instrument of state-sponsored terror. It was punishment for insurrectionists and all those viewed as enemies of the state. The trial of Jesus before Roman authorities reveals the contest of kingdoms. "Are you the king of the Jews," Pilate asks. Jesus replies: "My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom belonged to this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here" (John 18:36).

This exchange comes soon after Jesus tells Peter to put away his sword, because faithfulness to the kingdom of God is not proven by the honor that would come from killing one's enemies but by loving them. Without his sword to defend him, Peter

denies his master, just as Jesus predicted he would. He is unable yet to imagine the self-sacrificial love that honoring the kingdom of God demands.

Crucifixion was the ultimate expression of shame. The Epistle to the Hebrews names this when urging us to follow the example of “Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame” (12:2).

Viewed from the honor culture of Rome, the cross proved for all to see that the one who hung upon the tree deserved death for dishonoring the emperor, the empire, and the gods who were the power behind them. The cross was a warning that served civility and preserved the peace. But that peace was achieved only by violence or acquiescence to it. Roman authorities inflicted suffering and death upon others to maintain control over the masses and keep the order of the society intact. Civilization—no matter the benign sound of that word—has always relied on violence to maintain its manners. And the willingness of the Jewish religious leaders to offer up Jesus to Roman crucifixion was based in the community’s accommodation to it. “It is better,” the High Priest Caiaphas said, “for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed” (John 11:50).

This is what makes the cross of Christ revolutionary. He takes it up voluntarily. “No one takes my life from me,” he says in John’s Gospel, “I lay it down of my own accord” (10:18).

But he also *must* lay it down. These things must be so, Jesus says. As the Messiah, he must suffer and die. Why must he?

The seminal moment in Mark’s Gospel is when Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah—the Christ. Jesus and his disciples are on retreat in Caesarea Philippi and people have been talking. Who is this man who has such power to heal the sick, exorcize demons and teach with authority? Peter’s answer brings immediate blessing, followed by subsequent chastisement when Peter proves that he fails to understand that being the Messiah means that Jesus must suffer and die.

And then Jesus turns to all the disciples—which includes us today—and declares what should be the ringing and recurring theme of Lenten preaching:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are *ashamed* of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be *ashamed* when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels (Mark 8:34-38, emphasis mine).

And there it is: the crux of the matter for Christian identity. Jesus takes up his cross not so that we can take up arms to defend the cross as an emblem of Christian supremacy. He demands that we join him in taking up our own cross.

Repenting of Christian Nationalism

In February 2024, Donald Trump told religious broadcasters, “No one will be touching the Cross of Christ under the Trump Administration. I swear to you that will never happen.³” He wrongly assumed that he was defending Christians by this statement, when in fact he was seducing Christians into seeing the cross as an identity icon that required nothing more of them than to claim it and cling to it.

The cross is a symbol of Christian identity, but that identity is tied to our commitment to carrying it rather than wearing it. Brandishing the cross plays into the culture of power that always sets up a contest of us against them. It sees the cross as a sign of victory over enemies and assumes eternal enmity between believers and nonbelievers.

But the cross of Christ contradicts a culture that values strength and success, a culture that celebrates and rewards winners over losers. It stands in opposition to a way of being in the world that sacrifices or marginalizes or dehumanizes others in the pursuit of an honorable life. The cross honors the power of love over the love of power. It attends to the relief of the suffering of others, even if that requires our own suffering in the process.

In her book, *This Is Going to Hurt: Following Jesus in a Divided America*, Bekah McNeel puts it plainly: “If you want to walk in the Way of Jesus, you are going to have to take up your cross *daily*. He’s not talking about grand martyrdom, here. He’s talking about lives that put our self-interest aside and choose self-sacrificial love in a way that is not rewarded, in fact may be punished, by the power structures of the day. Taking up your cross and following Jesus means not capitulating to exploitation and power hoarding just because that is ‘the way it’s done.’ And when you realize, ‘Oh s---, that’s going to cost me something’—a promotion, an election, some profit, some power—the gospels are there to agree with you. ‘Right. Because it’s a *cross*.’⁴”

To carry our cross means that we voluntarily give up striving for self and offer ourselves sacrificially in love for God and in solidarity with our most vulnerable neighbors. This act of self-denial is integral to cross-bearing. When bystanders at the crucifixion of Jesus wondered why he saved others but would not save himself, they were pointing to the conflicting understandings of the honor culture of Rome versus the honor culture of heaven.

This is why we struggle today with the call to repent. As the title of this article suggests, we live in a shameless society. But is that really so?

