

2016

Lift Up Your Hearts: Preaching Grace Effectively as a Pastoral Response to Shame

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LIFT UP YOUR HEARTS:
PREACHING GRACE EFFECTIVELY AS A PASTORAL RESPONSE TO SHAME.

by
HAROLD KENYON

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Luther Seminary
In Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree of
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

March 10, 2016

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ABSTRACT

Lift Up Your Hearts: Preaching Grace Effectively As a Pastoral Response to Shame.

by

Harold Kenyon

Proposes preaching grace effectively as pastoral response to shame. Sources include Robert Albers, Robin Stockitt, James Fowler, Serene Jones and Cameron Harder. Argues fall-redemption theology harms those experiencing shame. Employs shame as alternative lens for reading scripture. Explores social, biblical and theological dimensions of shame. Differentiates shame and guilt. Demonstrates shame's connections to mental illness, trauma, and addiction. Honors people's formative narratives. Claims baptismal basis for identity. Seeks preaching practices that build resilience from shame's spiritual and psychological consequences. Identifies narrative practices enhancing understanding God's acceptance. Offers insight into crafting sermons that celebrate identity within a reconciled future.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I began this project, I had no idea how much other people would contribute to this thesis. Many people offered support, encouragement, wisdom and inspiration towards its completion. I have been privileged to be included in two wonderful cohorts, the classes of 2013 and 2016. Professors Chris Smith and Michael Rogness provided patient and faithful direction as well as untold hours behind the scenes. Dan Anderson offered essential input into research methods. The administrative leadership and counsel of Katy Dahl, Paul Lokken and Dirk Lange provided a roadmap through the complex realities of seminary research. The library staff of Luther Seminary has offered invaluable insight and support.

I am grateful to the members and council of Crossroads United Pastoral Charge for their partnership in ministry and whose love and encouragement were invaluable. My Parish Response Group gave insightful direction and enriched my data with thoughtful responses. I am grateful to my colleagues Karen Tjaden and Karen McGill who always encouraged me to move forward. I am especially grateful to the individuals who participated through sermon surveys and interviews and whose efforts and dedication enriched all of my research. This project would never have reached completion without the love and support of my family, my wife Susan and children Elizabeth and Matthew. Grace and peace to you all!

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CHAPTER 1

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

In my preaching it has long puzzled me why well intended words of grace and encouragement so often seem to go unheard. Why do the very people most in need of God's acceptance often fail to hear and apprehend the message? They seem to be stuck behind a barrier that they cannot overcome. That barrier is shame. My question is, "How can I craft sermons to help people stuck in shame gain resilience and grow in confidence and hope?"

I want you to meet some people who have listened to my sermons. The first is an elderly woman with a sharp and clear mind. She looks at the world through the eyes of faith. Her compassion for those in need stands as humble witness to God's goodness and generosity. The woman tells me, "I have never had an experience of God. I don't know why, I just have never sensed God's presence. When I come to church, I feel like a fraud."

I meet with a man, bent over with trouble. Married early in life to his first love, they were happy, for a while. Their relationship collapsed. Neighbors whispered. The community judged. "I didn't know what was going...it was as if she had become...a different person." It turned out, the man's sweetheart suffered from schizophrenia. "I loved her. I still love her. How could this happen?"

Do you know people like this? They share a common experience. They know the sting of failure: at work, in faith, or in their family life. No matter what they do, it never

feels good enough. They feel stuck. What holds them back is shame, an unseen force,¹ a power that grips and strangles confidence. These people have done nothing wrong. They carry inner wounds that never seem to heal. Is there a way that their life story can be re-written?

Looking out on the congregation on Sunday morning, their stories stick with me. As a community of faith we place our story alongside the story of Jesus Christ. Jesus gets our shame, and does not shrink from it. Jesus' life, death and resurrection offer us a paradigm for the transformation of shame. For those in the midst of it, shame never makes sense.² My hope is this: by placing our story alongside Jesus' story, perhaps a way forward can be found, shame lifted and healing begun.³

Some people have asked, "Why are you so passionate about such a difficult topic?" I am encouraged by the courageous and public choice many people have taken to name the things that shame: bullying, sexual violence, addiction, racism, mental and physical illness, and suicide. When politicians are publically shamed on the world stage, wars break out. Shame isolates and blocks people from getting help. This thesis argues that the Bible remembers a Shepherd who never relents from seeking the lost and shamed members of the flock.

It takes courage to engage congregations in difficult topics from the pulpit, but too many people struggle with issues of shame in their lives. They become diminished by its

¹ Robin Stockitt, *Restoring the Shamed: Towards a Theology of Shame* (Eugene, Or.: Cascade Books, 2012), Kindle edition, chap. 1.

² Jill L. McNish, *Transforming Shame: A Pastoral Response* (Binghamton, NY: Haworth Pastoral Press, 2004), 177.

³ Ibid., 3.

power. There is a hunger for “real assurance from a real God about real troubles.”⁴

Shame leads people away from community and the identity that is theirs through God’s acceptance and grace.

Addressing shame through preaching becomes a question of mission and purpose. The Biblical image that comes to mind is that of the one lost sheep, and the celebration that sounds when the lost are found. Wouldn’t it be incredible to be a church where shame-burdened people re-imagine their future and gain resiliency for living? Jones makes two affirmations that shape this project. “First, we live in a world profoundly broken by violence and marred by harms we inflict on each other. Second, God loves this world and desires that suffering be met by hope, grace, and love.”⁵

Justification and Rationale

Identifying Project Goals – “The Toolkit”

Preachers are purveyors of identity and meaning.⁶ People who carry the burden of shame suffer from a diminished and distorted sense of self. Through this enquiry, I hope to develop insights into the dynamics of shame that will enhance my toolkit for proclaiming God’s reconciled future, where shame will be no more.⁷ Further, I hope to grow in understanding of those who walked this path that I might respond more effectively to their pastoral needs.

⁴ Frank A. Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1997), Kindle edition, 32.

⁵ Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (2009), Kindle edition, chap. 1.

⁶ Andrew Root, *The Promise of Despair: The Way of the Cross as the Way of the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), 66.

⁷ Stockitt, *Restoring the Shamed: Towards a Theology of Shame*, Introduction.

Gaining Skills in Responding Pastorally to Shame

People who experience shame often experience isolation from the community, and this is especially true in a rural context. For example, if you were a clerk in a grocery store and something shame-related caused you to leave your job, there might be only one place in town for you to buy your groceries. Unable to imagine their future, people burdened by shame drop out of the very circles of support and friendship they need most. The preacher's task is to help the congregation break the cycle of shame and to enable individuals to be restored to community and fellowship of the church.

Gaining Insights for Congregational Mission

I hope this study will increase my skill in responding pastorally to farm families because they are in a sense, the heart of our identity as rural people. The pressures farmers face are a deep concern for the rural church. Caring for those called to be stewards of the land is one way we live out our baptismal identity and our mission.

Insight from this study has the potential to shape congregational mission and identity. Looking around on a typical Sunday, there are many who once were active but who find it hard to attend worship because of shame-related issues. My deep desire is for the church to be the kind of community that supports people even when their hearts are shattered by shame. Part of the genius of twelve-step groups like AA is their understanding of community and the manner in which they come alongside people in their most vulnerable moments, offering unconditional support and mutual acceptance. The church could do worse than to model such grace for those experiencing shame.

Sharing Pastoral and Preaching Insights with the Wider Church

In the course of my ministry, I have opportunities to mentor theological students, and this study could benefit their preparation for work in rural ministry. Arriving from urban backgrounds, few have been adequately equipped to understand their context and the role shame plays in distorting people's identity. Helping students understand their context is one way we prepare future leaders in the faith community.

Through my work in presbytery, one of the recurrent themes we deal with is the morale of church leaders. Rural depopulation can cause leaders and clergy to experience corporate shame. A community grief sets in, where churches struggle to identify where they went wrong and how to identify hope.⁸ This research may benefit those in the wider church who are called to imagine an alternate future.

Understanding the Contours of Shame

Both Brown⁹ and Fowler affirm that gaining an understanding of shame's power is essential for spiritual growth and living with integrity.¹⁰ We are made to connect with one another, and connection makes life full and purposeful. Invariably shame is the one thing that distorts the connections we enjoy in relationship. While dealing with shame is painful, the advantages are great: growth in confidence and courage, deepening of respect

⁸ Cameron Richard Harder, "The Shame of Farm Bankruptcy: A Sociological and Theological Investigation of Its Effect on Rural Communities" (University of St. Michael's College, 2000), 42.

⁹ Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York, NY: Gotham Books, 2012), Kindle edition, 6.

¹⁰ James W. Fowler, *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 93.

for self and others, openness to vulnerability¹¹ and an increased creativity before life's challenges. As we develop resilience from shame's power and restore our sense of worthiness, we gain confidence in our capacity to enjoy a purposeful future.

When I originally envisioned this project, I expected to explore related disciplines for their perspective, including psychology, scripture and theology, hoping to learn as much as I could about shame. Applying that knowledge, I would select texts that would help the congregation gain insight into shame's power and how grace can overcome and heal us from shame. The goal would be to assemble a simple tool box to help preachers deal with a difficult topic. My research led me think about shame as something more than just another topic for preaching. There were two turning points: Fowler's description of shame as an *affect*,¹² and Stockitt's insights into the theological dimensions to shame underpinning human anthropology.¹³

Fowler is particularly interested in the means by which people grow in faith,¹⁴ devoting considerable research to shame as a force that blocks faith development. Expanding on the work of Donald Nathanson and Silvan Tompkins,¹⁵ Fowler describes nine *affects*, a psychological term for the emotions that drive us; shame being one. We are hardwired for the affect called shame/humiliation. Shame is part of our makeup, and one of the realities of how we "live, move and have our being." Although this insight is

¹¹ Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*, 10.

¹² Fowler, *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life*, 99.

¹³ Stockitt, *Restoring the Shamed: Towards a Theology of Shame*, chap. 1.

¹⁴ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

¹⁵ Donald L. Nathanson, *The Many Faces of Shame* (New York: Guilford Press, 1987), 137.

gained from psychology, it also has theological significance as it points to the manner in which we were created. Shame has a global influence and acts as a driver in almost every sphere of human relationships.

Stockitt argues that God's created order in Genesis was originally free of shame. (Genesis 2:25) In the text we see how shame enters the scene and presents itself as a distortion of God's intention. Stockitt finds the sin-redemption theory of atonement a somewhat archaic solution for what ails the world.¹⁶ He posits shame as an interpretative lens for reading scripture and the "red thread" that runs from beginning to end. Looking at shame theologically, he comes to the same conclusion as Fowler regarding the global nature of shame. Speaking of Eden, Stockitt writes, "If that ordinary place becomes distorted by shame, then it is a distortion of every aspect of who we are, our sense of self, our relationship to God, and our connectedness to our neighbor."¹⁷ If shame enters the world at creation, then scripture is held together by a narrative that describes God's desire to heal God's "lost, guilty and shamed people."¹⁸

Both Stockitt and Fowler identify shame as a force driving human relationships. Fowler however adds an innovation, and points to a potential direction for healing. In terms of the nine psychological affects governing human behavior, shame/humiliation has a corresponding opposite, confidence/pride.¹⁹ Shame attacks that part of the self that informs confidence. Imagine someone you know who once was trapped in shame. Do you remember how they walked down the street, head covered, hiding from the world?

