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The Message: Honour or Shame? Learn

How do we know what our community honours?

There are many ways. Our buildings tell the stories of what we honour or have honoured.

First campus speaks loudly of honouring worship as the original sanctuary and its renovation attest. Christ campus speaks loudly to a history of honouring children with classrooms galore. The Chancel here speaks of honouring the episcopal art of our Methodist Episcopal heritage. Why is it so deep? Because the choir pews used to face each other in the Anglican style.

The stained glass windows in both buildings tell the Biblical stories we honour. I hope in the fall that the Rev. Drs. Ted Lutz and Bob Johnstone might give a tour of the windows after worship for a few Sundays. Meanwhile, look for what they have to teach you.

The stories we tell indicate what we honour.

Ministers have the privilege of being invited in to many people's stories – particularly at the time of their deaths. To prepare for the funeral, I ask the family to gather and reminisce. I ask them questions like, "What did you admire? What made you laugh? What drove you crazy? What do you remember as children? Grandchildren? What were there favourite sayings? What would they want us to remember them for?" The stories they tell me create the colour for the sermon. And the challenge is always there: go and do likewise. Value what they valued. That is how community is built and tended.

In telling our stories in the context of Christian community, we have a master storyteller to guide us. Jesus tells stories that teach us what is honoured in God's eyes.

But in the scriptures this week, Jesus doesn't tell a story. In this passage from Luke, Jesus is explicit about what will be honoured in God's kingdom and what won't be. This is one version of the Beatitudes. In Matthew Jesus preaches a sermon on the mount - the centre panel of the window on the pulpit side at the back of the church portrays that moment; here in Luke's version, Jesus preaches a sermon on the plain. And there were present all the disciples – all those who followed him, and a great many who were seekers but weren't yet followers, and probably quite a few opponents. So Jesus didn't have the luxury of telling stories – that takes time, to tell a story about each value he wanted to hold up.

I was reading an article this week that looked at all the places in the Bible where blessings and curses appear – in Matthew and Luke, in the Hebrew Scriptures, and even in texts that didn't make it into the Bible. And the author decided that these blessings and curses were all about honour and shame. He suggests that instead of "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" a more accurate translation would be, "Honoured are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."

And instead of "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." a more accurate translation would be "Shame on you who are rich ..."

Honour and shame are extremely important in the culture of Biblical times. What Jesus does is to emphasize values that bring honour in God's eyes, not the eyes of the culture. And those values are not the same.

The culture would place a high value on wealth; Jesus does not. The culture would place a low value on poverty; Jesus does not.

What values bring the individual and more importantly the community honour? What behaviours bring shame on the individual and the community?

George W. Bush, along with Bill Clinton and Barak Obama were all interviewed in the aftermath of George H.W. Bush's death. Over and over we heard them use the word honour to describe a president and a father, and more particularly, "He brought honour to the office of president."

Jesus says that those who experience

1. poverty – a recognition that we have less than we need of what we need;
2. hunger – a yearning to be filled by God;
3. suffering – weeping for the sake of others;
4. and have the courage to stand up for Christ even though hated and mocked;

those are the people who are honoured.

Jesus offered this week's remarkable list of "blessings" to offer the disciples God's dream.

1. The dream-come-true for the poor that Jesus offers is that they will receive nothing less than all the glory that is the kingdom of God. The kingdom is theirs.
2. The dream-come-true for the hungry that Jesus offers is that they will be forever filled and satisfied at the sumptuous table of the messianic banquet.
3. The dream-come-true for the mourning that Jesus offers is that they will bubble over with laughter and light-heartedness, that joy will fill their lives. Ennobled and enrobed, enriched and empowered, satisfied and fulfilled, joyfully alive.

Jesus says that those who live for:

1. material wealth;
2. empty laughter without a thought for others;
3. fame for doing what you have to to get accolades;
4. those are the people who are shamed.

Shame is not a popular concept – but we see shame at work – not when people do wrong, or omit to do good, but when they are CAUGHT doing wrong or ignoring opportunities to do good. And even then it is sometimes missing.

Psychiatrically, people who experience no shame are described as psychopaths or sociopaths – and the rest of us can't quite understand how they experience no shame.

Japanese executives in charge of the nuclear reactor damaged in Japan's worst earthquake -- expressed shame very publicly by prostrating themselves in front of the community, as they were berated for not protecting them. That was the first step to move from shame to honour. Japan is spending billions cleaning up the site, removing contaminated soil like archeologists, and billions more over decades creating robots to find the lost fuel that disappeared under one of the reactors. This is a great example of the cost and determination it takes to move from shame to honour when honour is lost.

Christian teachings – in fact many religious teachings – are helpful in providing a structure to protect us from shame.

Apart from religious/ethical teachings, we really have to hunt to find elements in our society that give us a structure to avoid shame. Sometimes comedians find ways to say, "Shame on you!" But the trouble is that they may tell jokes about people who haven't done shameful things, just to get a laugh. That's shameful in itself. We can't place our trust in them.

Television news broadcasters in the US have taken to shaming people they don't agree with, and many have jumped on the bandwagon. They are just as likely to serve their advertisers,

their owners' political persuasions, or their own prejudices. We can't trust them with the 'Shame on you!' finger.

In today's list of "blessings" and "woes," Jesus warns his disciples that by living God's dream, they will experience hate, exclusion, rejection and even excommunication from those who would prefer to hear safe "just-make-a-difference" dreams and schemes. Offer the world Jesus' message of redemption, complete re-creation, miraculous rebirth and personal transformation and you will unnerve and disturb those who are satisfied with and invested in status-quo dreaming. Dreams threaten small schemes and small dreams.

Religious groups are not immune. Even at the funeral of Fred Rogers of Mr. Rogers Neighbourhood, there were supposed Christians shouting hateful things right across the road. Mr. Rogers!

He is a fine example of how religious teachings can bring honour to people for good actions and create a structure to avoid shame.

Fred Rogers was a shy, overweight child bullied and lonely. One of his colleagues mused that had there been no "Fat Freddy," there would have been no Mr. Rogers. He went into television because he hated it, especially programmes for children; he yet realised it could be harnessed to do so much good.

While working behind the scenes developing children's programming, Rogers studied to become a Presbyterian minister, and he thought of his work as a ministry.

It was the CBC who asked him to develop "Mr. Rogers," and the head of children's programming who insisted that he step in front of the camera because of the way in which he talked with children. Ernie Coombs, his assistant puppeteer, was influenced by him in developing Mr. Dressup.

Rogers had a way of relating to the child in those who interviewed him. There are classic moments with newscaster Tom Brokaw and Johnny Carson in which they start out flippant and cynical and end up wordless and in tears. Those are examples of a transforming shame.

Because we are Christian we value what Jesus valued and we are shamed by what Jesus found shameful. That's what Fred Rogers did and that's all the structure we need to avoid shame.

In our lives, we tell stories that lift up those things we honour.

Never in all my conversations with grieving families has anyone ever held up a person's wealth as a sign of honour. What do we remember about those we admire? Stories of generosity, humility, compassion, laughter, honesty.

Listen to the stories you tell.

The stories we tell hold up the values we try to live. Aim your sights towards those stories; you will receive the honour Jesus offers.