We see a remnant of ancient honor culture in our military. The Congressional Medal of Honor is given only to those soldiers who flagrantly disregard their own safety in the interest of defending fellow soldiers in harm’s way. Those who serve with honor forfeit their self-protective instincts for the greater good of country. To be dishonorably discharged from military service is to be marked with the shame of deliberately failing in this duty of self-sacrifice. Similarly, in team sports we expect individuals to sacrifice themselves for the interest of the team. While individual

achievements are celebrated, they are considered shameful if they undermine the interest of the team as a whole.

But while that is true in discreet sectors like military service or team sports, the wider culture is dominated by status values tied to wealth and celebrity such as self-preservation and personal achievement. These are the people we honor. Those who fail to stand out—regardless of how they stand out—are shamed. Whatever it takes to gain public notoriety is excusable. Even if it's, well, shameful.

It is difficult not to name Donald Trump over and over in this piece as the epitomizer of this shamelessness. For one thing, when asked if he had ever asked forgiveness from God for anything, he could not think of why he might have ever needed to. While claiming Christian identity, he doesn't believe he has ever done anything wrong that would require repentance.⁵ Furthermore, he disrespects those who lost their lives in service to the country, calling them losers; he instead urges us to honor those who saved their lives as the winners.⁶

Preaching repentance will require making clear the call to deny ourselves and take up our cross. It will make plain Jesus's warning about gaining the whole world and losing one's soul. To be a winner in the eyes of our shameless culture is to put ourselves in the position of being ashamed at the coming of the Son of Man with his angels. The temporary reward of worldly reputation risks the eternal shame of infidelity to the gospel.

The Promise of the Cross-bearing Life

When Jesus tells his disciples that he must suffer and die, he immediately follows that with the statement that on the third day he will be raised. And he promises that faithful cross-bearing disciples will be so rewarded with resurrection life as well. In other words, the gospel is not about self-sacrifice for the sake of self-sacrifice; it is about participating in the everlasting kingdom of unending love that death cannot thwart.

Repentance is a kind of death. It is dying to self. But it is dying for the sake of living. When we repent, we open ourselves up to the gift of new life that we could have never imagined before. Repentance is what we are for, not just what we are against. When we repent, we model a kind of Christian living that honors the gospel and inspires others to do so as well.

When Russian dissident Alexei Navalny was murdered last year for opposing the undemocratic and oppressive rule of Vladimir Putin and his state-sponsored wars, what was little known to the world was his Christian motivation in returning to Russia from the safety of exile. He found his moral imperative in Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, especially the beatitude about hungering and thirsting for righteousness. "I've always thought that this particular commandment is more or less an instruction to activity," Navalny said. "And so, while certainly not really enjoying the place where I am, I have no regrets about coming back or about what I'm doing. It's fine,

because I did the right thing ... I feel a real kind of satisfaction,” he said. “Because at some difficult moment I did as required by the instructions and did not betray the commandment.”⁷

Preachers, too, must model this moral courage for the people we preach to, opening their imagination to what repentance might look like for them. In a meeting with mainline pastors in Washington, D.C., last year, the question was posed why pastors were not calling on their congregations prophetically to disavow Christian nationalism, along with some of the horrendous policies being promoted in the name of Christianity? The honesty of some was damning. “I have a family and we need the parsonage,” one said. “I can’t risk alienating some of our church’s largest givers,” said another.

This is a challenge every preacher faces—the personal risk of carrying our own cross by preaching and practicing repentance. When we fail to do so, however, we let people down.

Sometimes we are speaking for those who are depending upon us to uphold their humanity. When we call out anti-immigrant attitudes toward migrants and defend those who would treat them as animals, we carry our cross in solidarity with those who are equally made in the image of God. When we defend the equal worth and ministry of women and LGBTQ+ Christians in the church, we carry our cross in solidarity with those whom God is raising up among us to strengthen the church’s witness in the world.

Failing to do these things lets down the people with privilege who sit in our pews, people we are most afraid of offending. If we don’t model this cross-bearing repentance ourselves, they will lack pastoral examples of courage and compassion. But when they see us put ourselves at risk, they are emboldened to do the same. Faithfulness begets faithfulness.

The fruits of repentance are also sweet. When we die to self and carry our cross in solidarity with and for others, nothing lost can compare with what is gained. We will discover surprising gifts that feel like resurrection. A freedom that comes from being unburdened by worries about our reputation. A joy that comes from unexpected new friendships. A peace that passes understanding.

And as Jesus tells it, there is also joy among the angels in heaven over one soul that repents.

Notes

1. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2000.
2. Ibid, pp.89-90.
3. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/trump-no-one-will-be-touching-cross-of-christ-under-trump-administration-/3146341#>
4. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024), pp. 7-8.
5. <https://www.cnn.com/2015/07/18/politics/trump-has-never-sought-forgiveness/index.html>

6. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/09/trump-americans-who-died-at-war-are-losers-and-suckers/615997/>

7. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2024/02/alexei-navalny-russell-moore-putin-russia-moral-courage/>