¹⁶ Stockitt, *Restoring the Shamed: Towards a Theology of Shame*, chap. 1.

¹⁷ Ibid., chap.1.

¹⁸ Ibid., chap. 1.

¹⁹ Fowler, *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life*, 103.

Then, something happened. They walk with their head held high, and a spring in their step. Their past no longer controls them. Their relationships broaden and their future opens with potential. God's grace has the power to restore shamed people. The goal of this project is to help people stuck in shame not only hear grace but experience it, that they might gain resilience and grow in confidence and hope.

Shame is an emotion we would rather walk past than welcome into our circle of friends. Shame feels like such a difficult emotion to claim; we find it much easier to say that we feel awkward, embarrassed or even stupid.²⁰ Shame colors the narrative that draws our self-image, whispering that we are weak, defective, and not good enough. Shame wounds the heart and leaves us feeling diminished.

Distinguishing Guilt vs. Shame

Although the two often appear at the same time, guilt is different from shame. Guilt has to do with our behavior, while shame concerns the self. I might regret being late in handing in a project for work, and feel guilty that I am behind and need to catch up. That being said, my failure to make a deadline doesn't have to impact how I feel about my sense of vocation, or whether I am valued as an employee. Shame is distinct and more global in its reach. When I am ashamed, I come to understand that I am a failure and incompetent, unworthy of respect.

As much as we might want to escape shame's presence, we can't. Shame matters, because it abides in the deepest place inside us.²¹ In its healthy form, shame acts as a bridle on behavior and grounds the conscience. Shame can protect us from making poor

²⁰ Ibid., 92.

²¹ Ibid.

decisions that would damage relationships. Shame can lead us to act with integrity, even when the temptation to choose easier paths is great. When we stop listening to its correction, disaster is near at hand. Healthy shame is a guardian of the soul and everything that is good and honorable in us.

Unhealthy Shame vs. Healthy Shame

Unhealthy shame does great damage to the self. How often I have felt the despair of faithful people who in the grip of shame have uttered the statement, “I am worthless. I have done nothing of value in my life.” Unhealthy shame compels people to construct alternate personalities and lifestyles that are a lie. The fervent persecutor becomes caught up in the very thing they claim to oppose. Segregationist and Senator Strom Thurman had a child with his black teenage maid, Carrie Butler.²² Shame can cause people to withdraw or explode with rage. Mr. Putin was shamed when his handpicked president of Ukraine was democratically removed, and in response his army invaded a sovereign country. Shame invades our relationships and divides nations on the basis of race, religion, sexual orientation, gender and social location. In the process it poisons our political life.

Dr. Charles Richard Drew was a brilliant hematologist, an African American educated at McGill and professor at Howard University,²³ and the medical director of the American Red Cross blood program during WWII. By this time, science had established that blood was differentiated by three types and their variations, A, B and O. In 1941, the

²² Essie Mae Washington-Williams and William Stadiem, *Dear Senator: A Memoir by the Daughter of Strom Thurmond* (New York: Regan Books, 2005).

²³ Lawrence Hill, *Blood: The Stuff of Life* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press Inc., 2013), 106.

American Red Cross at the urging of the US Army and Navy announced that blacks would be excluded from donating blood. This was at a time when whole blood and blood products were urgently needed, and giving blood was seen as a patriotic duty. At Johns Hopkins University, it was the practice to segregate blood not only on the basis of type, but also by the race of the donor. The bags of blood were marked with a “C” for colored and a “W” for white. The stories in scripture that speak of blood as unclean do not seem so very far away. Time and again, we can see instances when shame trumps both reason and grace. Paul reminds us however, to not be discouraged. Shame’s victory is but temporary and an illusion. (Romans 8:37)

The Continuum of Shame

Carl Schneider is a pioneer of shame research and coined the terms “discretionary shame” and “disgrace shame.”²⁴ Fowler elaborates on these themes to envision a continuum of shame extending from healthy forms to the profoundly disabling.²⁵ Discretionary shame is concerned with our sense of modesty, privacy and prudence. It functions to guard healthy boundaries when if crossed would diminish our sense of self. I recall a lady who remarked that she had no shame, having endured 24 surgeries in her life. “So many people have seen my body exposed that my nakedness is something I no longer fear.” On the other hand, disgrace shame is like an impending storm of disapproval. Crossing the boundary into disgrace shame can injure our sense of self and be a source of betrayal to those who have come to expect our trust and fidelity. Actions leading to disgrace shame might include a chartered accountant entering bankruptcy or a

²⁴ Carl D. Schneider, *Shame, Exposure, and Privacy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1977).

²⁵ Fowler, *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life*, 113.

judge convicted of bribery. Healthy shame that protects the self and neighbor can be both discretionary and disgrace-based. We need both to enjoy healthy relationships.

Considerable attention has been paid to perfectionism as a distortion of our true self. Perfectionism almost always involves seeking approval and the fear of being ordinary. Perfectionism comes at great cost. We see it played out in the children of former athletes who endure unbearable pressure to excel at the sport their parent once played, hoping to gain parental approval, but never achieving it. I remember a woman with high achieving parents who always wanted to be a hair dresser, but was never allowed for such an occupation was beneath their family. It wasn't until both parents had died that the woman took up her dream of cutting hair. A great deal of burnout and destructive boundary crossing in adults can be traced to perfectionism where people live a lie in order to seek approval. Perfectionism distorts the heart and prevents people from pursuing life with spontaneity and joy. The desire to be extraordinary and to achieve perfection functions in many ways like a powerful and addictive painkiller. The only way to overcome and kill the pain of rejection is to seek perfection. Healing from perfectionism requires a word that allows people to identify their true self and to recover their sense of agency and acceptance.

Shame from enforced minority status is one of the great distortions of modern society. Many problems of race, ethnic background, gender identity, religion and physical ability have roots in a fear of people who are different from us. How are we to live and work together? Beverley McLachlin, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada speaks of three values that underpin the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms: “respect for rights, respect for difference, and the commitment to resolution of

differences through peaceful compromise.”²⁶ McLachlin says that history remembers only two paths for resolving conflict arising from minority status, the path of dialogue or the path of violence. McLachlin is a champion of the path of dialogue.

We come to understand our place in the world from a very early age, and with it our sense of self-worth. As parents we model self-esteem for our children. The trouble is we often pass on our shame as easily as our sense of self-worth. When discrimination due to minority status becomes part of our identity, our children absorb and carry that sense of shame into the classroom upon their first day of school. Too many people enter their early years with shame not of their making. When coupled with some of the other variations of shame, the child of minority status can experience a terrible burden. A recent study by researchers at the University of Lethbridge found a causal link between racial discrimination toward aboriginal people and prescription drug abuse with the conclusion that efforts to reduce racial discrimination may reduce reported symptoms of trauma, shame and resulting addiction.²⁷ Healing from shame is not only a personal matter, it is corporate and communal. Our shared narrative as people of God needs to be re-authored²⁸ in the light of equality, dignity, inclusion, and social justice.

John Bradshaw popularized the idea of “toxic shame.”²⁹ Toxic shame almost always involves a profound breach of trust, a demand for loyalty and secrecy, often

²⁶ Susan Harada, “The McLachlin Group: How Canada's First Femal Chief Justice Has Taken the Heat Off the Supreme Court,” *The Walrus* 2014.

²⁷ Cheryl Currie et al., “Racial Discrimination, Post-Traumatic Stress and Prescription Drug Problems among Aboriginal Canadians,” *Canadian Journal of Public Health* 106, no. 6 (2015).

²⁸ Michael White and David Denborough, *Narrative Practice: Continuing the Conversations* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), Kindle edition, 5.

²⁹ John Bradshaw, *Healing the Shame That Binds You* (Deerfield Beach, Fla.: Health Communications, 1988).

accompanied by threats of violence and social exclusion. Toxic shame splits the self, where two contradictory narratives exist at the same time. The result of sexual abuse and violence is an all too common source of toxic shame. People who have experienced toxic shame may have a terrible time with boundaries and go on to inflict toxic shame on others in their care. Many of the roots of toxic shame are centered in traumatic events. Toxic shame is an experience of the body where the shock waves of past violence and abuse continue to reverberate.

Some toxic shame is “ascribed shame.” Canada is a nation of immigrants and part of our make-up includes children of men who served as soldiers for Nazi Germany. Unlike the rest of the population who proudly assemble to honor the fallen, children and grandchildren of Nazi soldiers often carry with them a shame arising from events in which they did not participate. They ask, “My father was a monster. Does that make me a monster?” Unable to disclose their family background, they feel cut off from a pride that other people claim. People stuck in toxic shame feel a weight that drags like an undertow upon their lives. However, it is possible to gain resilience and to grow in confidence. Through supportive communities that allow painful memories to be brought into the light of acceptance, people may find the capacity to rebuild their lives and experience grace.

Physiological Links between Shame and Trauma

A key moment in my research came when a librarian encouraged me to look into trauma studies. She had observed that many physiological responses to shame and trauma are indistinguishable. When we experience shame, it shows up in our bodies with a host of reactions. Shamed people often present themselves with shoulders slumped, head dropped, and eyes cast away. Experiences of shame and trauma are often accompanied by

elevated heartrate and difficulty breathing. Shame can leave us literally speechless. Like trauma, shame can cause the body to become frozen and unable to move. The reason some sexual assault victims appear not to fight back is physiological, their bodies freeze as a survival strategy. Trauma is often the trigger for shame; they enjoy a familial relationship. The negligence of an impaired driver causes a terrible and traumatic accident leaving the driver with life-long shame. Children sexually abused by a trusted relative may continue to feel shame into adulthood, believing they played a role in creating their own suffering. The connecting point between shame and trauma is that the sphere of their shared activity is largely within our bodies.

We can observe how some people have the capacity to recover quickly from traumatic events, and some do not. Two people might have similar experiences causing shame, one is able to move on, and other does not. Why? Trauma studies provide a critical insight into resilience. During a traumatic event, the body responds in some very predictable ways rooted in the fight or flight mechanism. For the most part, we do not stay permanently in traumatic events. Following trauma, the body has the capacity to reset itself, almost like a computer that is restored to default settings. Think of your cat traumatized by the experience of being chased up a tree. One moment they are in fight or flight, and the next moment they are down the tree, ready to resume their place on the back of the couch, almost as if nothing had occurred. If shame and trauma are physiologically related and we have the capacity to recover from trauma, can we also reset ourselves following the experiences that shame us?

Breaking the Cycle of Shame and Trauma

Some experiences of shame and trauma never seem to go away. We relive them again and again. To say that someone is stuck in shame or trauma is actually an accurate description of their felt experience. They feel they cannot move forward or past the event, bound and restricted by a past that will not leave nor from which they can escape. What they experience is not unlike a feedback loop that repeats endlessly. People stuck in shame or trauma experience a loss of confidence that their situation will ever change. I think of Jesus' encounter with the woman caught in adultery, who felt shamed by the judgment of her community, and how Jesus sets her free. (John 8:3-11) Feeling that they are in some way broken, shamed people lose the capacity to imagine that their situation is redeemable. "Stuck in a kind of limbo, (they are unable to) fully reengaging with life."³⁰

I would concur with Peter Levine. "Trauma is a fact of life. It does not however have to be a life-sentence."³¹ While some may question whether shame can be healed, this thesis argues that people can learn a new narrative and imagine their past and future from the perspective of grace. Effectively preaching grace has a part to play in the re-authoring³² of people's lives that they may gain resilience over the power of shame and grow in confidence and hope. Trauma and shame are not so much the event itself, but what we hold within us "in the absence of an empathetic witness."³³

³⁰ Peter A. Levine, *In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2010), Kindle edition, chap. 2.

³¹ Ibid., chap.3.

³² "Re-authoring" is a therapeutic term whereby negative identity conclusions are examined and new options suggested for actions in the world. See White and Denborough, *Narrative Practice: Continuing the Conversations*, 9.

³³ Levine, *In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness*, Forward.

Seeking Signs of Grace Among Those Who Experience Shamed

This project was written to benefit God's beloved people who feel their lives have come unraveled like the threads of a garment. The wounds and bruises they bear often make it hard for them to experience God's grace as real and present. They feel like outsiders to the promise. Helping people overcome shame requires a definition for grace that honors their life-shaping narrative.

Doug and Ellen's Story

When asked to describe what grace is, I point to Doug and Ellen. They were such a handsome newlywed couple, tall and athletic with a promising future before them. They loved to play ball and to dance. Short days after they were married, Doug contracted polio. One moment they were the picture of health and vitality and the next moment Doug was kept alive by an iron lung. It seemed for a time that Doug might be permanently disabled. What did his new bride think? Can you think of anything more cruel or bewildering for a couple? Time past and Doug gave up his dream of farming. He became a school janitor, not a glamorous job but something he could manage. Doug kept the physical plant of "his" school in perfect running order. Together Doug and Ellen built a home and raised a family. Despite Doug's disability, they enjoyed a good, productive and meaningful life together.

How did this couple enjoy what anyone would describe as a successful marriage? I want to say that something got into Ellen and Doug that allowed them to re-imagine their future. It was grace. Grace took hold of them. Grace enable Doug and Ellen to trust that God does not give up on us. "Grace is not the reassuring end to an orderly

story, but the incredible insistence on love amid fragmented and unraveled human lives.”³⁴

The gospels bear witness to such a grace. A young girl named Mary becomes engaged and then suddenly discovers that she is pregnant. Surely her life and future were ruined. Can you imagine anything more cruel or bewildering than this? But then grace enters the picture. “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you!” (Luke 1:28) Before long, Mary will sing a song of grace. Mary is not stuck in her grief and shame. Mary’s faith enables her to trust in God’s promised faithfulness and to behold a future that lays claim to her present.

John Wesley speaks of at least two aspects of grace. The first is that grace is free, an unparalleled gift that we cannot even imagine before it enters our lives. It is a grace that overturns our expectations and breaks upon us from the outside. Grace is external. The second aspect is this: grace never violates but cooperates with who we truly are. On their wedding day Ellen and Doug trusted that God was present making their future possible. Even when it seemed their lives were coming unraveled, they chose to respond to one another with grace. There is an internal aspect to grace, something that animates and is present in every human heart. Grace makes a whole new future possible. Grace knows and identifies with our suffering and opens doors to new possibilities we have yet to imagine. Grace is both an external gift and the deepest part of our created nature. Preaching grace effectively can help people stuck in shame to pull the threads of their lives together and re-order their imagination.

³⁴ Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*, Introduction.

Empathetic Witness as the Path to Grace

It is an interesting term that Levine has given us, for “empathetic witness” is an imaginative description of how ordinary people share grace with the neighbor. When we listen to our neighbors, standing in their shoes and walking publically with them, we extend the grace that brings us together. Admittedly, the church has not always been a beacon of empathic witness. Churches and nations are torn apart by a lack of it. Countless people drop out of church when they feel judged rather than heard. What are the conflicts around race, gender, and social exclusion but an absence of empathetic witness? But as we read scripture, we find that empathetic witness is the one thing that heals broken relationships. In almost every encounter with others Jesus demonstrates empathetic witness. It is the reason why people felt drawn to his presence, and the one thing that fills the empty place inside us. Think of your own experiences when someone has been present to you, spoken to you in a manner that made you feel heard. Empathy shared has the capacity to lift our hearts and open the door to confidence.

Karen McClintock tells a story about her dad who served in the US Navy in WWII.³⁵ She had never heard the secret her mom and dad shared, how her father discovered he was homosexual while in the service. It wasn’t until Karen was an adult that her father could come out to her. For years she felt shame over her father, as if it were something they shared in common. The day came when a controversial law was passed in the United States called “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” It was a watershed moment for many families. Karen stood up in church and said she was proud of her gay father. Other people who had family members who were gay and served in the military were in

³⁵ Karen A. McClintock, *Shame-Less Lives, Grace-Full Congregations* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2012), Kindle edition, chap. 2.

tears. People came to Karen and felt free to tell their stories. Sharing that story became a transformative moment for the congregation. “The universal need that touched the congregation that morning was for all of us to replace shame with honor and pride.”³⁶ In light of Fowler’s naming the psychological affect *pride-confidence* as the opposite of *shame-humiliation*, McClintock’s observation takes on greater credence,³⁷ and points to one of the key affirmations of this project.

Are There Positive Uses for Shame?

With the growing interest in shame research, some have asked the question if there is a positive social purpose for shame. Jennifer Jacquet sees the potential for shame as a tool in pursuit of social justice and environmental protection.³⁸ Journalism and documentary filmmaking can employ shame to illuminate injustice and bring out a dialogue that leads to social change. The animal rights movement frequently employs shame to change behavior and influence consumer purchasing patterns. Jacquet points out that shame can be an effective tool that can be used for good or evil.³⁹ It is possible that shame can bring about repentance and transformation. We read in 2 Samuel the story of King David’s acts of adultery and murder, and how the prophet Nathan uses shame to stop his master’s behavior. “You are the man!” (2 Samuel 12:7) While there may social benefits and a greater good obtained in the process of shaming an individual or group within society, the risk is great. Following WWI Germany was required to pay punishing

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Fowler, *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life*, 103.

³⁸ Jennifer Jacquet, *Is Shame Necessary? New Uses for an Old Tool* (Toronto: Random House of Canada Limited, 2015), Kindle edition, chap. 5.

³⁹ Ibid., chap. 7.

reparations to the Allied countries and felt shamed in the process. The shame of reparations was part of the environment that birthed the rise of fascism. While social justice and transformation are important and laudable goals, mockery and public shaming hardly seem congruent with Christian practice.

Research Context, Method, and Assessment

This project was conducted in a rural two-point pastoral charge of the United Church of Canada in southern Manitoba where I have served in team ministry since 1999. The community is economically diverse with typical gaps in income and opportunity. Much of the membership of these congregations have roots in agriculture or are engaged in agri-business. They are generally oriented towards liberal Protestant expressions of faith. Crossroads United is an outward-looking pastoral charge that finds purpose in community development and outreach with current projects including Syrian refugee sponsorship, Habitat for Humanity, food security, and an education and exposure trip to Nicaragua. They seek to demonstrate an empathetic witness to those who are marginalized by society.

Research from the literature review and biblical-theological reflection led to the development of four action-outcome statements and four corresponding Christological claims which guided the crafting of sermons. Adult members of the congregation completed sermon surveys⁴⁰ for ten sermons. A journal was kept for the purpose of collecting stories and experiences of people who have experienced shame and/or to have shown resilience to disgrace-based shame. The data from sermon surveys and journal entries was reviewed and coded seeking patterns in responses that demonstrated the

⁴⁰ See Appendix “A”.

effectiveness of sermons to help people grow in understanding of shame and to gain resilience from shame's power.

Assessment of Project Criteria

This project will be successful if it: 1. Can suggest practices for preaching that help people gain resilience from the spiritual and psychological consequences of shame; 2. Offers insight for crafting sermons that celebrate our identity within a reconciled future; 3. Provides a resource to rural preachers who seek to articulate the problem of shame and how to address it in a pastoral and prophetic fashion.

Summary

For some time, I have been committed to finding practices for preaching that help people stuck in shame to move forward with confidence and hope. I have found inspiration in young people inside and outside the church who courageously share their struggles with shame. I preach in awe and gratitude for those who live with addiction and who demonstrate resilience, humility and hope. In this chapter, I have tried to put a face on the people who experience shame's power. Shame is a challenging topic, but the search for shame's antidote holds great blessings for individuals and congregations.

I have tried to describe the contours of shame, and how it differs from guilt. Shame has an opposite in us, our sense of confidence and pride. Shame is a continuum of emotions beginning with healthy shame which guides our conscience, and extending to a variety of distorting and debilitating experiences. Shame is something we all experience, but embodied grace is the one thing strong enough to overcome shame's power. Effectively preaching grace has the capacity to help people grow in confidence of God's acceptance.

Chapter Two begins with the question whether fall-redemption theology helps people who experience disgrace-based shame. It explores an alternative lens for reading scripture: what if the problem that entered the world at Eden was not sin, but shame?

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The Challenge to Fall-Redemption

An elderly World War II veteran asked, “What’s this week’s sermon about – SIN?” The man had spent a lifetime in the church listening to sermons that tell the narrative of our common sinfulness and how Jesus had died for our sins. He identified a flaw in the preaching he heard: fall-redemption theology does not adequately address the complexity of many people’s problems. In large part, it does not describe how they experience “the joy and pain of living.”¹ The man had stopped expecting that sermons could effectively address what he experienced. Where can the church turn theologically when fall-redemption no longer helps?

The veteran’s question is echoed by theologians who have struggled with the problem of shame in relation to proclamation. As Albers notes, fall-redemption is effective when the pastoral issue is guilt and it is a person’s behavior that requires amendment. But when disgrace-based shame² is the source of spiritual pain and a person’s identity is called into question, fall-redemption can actually make people feel worse.³ Consider for instance, the complex nature of infertility and how couples seeking

¹ Presbyterian Church, *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).

² Schneider, *Shame, Exposure, and Privacy*, 22.

³ Robert H. Albers, *Shame: A Faith Perspective* (New York: Haworth Press, 1995), 86.

to conceive hear this reality described in worship. In Genesis, Rachel is marked by her inability to bear children and feels deep shame for her condition.(Genesis 32:1) Every Advent, congregations encounter Elizabeth who, like Rachel is scorned by the community because she is barren, and her honor only restored through the birth of a son. (Lk.1:36) The problem is this: if all we have for understanding our place in the world is fall-redemption, then we are apt to view our personal experiences such as infertility as a mark of shame. “How could I ever be blessed or become a blessing to others?” Paul Tillich famously said, “We have but to accept that we are accepted.” People stuck in shame are unable to take up Tillich’s offer, and it is not their fault. They cannot hear even the most eloquent words of grace, for the thunder of shame in their heads is too loud.⁴ This thesis seeks patterns and practices for preaching which help people gain resilience from the power of shame. The goal will be to develop a concise set of theological affirmations which will guide the crafting of sermons. My suspicion is that what Jones has offered is true: preaching has the capacity for healing “as much through the stories we tell, and the gestures we offer, as with the doctrines we preach.”⁵

Reading Scripture through the Lens of Shame

This endeavor is both personal and exploratory, for no single author stands alone with a ready-made theological solution. Taking direction from Albers, an experienced pastoral counselor and theologian, I begin with a creation-centered anthropology.⁶ The creation narratives of Genesis affirm the goodness of the individual and creation while

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*, Introduction.

⁶ Albers, *Shame: A Faith Perspective*, 87.

declaring the value of our materiality. (Genesis 1:31) This affirmation is significant, for shame-bound people live under the assumption that they are not good enough, strong enough, or wise enough; “just never enough.”⁷ In baptism our value as a gift of creation and a child of God is affirmed. This matters; for many triggers of disgrace-based shame are based in negative images of our bodies and our materiality.⁸

Stockitt’s theological enquiry begins with an illuminating question, “What does shame look like?”⁹ How is shame manifest in our outward appearance, the way we walk and hold ourselves? The inference is that shame is apparent in our posture and written across our faces. What is the nature of this affliction that the Creator would feel compelled to come in the flesh and to even die upon the cross? “Such a dramatic, daring intervention into our lives must have been necessitated by the dramatic, tragic violence that distorts the beautiful world God created.”¹⁰

Shame seeks to reprogram our heads, switching the truth of our God-given identity with a persistent and persuasive lie. Shame distorts the narrative by which we live, move and have our being. Genesis bears witness to a God who is both transcendent and above but also who strolls the garden seeking companionship. If God is relational and we are made in God’s image, then it is also our nature to be in relationship. Wisdom literature broadens Creation theology with images of a God who delights in God’s

⁷ Brené Brown, *Men, Women & Worthiness: The Experience of Shame and the Power of Being Enough*, (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2012).

⁸ Albers, *Shame: A Faith Perspective*, 87.

⁹ Stockitt, *Restoring the Shamed: Towards a Theology of Shame*, chap. 1.

¹⁰ Ibid.

creation.¹¹ Taken together, humanity is created to be in relationship and to delight in one another. Indeed, wherever shame enters relationships crumble and interpersonal delight is extinguished.

Genesis remembers a creation that was free from shame.¹² The act of Adam and Eve turning from God's face allowed shame to enter Eden. Having listened to the lie, they are too ashamed to show themselves. Before they knew what happened, the man and woman's relationship was divided and they experience a sense of aloneness that was foreign to their first days together. There is no longer a unity between the humans and the God who made them. Expelled from the garden, they experience exclusion, and stand as outsiders. All of these are hallmarks of the modern experience of shame. Adam's problem is much deeper than guilt for disobedience of a simple command. The shocking thing for the human couple is finding oneself alone and without God's presence to accompany them. This absence is palpable in the moment when they find themselves walking away from Eden,¹³ as surely as a bankrupt farmer walks away from the land she once called home.

There is a tender moment in the story of Eden when God selflessly sacrifices an animal and fashions clothing from the skin for the Adam and Eve. Even in the midst of searing judgment and wrenching division, God acts to comfort and provide. Here we see a hint of reversal foreshadowing future tender moments when God takes the first step. Even when God's people make tragic choices that lead to separation, God leaves open the

¹¹ Ibid., chap. 2.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

possibility of restoration. We see this especially in the Aaronic blessing. (Numbers 6:26) The theological significance of this promise can hardly be overstated as it marks the reversal of separation that occurs at Eden. By this point in the story, God's people have been carrying the cloak of shame for long years like a heavy burden. Having exiled themselves from relationship and delight with God, God takes the initiative and holds the human face tenderly in a moment of sheer grace. The Aaronic blessing is a promise that one day we shall look upon God's face without fear, for our shame will be covered by grace.

We see in Mark how Jesus enacted this blessing as a sign of God's coming kingdom, when shame shall be no more. Following the call of the disciples, Jesus toured Galilee healing and teaching even when demons ruled their territory. In the synagogue Jesus encounters a man with an unclean spirit, and calls the spirit to come out. Note what demons do: they render their hosts unclean. They are a force that enfolds their victim in shame and all of its consequences, separation, alienation, and the physical removal from the community of grace. Socially, demons had the same impact as a host of diseases including leprosy. Jesus reaches out to them all, and touches those who were untouchable. (Mark 1:34) Those who were bent over were able to stand. Those who felt they were of no worth were restored to community and the potential for a full and meaningful life. So many afflictions in our world today carry stigma and shame including racism, abuse, poverty, and illnesses of the body or mind. Of course they are different, but each acts to diminish the person. But Jesus understands the forces that cause us to turn from God's face. Jesus gets our shame and has compassion for us. When the demons see Jesus coming, they cry out for they know the Redeemer is coming to reclaim what

rightfully belongs to God. We who have been charged with the ministry of reconciliation are invited to do likewise, and to reach out and restore to community all who find themselves marginalized by shame.

Jesus' Solidarity with Those Who Are Shamed

How are we to reach out? Jesus models compassionate outreach towards those who were ill in body or mind or possessed by demons. Early in Luke Jesus enters a synagogue in Nazareth to teach “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me...to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18) Harder demonstrates how Jesus reorients the commonly held understanding of “the Lord’s favor” and in the process redefines honor and shame.¹⁴ In Greek, the word “favor” is related to “acceptable” and “well pleased.” The Lord’s favor is announced three times in the context of Jesus life: at birth by angels, at baptism by a heavenly voice, and at the transfiguration from a cloud. That Jesus is acceptable to God and found God’s favor doesn’t surprise or uplift us. However, in each case Jesus is already acting in solidarity with God’s people. Jesus stands with us and acts for us, and we are joined to Jesus as family. The heavenly benediction, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those whom God favors!” (Luke 2:14) is bestowed not only on Jesus but also on all humanity through Emmanuel. At baptism Jesus enters the Jordan alongside a host of sinners, and in doing so shares their shame and identifies with them. Having joined us in the river, the honor extended to Jesus now extends to us, “This is my beloved, in whom I am well pleased.” One day Jesus whispers to the disciples that he will share the shameful

¹⁴ Harder, “The Shame of Farm Bankruptcy: A Sociological and Theological Investigation of Its Effect on Rural Communities,” 139.

death of crucifixion which so many Jews had come to fear. He warns that those who are ashamed of his death will miss God's presence and the purpose of his ministry. (Luke 9:26) In response a voice declares, "This is my Son, my Chosen, in whom I am well pleased." (Luke 9:35)

The Year of the Lord's favor is no a one-time event, but keeps happening. It is the year when God's people are made acceptable to God through Christ.¹⁵ The Year of the Lord's favor is the collision between God's righteousness and our ways, when all human expectations and standards that lead to pride are revoked. We have a part to play in the resisting the forces that lead to shame. I think of alcohol addiction and how A.A. works to give people resistance to the power that drug holds. The people who come to A.A. demonstrate solidarity. They do not judge one another on the basis of worldly standards. They greet one another by name and honor each other's narratives, all the while acknowledging that they are helpless on their own to defeat this force. They promise to be present for one another in their time of need, day or night. They share stories of how they have failed and struggled, and how they are seeking to set things right. In the process, lives are transformed. In church basements around the world, the Year of the Lord's favor is enacted once more.

Human Finitude as God's Gracious Gift

One way people of faith reach out to those who experience shame is by simply acknowledging that we humans have limits.¹⁶ Genesis reminds us that God is the Creator and we are creatures, and it becomes an enormous burden when we mix them up. We are

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Albers, *Shame: A Faith Perspective*, 91.

imperfect, finite humans in need of God's forgiveness and grace. People stuck in shame have been brain-washed with a very different narrative. Brown shows how men who fail to meet expectations are labelled as weak, while women who fail to measure up see themselves as "never good enough."¹⁷ Albers shows that the expectations that we place on each other in our daily lives are both irrational and ultimately unfaithful.¹⁸ Albers points out how hard it is to push back against perfectionism,¹⁹ especially within churches that reward behavior which leads to professional and spiritual burnout.

Perfectionism driven by shame is a human attempt to deny our nature as finite creatures. It is an exhausting way to live. Albers offers something that is at the same time sound theologically and delightfully good news. "Human finitude is not a curse! It is a gift that frees us from the anxiety of being God."²⁰ I think of a faithful and talented colleague who freely admits she can be weeks behind in addressing emails, or that she imagines dozens of big ideas that never get off the ground. That kind of candor about our personal finitude is tremendously freeing for shame-based people seeking a path of sanity in this age of anxiety. Perfectionism damages community and drives a wedge between spontaneity and the spiritual gifts of joy and peace that arise from our identity as children of God. It is no coincidence that A.A., that 12 step group that know so much about shame is guided by Augustine's beautiful prayer, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things

¹⁷ Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*, 24.

¹⁸ Albers, *Shame: A Faith Perspective*, 91.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”²¹

Resources for Preaching

Baptism as the Ground of Identity

The church is not without resources to engage people in the re-imagination of their future. In an age when many shame-based people feel trapped by forces outside their control, our preaching may point to the mystery and grace of baptism which shapes Christian identity and offers an alternate vision of who we are as children of God. Many people have come to believe a narrative that claims our identity and worth are conditional upon our utility to society. This is a market-driven identity where money is God. Anyone who is viewed as weak or vulnerable are cast to the margins of society. These people dwell within a diminished state of honor and their lack of financial wealth and prosperity is seen as a source of shame. While in theory most democracies claim the equality and worth of all citizens, the lived reality for many is far different. Baptism makes an alternate claim about us, that our identity and worth are established by God’s unmerited love and faithfulness. God’s covenant faithfulness is a unifying thread running through both Old and New Testaments. Scripture remembers how the God of Israel is a covenant-making God. Baptism is a visible sign of God’s covenant love enfolding us into the community of grace. Throughout the history of God’s people, each of God’s covenants (including baptism) is an unconditional act of a God who loves us. God’s gift of identity through baptism can be a counter narrative for people locked in shame.

²¹ Ibid.

God's covenants invariably include an aspect of naming. Whereas the forces that shame us invariably rob people of their name, reducing them to a number or a derogatory slur, baptism involves the pronouncement of a name in relationship to God. Scripture is replete with instances of people's names being joined to God. "I have called you by your name, you are mine." (Isaiah 43:1) Abram and Sarai received new names transforming their identity and future with God. Naming is an act of faith and imagination. Often in baptism the candidate is anointed with oil as the presider declares, "(James Robert), child of God, from this day forward you bear the mark and blessing of Jesus Christ." At baptism our name is sanctified by God who seeks to be in relationship with us.²²

If baptism were only the bestowing of a name, it would be remarkable. The meaning of baptism is much richer. We are baptized into the church universal within the context of a particular congregation. A powerful moment occurs at each baptism when congregations rise to make their pledge and join this covenant with God and the individual. While shame separates and distorts community, baptism promises that we are not alone. The covenant and future for the person is sealed by the Holy Spirit. Baptism names, claims and calls us into the community of grace which becomes our home. People stuck in shame often speak of being rejected, judged and lacking a sense of meaning or purpose. God's acceptance joined with the faith community's standing expression of solidarity enfolds the individual in a relationship with the strength to counter shame's power.

Especially when the root of shame is found in abuse and violence, people may express feelings that they are damaged, dirty and worthless because of their past. In Acts,

²² Ibid., 95.

Peter has a dream inhabited by a host of crawling creatures upon which he is commanded to feast. Peter is appalled and protests for these animals are ritually unclean. A voice tells Peter, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” (Acts 10:15) The baptismal liturgy is filled with images of cleansing which speak tenderly to those who feel unclean or unfit before God. We are created in the image of God and declared beloved through Christ. In baptism God takes the initiative and washes us ensuring that no matter our past, we are cleansed and made whole in God’s sight.

Helping Shame-based People Experience Grace

Pastoral experience shows the challenge of helping shamed-based people live into the freedom of a grace-based narrative. The message of grace is not always heard or trusted to be true. As much as preachers might hope for listeners to take in and receive words of grace and be changed, the voice of shame also speaks with eloquence. Not long ago, a woman who had endured abuse came to church and listened to my sermon. “Where was God when my ex threw me down the stairs?” Her question was not abstract, but arose from the pain of a concrete and violent event. This person had little sense of her personal worth or a vision that life could change for the better. Albers points out how words that describe God’s grace are not enough for shame-bound people. What is required is an experience of grace.²³ I have puzzled over what that means and how it might be accomplished in the context of preaching. People who experience shame need preachers to exhibit a certain vulnerability and awareness that the territory they are travelling is sacred and costly. Shame occupies the deepest place inside the human soul.

²³ Ibid., 86.

What is required is “an incarnational experience of unconditional acceptance.”²⁴ Only when preachers can demonstrate that they have heard and honored their listeners’ stories will they gain the confidence of their audience and be open to “the light that shines in the darkness.” (John 1:5)

Honoring Life-shaping Narratives

Sermons that help people locked in shame need to honor people’s life-shaping stories and personal narratives. Much of the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada has been about this very conviction, where for more than two years a group of commissioners led by Murray Sinclair documented aboriginal people’s personal stories of abuse at the hands of those who ran residential schools. This truth-telling becomes in a sense a chain of stories, where one person tells a story, and then another and another, until it becomes apparent that we are joined by the stories inside us. Honoring people’s life shaping stories is an expression of solidarity, and tells the listener that they are not alone.

Honoring the listener’s life-changing stories is a prerequisite for the preacher to offer the grace of acceptance. For many listeners it becomes a first and tentative step. Trusting that their stories are honored allows the listener to lean into scriptures’ stories of faith, and to find connections that point to God’s healing activity in their lives. Yes, “we live in a world marred by violence and profoundly broken by the harms we inflict on each another. Yet God loves this world and desires that suffering be met by hope, love and grace.”²⁵

²⁴ Ibid., 99.

²⁵ Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*, Introduction.

Justification

Justification by grace is a cornerstone of the church's faith, but shame presents a significant challenge to the utility of this doctrine. The problem as Albers has noted, is that justification is effective in helping people who experience guilt, while potentially harming those who feel shame.²⁶ Guilt is essentially about our actions and what we have done, but shame smears our identity. The two emotions often intermingle in the same person. People who are stuck in shame may develop elaborate and unhelpful strategies to cover the pain they are experiencing. For example, a strong correlation can be found between people who have experienced sexual abuse and addictive behaviors. Deep shame requires a powerful painkiller to mask the conflict. As a response to shame experiences, some will seek extraordinary efforts to justify themselves. The gracious word from justification for shame-bound people is that we do not have to go it alone, we have a God who understands our shame, who takes on our burdens, and who restores us solely on the basis that we belong to God.

Jesus Crosses Boundaries of Honor and Shame

While there are a host of tools to employ when reading scripture, this thesis explores the lens of shame as an interpretive tool for reading the Bible. Too often the crucifixion has been cut off theologically as if it were a separate story, and unconnected to the birth, baptism, life and ministry of Jesus.²⁷ If the cross is understood as the ultimate symbol of shame, then perhaps there are precursors in the gospels that broaden

²⁶ Albers, *Shame: A Faith Perspective*, 100.

²⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 127.

the meaning of that statement.²⁸ Where in scripture do we find Jesus crossing boundaries of honor and shame?

One reason Jesus provoked conflict with both civic and religious authorities and ultimately was crucified can be found in the company he kept. He continuously crosses social boundaries established by those who would judge him. He never shirks from entering places of shame; engaging in conversation with a Samaritan woman, touching and healing lepers, showing grace to the woman with a flow of blood, and sitting at table with tax collectors and sinners. Unafraid of shame, Jesus dwelled among those who felt the stigma of being unclean, and drew near to offer them solidarity, grace and healing. How is Jesus able to accomplish this? Let us consider two stories.

Shame in the Parable of the Lost Son

The parable of the lost son concerns honor and shame from beginning to end. The story begins with an outrageous demand. “Give me my share of the inheritance!” It is essentially a demand that the father drop dead. The father shockingly agrees and passes over what must have been a great sacrifice, perhaps even requiring the father to take on a debt to give the son the sum of money he requires. In any event, the father lets his son depart from the community which loved him and the family who supported him.

The story remembers the salacious details of what follows; the disappearance of money and friends, and the arrival of hunger and desperation. A Hebrew, this son disgracefully hires himself to a gentile farmer to tend pigs, but still has nothing. (I am reminded of Muslim men, refugees, hired to work on the kill floor of hog plants in my home province.) After this disastrous experiment in freedom, the son returns home

²⁸ Stockitt, *Restoring the Shamed: Towards a Theology of Shame*, chap. 10.

hoping his father will accept him back as a servant. The father runs to meet the son, and embraces him. Already shamed by his son's departure, he holds nothing back. Even before the son repents, the father accepts him. The older son scorns his own father on account of his unbridled forgiveness. If God is like this father, then God is willing to enter the place of shame for us.

A Woman Anoints Jesus

Jesus demonstrates extraordinary boundary crossing at a dinner party. Invited to the home of Simon the Pharisees, an esteemed Rabbi, he goes and takes his place at table. (Luke 7:36 -50) Immediately it becomes apparent that something else is at play than dinner. Unlike the other guests, Jesus receives none of the normal hospitality, no water to wash his feet, no kiss of welcome, and no anointing with oil. By withholding these normal tokens of welcome from Jesus while in front of other guests, the Pharisee chooses to shame Jesus. Rather than leave in disgrace, Jesus uses the event as a teachable moment. A nameless woman enters a sinner and by insinuation is feared to be a prostitute. The woman must know Jesus for she has come bearing a gift. She proceeds to unfurl her hair and to anoint Jesus with fragrant oil, touching him. He does not try to stop her, but receives her gratitude. The sinful woman proclaims with her actions that she has found a friend in this shamed dinner guest, and she stands with him, as surely as Jesus stands with her. Jesus forgives the woman her sin, and in the process declares her righteous before those who would judge her. So much in this story foreshadows the crucifixion when Jesus enters the place of shame.²⁹ No more is this woman's identity

²⁹ Ibid.

tied to her past. Reconciled through grace and restored to community, the woman enters a new and open future.

Jesus never stops crossing the boundaries of honor and shame. He searches out people from the margins who were stuck in shame, setting free those who were imprisoned by it, restoring them to community and enacting the year of the Lord's favor.³⁰ It is hardly a surprise then, to see how his death corresponds to the manner in which he granted life.

Crucifixion

Crucifixion was a particularly heinous manner in which to perform an execution with the clear purpose of sending a message, inflicting fear and causing deep shame. Jesus was publicly hung naked upon a cross in a notorious location. From the account of the story of Eden, we remember how shame causes people to want to hide and conceal their faces. Jesus face and naked body were exposed for all to see. The Law of Moses states that crucifixion is in itself shameful. (Deuteronomy 21:23) Scripture also remembers how Noah dishonored himself and his family by exposing his nakedness. (Genesis 9:20-27) The drama of the crucifixion is steeped in shame; the mocking, the crown, the inscription on the cross, until it overwhelms us and leaves us speechless. But even in the midst of this event, Jesus shows concern for those around, commending his mother into the care of the community and offering forgiveness to the thief crucified beside him. Jesus endures shame but is not overcome by it. Rather than being broken by cruelty, Jesus shows a path of dignity that defeats shame. Few can read this story and not be touched by a deep resonance with their own moments of shame. Our brother Jesus

³⁰ Ibid.

consciously enters the place of shame for us. “What wondrous love is this?” asks the hymn. Indeed! What wondrous love is this?

Shame’s Power Overcome

I think of countless people who have courageously told me their life-shaping narratives where shame has touched their lives. They ask, “When will the hurting inside me stop? How long must I endure?” On our own, we do not have the resources or the strength to overcome shame’s power. We need a narrative from outside us that we might gain resilience and stand on our feet once more. The culmination of this new narrative is the resurrection where shame’s power is overcome.

The resurrection invades our minds like a paradox. Jesus died a shameful death. He was convicted by his community and the law and found to be a shameless sinner. He endures the punishment that all such law-breakers face.³¹ Moreover, in his punishment he finds God’s face turns from him. Not only is Jesus abandoned by friends and community, he is abandoned by God. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46) There is no greater shame, and no darker place on earth. What does it mean that this same Jesus, abandoned, shamed and crucified is also “declared to be the Son of God with power...by resurrection from the dead”? (Romans 1:4) By legal measure, it would have been just for Jesus to receive eternal punishment rather than glory. God’s action in raising Jesus signals God’s judgment on the forces conspiring to take his life.

³¹ Harder, “The Shame of Farm Bankruptcy: A Sociological and Theological Investigation of Its Effect on Rural Communities,” 150.

The paradox that brings life is found Jesus' cry of abandonment. If Jesus is God's Son, then this is a cry of self-abandonment. It is good news then, that the separation in God is overcome by grace. If the separation in God is overcome and Jesus is restored to honor, how can we claim that lesser things we have done could separate us from the love of God? If in the resurrection God honors the Son who broke the law, can any of us be treated differently? By baptism we are joined to Christ as kin, and through the cross of Christ the shamed and godless are no longer abandoned. There is continuity in Jesus' story, and a thread that redeems us. In the river, Jesus stands with the shamed at his baptism. At the cross, he endures the suffering and shameful end of law-breakers. At the empty tomb, we are stunned by what God has done for us, and run to tell the good news. If Paul is right and God honors the Son at the resurrection, then God gives honor to all whom Jesus came to redeem. Through God's love poured out from the cross, shame's power is overcome.

The Healing Power of Community

While the purpose of this inquiry is to formulate tools for crafting sermons which help people stuck in shame, it is with the acknowledgment that preaching itself can't do it alone. The community who gathers for worship and praise has an enormous part in helping people locked in shame experience the grace of acceptance. People who experience shame often withdraw from the community for fear of being exposed. It is in the act of compassionate outreach and coming alongside that others are drawn back into relationship. Serene Jones recalls an incident where she was counseling a person who had experienced profound shame and trauma. The person was pouring out her heart and then stopped to apologize saying, 'I shouldn't do this, it's not your problem.' Jones said to the

person, “It’s not just your problem, it’s my problem, the church’s problem, God’s problem. You don’t need to be alone. I hope we can work on it together. That’s what faith communities do.”³² When preachers share their own vulnerability they create the potential for a safe space where others feel encouraged and strengthened to share their own struggles and burdens, and thereby open the door for healing and hope restored.

Summary

I struggle with the inadequacy of fall-redemption theology as a description of God’s response to humanity’s problems. Fall-redemption is effective in helping people who experience guilt, but its message can be destructive for those caught in disgrace-based shame. Shame blocks our capacity to experience God’s acceptance and grace.

Chapter Two proposed an alternate reading of scripture. This reading finds a basis in a creation-centered anthropology affirming humanity’s inherent goodness. The goodness of creation is a theological buttress against the inner voices whispering “unclean” to shame-based people. Rather than sin, shame is posited as the destructive force entering Eden’s paradise.

Throughout scripture God seeks to restore fellowship with humanity beginning with God’s gracious act of fashioning clothes to cover his beloved Adam and Eve. The Aaronic blessing marks a turning point where God graciously opens the door to God’s act of reconciliation. Jesus continually seeks out God’s shame-bound people and demonstrates the pattern of compassionate outreach. Through baptism and table we are agents with Christ for God’s reconciliation and healing. Preaching is a shared action of

³² Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*, chap. 1.

the whole congregation. Together we are called to embody God's grace that people locked in shame may experience acceptance and new life.

Chapter Three reviews the literature that awakened me to the dimensions of shame. I am grateful for the new eyes this research has bestowed and for the hopeful promise that shame can be named, tamed, and overcome by grace.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of my goals has been to learn as much as possible about shame and to search for preaching practices which help people who are stuck in disgrace-based shame.¹ This literature review began with core sources relevant to biblical and theological knowledge of shame and moved toward sources that inform a psychological understanding of shame. A variety of material was examined that described experiences of shame related to social location, gender, race, physical ability, etc. Together, these sources informed a method to craft sermons to help people stuck in shame gain resilience.

Biblical/Theological Sources

Cameron Harder

I was first awakened to the topic of shame as a pastoral concern for preaching by Cameron Harder's 2007 presentation to the International Rural Church Association in Brandon, Manitoba. His address struck home as he described the burden of shame on rural communities that arose out of the farm crisis of the 1980's. Personal and community shame born out of the farm crisis lasted long after the event.² For his doctoral thesis

¹ Fowler, *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life*, 104.

² In reflecting on the farm crisis, Harder writes "The lives of those who farm in Canada have in the last decades become characterized by chronic anxiety and, for many who face foreclosure, grief. It is a crisis of the human spirit." See Harder, "The Shame of Farm Bankruptcy: A Sociological and Theological Investigation of Its Effect on Rural Communities," 19.

Harder interviewed more than sixty individuals who had experienced bankruptcy as result of the farm crisis, including twenty nine family farmers and their spouses.³ The research examined how “honor and shame” culture fails to respond to the crisis of bankruptcy, and how the shame of weakness⁴ blocks people from seeking help. Furthermore, the research examines how the church has the potential to “reinforce, reshape or challenge the shame of farm bankruptcy.”⁵ Harder urges rural pastors to engage communities in social analysis and theological reflection from the perspective of both debtors and lenders, that a path toward a reconciled future may be found. Breaking the silence over the things that shame us begins the process of building resiliency against shame’s power.

Harder’s response to the corrosive problem of shame in rural communities became a primary source for my research. His critique of the fragmented nature of rural communities points to a particular challenge which many rural pastors face when engaging difficult topics.⁶ “Honor-shame” culture separates community members one from another, often pitting neighbor against neighbor⁷, “preventing public conversation that would develop and cooperatively test alternatives.”⁸ Supported by the careful reading of his particular context, Harder’s insights have credible resonance with other

³ Ibid., 139.

⁴ The shame of weakness is a re-occurring category in the literature, and proves especially powerful for men. Behavior in men that demonstrates weakness or vulnerability (such as reaching out for help) leads to isolation. See Brown, *Men, Women & Worthiness: The Experience of Shame and the Power of Being Enough*.

⁵ Cameron Richard Harder, Cameron Harder.com, http://www.cameronharder.com/publications_presentations/index.htm (accessed July 29, 2015).

⁶ Harder, “The Shame of Farm Bankruptcy: A Sociological and Theological Investigation of Its Effect on Rural Communities,” 28.

⁷ Ibid., 24.

⁸ Ibid., 8.

communities, rural and urban, that operate under the influence of “honor-shame” systems. For example, first responders and prison guards who live with post-traumatic stress and shame can empathize with farmers touched by bankruptcy, for they too have felt shame’s power. Harder’s context is rural, but his research and analysis support wider applications.

Harder’s research lifts up effective tools for pastoral care with people who experience shame, and especially the problem of how to craft sermons. Research has shown how preachers feel ill-equipped to respond to topics such as mental illness and shame.⁹ When a topic is difficult or sensitive, the default for many preachers is to speak in generalities, and to avoid giving voice to particular concerns. Harder shows that for people who are suffering, an unparticular word is no help at all, and may actually make things worse.¹⁰ Preaching is most effective when it speaks a particular word to particular situations. Harder proposes that preachers craft liturgy (including sermons) which simply and without judgment “give voice to people’s pain.”¹¹

Harder acknowledges the challenge this can be but suggests that this model offers a two-fold benefit for both “the afflicted and for the advantaged.”¹² Honoring people’s stories of suffering recognizes their dignity and value before the congregation, confirms their experience, recognizes injustice, points to what is broken in our relationships, and

⁹ Adelle Banks, “Protestant Clergy Rarely Preach About Mental Illness Survey Finds,” *Christian Century*, <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2014-09/mental-illness-rarely-addressed-churches> (accessed July 28, 2015).

¹⁰ Harder, “The Shame of Farm Bankruptcy: A Sociological and Theological Investigation of Its Effect on Rural Communities,” 40.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹² *Ibid.*, 161.

offers hope for our potential partnership in reconciliation. Furthermore, speaking people's stories affirms the community's solidarity with them, and that they have allies among God's people.

Giving voice to people's shame in preaching can also benefit those who hold an advantage, as in the case of Harder's research, between debtors and lenders. When people's pain is described without judgement, the listener can engage without becoming defensive, and has the opportunity to focus on the one hurting. Compassion may grow, and conversion can happen. Telling the story of people's pain opens the whole church to reconciliation and strengthens community.

My research is deeply indebted to Harder's biblical and theological analysis. I have come to share many of his core assumptions and biases.¹³ Employing Lindbeck's multivalent lens for interpreting scripture, Harder seeks a reading with the potential to "challenge, change and save us, personally and corporately."¹⁴ Perhaps Harder's most distinctive contribution to the literature is the understanding that shame is powerful because it is *both* personal and communal. The farm crisis created both "a crisis of spirit, but also a crisis of community."¹⁵ If the whole community is a carrier of the infection, it's not enough to address only the individual who manifesting symptoms. For Harder, ministry is always about building resilience and growing capacity to become God's

¹³Harder's core theological and hermeneutical assumptions are laid out in Chapter 9 of his thesis, while my own are named in my opening chapter. Ibid., 135-138.

¹⁴ Lindbeck used a wide variety of interpretive lenses for reading scripture including Christ-centred, communal, multi-vocal, typology, literary critical, midrash, and allegory in order to "draw the reader into an experience of the biblical narrative as a whole, (allowing) one to experience its character, its deep themes, and plot structure." See Harder, *ibid.*, 138.

¹⁵ Ibid., 24.

reconciled people. In response to shame, Harder points to “Jesus as the healer of broken community.”¹⁶

The first place he turns to unbind shame’s power is the gospel narrative and its potential to redefine honor and shame.¹⁷ Recognizing how the roots of honor and shame culture finds support in scripture,¹⁸ Harder proposes Jesus’ life, death and resurrection as a counter-narrative. Harder emphasizes Jesus’ solidarity with those who are of low estate, have lost honor and are gripped by shame’s power. Jesus stands even with those tried, convicted and legally imprisoned. (Matthew 25:36) God’s action in baptism extends God’s loving favor to all who have been shamed and exclude.¹⁹ The baptismal promise, “You are my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22) is a blessing shared by the shamed and the righteous alike. (Romans 1:4-5) By sharing their poverty, he restores the honor of people who have none.²⁰

If Jesus restores broken community by restoring the honor of the lost and the least, Harder shows how Jesus’ shameful death finally defeats shame’s power.²¹ Jesus’ challenge to honor-shame culture caused conflict with the authorities and resulted in his trial. His words and actions were blasphemy to the Pharisees and a threat to Roman order. Standing with Moltmann, Harder shows how Jesus was lawfully convicted on both²²

¹⁶ Ibid., 138.

¹⁷ “The center and focus of this narrative, its typological fulfillment and its unifying heart is the life, death, resurrection and return of Jesus, the Messiah.” Ibid., 136.

¹⁸ Ibid., 139.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 142.

²¹ Ibid., 146.

²² Ibid., 149.

charges and dies a law-breaker. His death is both deeply shameful and shame ending.²³ How? In Jewish thought, the resurrection was reserved for the righteous. If Jesus was raised, then the code of honor and shame under which he was convicted lost its legitimacy. Not even law-breaking could separate us from God's love. As God honors (glorifies) Jesus in the resurrection, so too does God restore honor to those who are shamed. "As God exercises God's righteousness, human shame is undone."²⁴

James Fowler

Harder's thesis provides the bridge timber for my biblical and theological foundation. I was surprised then to discover James Fowler's *Faithful Change*²⁵ providing an unexpected buttress to Harder's work. Fowler is best known for his earlier volume *Stages of Faith*²⁶ which lays out his Faith Development theory. In this later work Fowler provides a comprehensive understanding of shame as a force blocking faith development and preventing people from becoming mature Christians. Similar in scope to Albers' *Shame: A Faith Perspective*,²⁷ Fowler posits an elegant hermeneutic for understanding a biblical perspective on shame which links to and expands Harder's vision of how Jesus acts to restore people who are shamed.

Fowler's hermeneutic begins with the observation that the air in Eden's garden was untainted by shame. The Creator walked through Eden like a human and knew

²³ Ibid., 150.

²⁴ Ibid., 151.

²⁵ Fowler, *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life*.

²⁶ Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*.

²⁷ Albers, *Shame: A Faith Perspective*.

creation in a deeply personal and harmonious fashion.²⁸ However, it was not to last. “The hiding, the covering, the confusion, the blaming – all these features bear the marks of shame.”²⁹ Fowler says that to interpret Genesis 3 through the lens of shame (rather than guilt) posits a new understanding of our kinship with our spiritual ancestors.³⁰ I appreciated Fowler’s focus on grace as a means to transform our self-image and experience healing. Fowler has a high expectation for the gospel’s potential to transform the narrative of people stuck in shame. This will be a significant question for this thesis: “What outcome do we hope for those who hear our preaching? Are we aiming to offer psychological tools to resist shame’s narrative power? Are we seeking conversion or healing? What role will the community have in helping people reorient their lives?”

Robin Stockitt

Enlarging upon Fowler’s work, Robin Stockitt brings the biblical perspective of shame to greater fullness. Stockitt challenges a theology which assumes all people are unequivocal sinners, and seeks an alternative to bridge the gap between authentic human experience today and the world of the Bible. Stockitt does not deny the brokenness of postmodern society, and far from it, but suggests the idea of universal sin no longer touches or speaks to people internally. Both Fowler and Stockitt suggest that shame has a greater resonance with people than sin as a force in their lives and describe how shame lies in the deepest place of the human heart.³¹ Fowler and Stockitt identify a thread

²⁸ Fowler, *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life*, 133.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 135.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

called shame running through scripture, but Stockitt articulates a continuous thread stretching from Genesis through Revelation.

The following are the broad strokes of Stockitt's argument. God created the world shame-free, and in fact this condition is shown to be its primary characteristic.³² Adam and Eve related to one another and to God without shame demonstrated by the fact that they looked upon one another face to face. Disobedience led to division for the first couple; they could no longer look upon one another or God. Human action caused an actor called Shame to enter the drama, and the human's response was to hide from God's face. Stockitt sees throughout scripture how people caught in shame sought to hide their faces. In the story of Cain and Abel, the rejection of Cain's offering caused a jealous response in Cain that was visible upon his face. In the Aaronic blessing God promised to reorient human life that we might once more experience God's face. The Aaronic blessing becomes the antithesis of the expulsion from the garden.³³ Shame that led to the exile from the garden mirrors a later exile in Babylon. Jesus repeatedly sought out those who felt shame and exclusion from society. Indeed, Stockitt sees a parallel between the shame of nakedness in the Garden of Eden and the humiliation of Christ's naked crucifixion.³⁴ The coming of Christ addresses the need for healing in a world trapped by shame's power.

³² Stockitt, *Restoring the Shamed: Towards a Theology of Shame*, chap. 2.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

Robert Albers

Robert Albers' volume offers a significant chapter on theological resources addressing the issue of shame. Like Fowler and Stockitt, Albers questions the usefulness of the fall-redemption anthropology for postmodern society and directs the reader to consider alternatives in order to help people stuck in shame.³⁵ Why? The pattern of confession, absolution, and forgiveness was created to restore people burdened by guilt. When used to address those who experience shame, fall-redemption theology can exacerbate their problem rather than helping it.³⁶ This is an enormous issue for preaching, how a foundational tool of theology may result in negative responses for a significant portion of the congregation.

As a correction, Albers proposes a creation-centered theology affirming "the worth and goodness of the creature and the whole created order."³⁷ Albers speaks as a pastor seeking to help people re-author their narrative in the light of the gospel. Genesis affirms the goodness of our materiality. However, much of the shame people experience arises from the particularities of their bodies: sexuality, race, gender, ethnicity, social location, physical abilities, etc. Ashamed of what they perceive as limitations, people spend "tremendous energy covering up, hiding, or masking one's identity as a human being."³⁸ Seeking to overcome their limitations, people pursue perfectionism,³⁹ a subject touched upon by Albers, and developed more fully by Brené Brown.

³⁵ Albers, *Shame: A Faith Perspective*, 86-87.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

Albers invites pastors to turn to the baptismal covenant to help people who experience shame re-author their lives in the light of God's promise. Baptismal identity is established in at least three ways: by the giving of a name sanctified by God, the joining of our identity to Christ which ensures acceptance, and the welcoming into a congregation of faith.⁴⁰ "The deep human need for acceptance, belonging, community, identity, and incorporation is provided by the community's covenantal relationship with God."⁴¹

Albers persuasively argues that God's unconditional acceptance is the antidote to shame's power.⁴² With this single assertion, Albers work became a core source for my thesis. He shows how God's mercy and grace were never taken from Israel even when they rejected God.⁴³ The promise that the person will never be abandoned forms the safety net for persons exhausted by shame.

When employing grace to combat shame, Albers shows little patience for generalities of speech which do not issue in action. It is not enough to make grace a slogan; it must be embodied in the community where connection to another person becomes the path to healing. In the title for this thesis, I name "Preaching Grace Effectively" as a central goal. For this to happen, people need to hear their particular experiences named in sermons as a concern for Christ in order that connections may be made incarnate within the community.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 93-95.

⁴¹ Ibid., 96.

⁴² Ibid., 97.

⁴³ Ibid.

Like Stockitt, Albers seeks to look at the suffering of world through the lens of scripture and speaks a particular word to people afflicted by shame. To these people, he declares the truth of justification that our value and worth are determined solely by our inclusion in the household of God.⁴⁴ Albers observes how people stuck in shame expend endless effort seeking to fix what they perceive to be broken or flawed about themselves and in doing so turn inward. Shame limits people's capacity to know and love their neighbor and themselves. Gaining resilience to overcome shame's power is essential for people to re-author their lives that they might experience the celebration of being loved, accepted and valued.

From the wide spectrum of atonement theories, Albers invites the reader to consider the image of the cross as God's shame-bearing symbol.⁴⁵ Upon the cross Jesus experienced derision, mocking, humiliation, despair, and defeat – common experiences for those who know shame's power. The central story of our faith is one of God's identification with those burdened by shame. Time and again, God's grace in Christ comes to redeem those who are shamed. Jesus birth was surrounded in shame. (Matthew 1:19) Jesus adversaries often sought to shame and cast aspersions upon him. (Matthew 12.24) The disciples were warned that a similar fate awaited them. (Matthew 10.25)

Albers shows how shame is present and embodied in the crucifixion. Jesus is betrayed by a friend and abandoned by followers. The trial, the scourging, the robe, the crown: all are players in a deeply shame-inducing experience, and not only for Jesus, but for all who knowingly took part in executing an innocent person. God's self-

⁴⁴ Ibid., 101.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 102-104.

identification with those who experience shame is good news; however for it to be effective it must be experienced and internalized in order for persons to overcome shame's power.⁴⁶

Serene Jones

I initially consulted Harder, Fowler, Stockitt and Albers as primary sources. Later I discovered the physiological connects between shame and trauma and how our experiences of them share much in common: elevated heart rate, difficulty breathing, loss of memory, etc. Trauma and shame are like wounded siblings who carry a shared secret. Many of the triggers for shame originate in traumatic events and so these two areas of study can be found to be in dialogue. Serene Jones' volume *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*⁴⁷ draws with great clarity much of what previous authors have observed and has become for me the framework to articulate a theology of shame.

Jones' question about overcoming trauma is eerily close to my own thesis question and is at the core of this research about shame. "*How do people, whose hearts and minds have been wounded by violence, come to feel and know the redeeming power of God's grace?*"⁴⁸ At the heart of this question sits a vexing problem: "When people are traumatized, a kind of cognitive/psychic overwhelming breakdown can occur. When this happens, it becomes difficult for victims to experience the healing power of God's grace because their internal capacities (where one knows and feels) have been broken. It is hard to know God when your knowing faculties have been disabled. It is hard to feel divine

⁴⁶ Ibid., 105.

⁴⁷ Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

love when your capacity to feel anything at all has been shut down. Addressing this vexing challenge is the core aim of the book.”⁴⁹

Jones begins her work with the conviction that the world is spun out of balance by the harms we commit against creation and one another, and secondly, that God loves the world and desires that we meet suffering with hope, mercy and grace.⁵⁰ Jones describes how trauma causing a crisis of imagination. By sharing insights into the wounds trauma inflicts upon the human soul, Jones offers pastors theological tools and practices to touch people affected by trauma that they might imagine their lives anew within the grace and mercy of God. Far from a sunny optimist, Jones nonetheless believes that God’s love is a real and living presence, “constant, steady and ever true.”⁵¹

Often in society, problems are compartmentalized as if we were not connected; and so there are Aboriginal issues, black issues, women’s issues, issues of poverty, sexual orientation, mental illness, sexual abuse, divorce and a dozen others. We can pretend that these aren’t our problems when we don’t fit one of these categories. To which Jones would say, “No!” When responding to a church member who felt embarrassed to trouble the pastor with her problem, Jones said, “No. It’s not just your problem. It’s *our* problem— my problem, the church’s problem, God’s problem. You don’t need to be alone, and I hope we can work on it together. That’s what faith communities do.”⁵² One contribution Jones makes to the pastoral response for people affected by trauma (and

⁴⁹ Ibid., Introduction.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., chap. 1.

shame) is the central role of the faith community as the place of healing and grace.

Effective preaching equips congregations to witness and testify to God's enduring grace.

Jones finds in the faith traditions of the church rich resources for understanding trauma and grace.⁵³ (Frank Thomas and others would call these *the elements of celebration*,⁵⁴ those aspects of narrative, hymnody and liturgy that when employed skillfully in preaching enables the listener to experience grace in the midst of suffering.) "I saw instead that parts of our rich faith traditions were born in the midst of unspeakable terrors and that grace had long been unfurling its warmth and succor therein."⁵⁵ Here is the trouble with trauma: these experiences that touch us deeply do not happen but once; they continue to reverberate through the lives of those who experience them and those who love them. They can affect whole communities and even nations. One of the church's resources for helping people with shame and trauma is a depth of biblical narrative and experience that allows it to hear other peoples' stories without judgment.

Imagination is central to Jones' understanding of trauma and grace. "A traumatic event reconfigures the imagination, affecting our ability to tell stories about ourselves and our world that are life giving and lead to our flourishing."⁵⁶ Trauma and shame can take away our story, our past, and our identity in Christ. The task of theology is to give it back, to help re-author and re-imagine a new and reconciled future. "If grace has power

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*, chap.5.

⁵⁵ Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*, chap. 1.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

to reshape the imagination, then theology is the language that both describes that power and evokes it in the lives of people by telling grace-filled stories of new imaginings.”⁵⁷

Jones names three steps crucial to helping people re-imagine their future. People who experience traumatic events need a community who will listen to their stories without judgement. The church calls this testimony, where a person’s experience is given voice. Second, the community needs to create a safe place for speaking and to receive these stories when they are spoken. Third, those whose stories are shared and those who receive them need to join in re-framing the story in the light of God’s grace.

Jones turns skillfully to the gospels as a means to convey God’s persistent love, but her most interesting biblical work is with the Psalms, where she mines what some would consider an archaic source in Calvin’s commentary.⁵⁸ For Calvin, scripture was an invaluable aid to truly discern what is happening in the world. Jones sees parallels between our present reality and the world Calvin inhabited, a world thrown out of balance by traumatic events and our “collective social violence.”⁵⁹ Like Calvin, Jones finds in the Psalms a resource that brings light to hidden sorrows, speaks the unspeakable, and “gives language to a heart rendered speechless.”⁶⁰ Jones sees in the Psalms the fullness of human expression and refers to a three-fold pattern: Psalms of Deliverance, where safety is established by a God who hears and helps, Psalm of Lament, where trouble is remembered and given voice, and Psalms of Thanksgiving, where life becomes re-integrated. Jones shows how suffering cannot be made to disappear or erased from

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., chap. 2.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., chap. 3.

memory, but that through grace the hold trauma exerts can be lessened and people gain renewed strength and imagination. Her work offers preachers and theologians a deep well of resources that truly helps.

Sources Informing the Psychology of Shame

Robert Albers

In the past decade there has developed a growing public awareness of the problem of disgrace-based shame and a desire to help people who experience it. We see this born out in the conversations around bullying at school and in the workplace, sexual abuse of children, post-traumatic stress among first responders and members of the military; all have links to shame. A subject that once was hidden has been brought into the light through courageous people raising their voices. Robert Albers provides a comprehensive and accessible overview of the psychological dimensions of shame. Indebted to Carl Schneider 's *Shame, Exposure and Privacy*, Albers lays out the landscape of this subject and the two-fold nature of shame, discretionary and disgrace-based. He distinguishes between guilt and shame, and how shame works and has power over our sense of self. Albers outlines a series of (unhealthy) strategies people employ to protect the self from shame: perfectionism, self-righteousness, passive-aggressive manipulation, scapegoating, withdrawal and isolation. Given the manner in which shame exercises power over people's lives and the strategies people employ to protect themselves from exposure, the author turns to theology and faith for strategies to help people locked in shame.⁶¹

⁶¹ Albers, *Shame: A Faith Perspective*, 82.

James Fowler

Regarding the psychological dimensions of shame Fowler comes to similar conclusions as Albers, but points to a spectrum of shame: healthy shame, perfectionism, shame due to minority status, toxic shame, and finally shamelessness, a distinction where the subject is incapable of expressing neither discretionary nor disgrace-based shame.⁶² Where I found Albers particularly helpful in describing the distinction between shame and guilt and the categories of discretionary and disgrace shame, Fowler's expanded spectrum of shame shows more clearly shame's role concerning race, sexual orientation, gender, and social location and how these connect to theology.

Brené Brown

What David Suzuki is to the environment, Brené Brown is to the psychology of shame. Grounded in rigorous research, Brown's work makes a complex and social difficult topic accessible to a wide audience. I would note two significant contributions to the subject that support preachers concerned with this topic. The first concerns expectations or aims for crafting sermons. What do we hope people will gain from hearing our sermons? Contrary to much popular literature, Brown doesn't promise a method to heal people of shame-inducing experiences, which she finds an unmeasurable goal. Rather than healing, Brown points the reader towards gaining resilience⁶³ and the goal of discovering strategies to help people reimagine and re-author their lives.⁶⁴ The

⁶² Fowler, *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life*, 113-130.

⁶³ The study of resilience is a significant area of psychological research, especially in relation to child development.

⁶⁴ Jean Clinton, "Resilience and Recovery," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 13, no. 3 (2008).

experiences of shame cannot be erased, but shame's power can be lessened, and resilience from shame can be learned. Resilience seems a realistic goal to seek concerning through effective preaching, and a gift to those who receive it.

A second contribution Brown makes concerns the differences observed in how men and women experience shame.⁶⁵ Brown had done years of research documenting how shame had affected her subjects, all of whom were women. In a moment of challenge and epiphany, Brown was forced to re-examine many of her assumptions and expand her research. I found the exploration of gender differences concerning shame particularly enlightening and wondered if rhetorical strategies in preaching must be varied in order to effectively reach both men and women.

Sources in Literature

I found it revealing to review a selection of literature that speaks of people's experiences of shame from a variety of life situations. Placing people's experiences alongside biblical, theological and psychological insights was important to ground this study. Harder's original research with farm families provides insight into the distinct manner in which rural communities experience shame. Stories from the aboriginal experience of Canadian residential schools⁶⁶ remind us how colonialism is built upon the racist assumption that those being colonized are inferior or damaged. Lawrence Hill has written extensively about the intersection of race and shame.⁶⁷ Yogaretum⁶⁸ documents

⁶⁵ Brown, *Men, Women & Worthiness: The Experience of Shame and the Power of Being Enough*.

⁶⁶ Joseph Auguste Merasty, *The Education of Augie Merasty : A Residential School Memoir* (Saskatchewan, Canada: University of Regina Press, 2015), Kindle edition.

⁶⁷ Hill, *Blood: The Stuff of Life*.

how police and other first responders are brutalized by trauma and shame, leading to a crisis of suicides. As a pastor, Jones was grounded in the narrative of those who experienced sexual violence.⁶⁹ The people listening to our sermons carry such stories inside them, and how to address their questions is at the core of this research.

Summary

Cameron Harder's thesis on farm bankruptcy turned out to be an engaging starting point for this research. Harder draws a picture how honor/shame culture distorts relationships and blocks people stuck in shame from seeking help. Steeped in rigorous social analysis, he shows how shame influences rural life. Harder addresses preaching in a fashion almost unique among the literature. He pursues reconciliation whereby perpetrator and the shamed meet at one table where stories are heard and empathetic witness shared.

Fowler demonstrates tremendous depth concerning the spirituality and psychology of shame. His concern is always that people have the capacity to grow in faith, and he sees shame as a primary block against spiritual maturity. His work dovetails with Jones who articulates the experience of the endless spiral of shame and trauma. Jones like Harder shares a passionate role of the community in bringing about reconciliation.

⁶⁸ Shaamini Yogaretum, "Walking the Thin Blue Line: How Stigma Is Silencing Officers," Ottawa Citizen, <http://ottawacitizen.com/news/local-news/walking-the-thin-blue-line-how-stigma-is-silencing-officers> (accessed July 28, 2015).

⁶⁹ Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*, chap. 1.

Stockitt and Albers both seek a correspondence between authentic human experience and the world of the Bible. They suggest that universal sin no longer touches people internally nor drives behavior, and that shame seems closer to the problem that ails humanity. Jones describes a world spun out of balance by violence but imagines how God desires that we meet the suffering of the world with hope, mercy and grace.

Chapter Four is the application of insights gained through the first three chapters. Here we will examine what shaped the crafting of sermons and the challenges to measurement of effectively preaching. An approach to sorting and analyzing data will be proposed that conclusions may be made.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

Through this research insights gained from the literature review and biblical/theological reflection were distilled into action-outcome statements and Christological claims which inform a practice of preaching designed to help people stuck in shame gain resilience and grow in confidence. These statements have been used as norms in the crafting of ten sermons and the corresponding sermon surveys questions.

Sermons that help people to gain resilience from shame's power need to:

1. Honor people's life shaping stories and formative narrative;
2. Help people claim their identity in the context of God's acceptance;
3. Help the listener imagine a future beyond the present;
4. Offer purposeful ways for the church to respond prophetically and pastorally to the experience of shame.

Seeking to help people re-author their lives and experiences of shame, I will craft sermons using the following Christological claims:

1. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are a paradigm for the transformation of shame;
2. Baptism is foundational to Christian identity;
3. The Cross makes reconciliation within the body of Christ a present and future reality;

4. A strong sense of identity and belonging in Christ is central to overcoming shame.

These summary statements inform the research to follow.

Using a qualitative exploratory method,¹ this thesis examines what sermons need to promote resiliency among those who experience the destructive power of shame. A sermon survey tool invited feedback from participants on the effectiveness of the sermons to convey assurance of God's acceptance and grace. Sermon texts were chosen from the Revised Common Lectionary and the Narrative Lectionary. Survey respondents reflected on whether the sermons effectively conveyed God's acceptance, and if so, what contributed to that outcome. Their responses were analyzed using a four step process to determine whether sermons crafted using the action-outcome statements accomplished what was intended, and how they might be improved. A second source of data consulted were journal entries written to explore narratives of events where I had encountered people who were burdened by shame. The journal entries "helped put a face" on the audience I was seeking to address through preaching. The stories recounted in the journal entries provided a constant reminder of the people this thesis is intended to help.

This thesis took longer to complete than expected, having begun in 2012 and resuming once more 2015. The reading and research expanded, but the project remained essentially the same. The research data contains material from sermons surveys obtained in both 2012 and 2015.

¹ John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Method Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2003).

Challenges to Effective Measurement

The Prayer of Great Thanksgiving opens with a moment of great anticipation, “Lift up your hearts! We lift them up to the Lord!” The presider announces that something remarkable is about to be experienced. Indeed, an experience is what is required for us to fully apprehend grace. Words alone are never enough. People stuck in shame need “an incarnational experience of unconditional acceptance.”² It is God’s intention that we be freed not only from sin, but the very things that weigh us down.³ Shame disorders the imagination,⁴ but embodied grace is the antidote to shame’s power. How can we measure when shame has been lifted by grace?

There are at least two challenges to measuring something so hidden as shame. The first is our denial that shame is part of the fabric of our lives. There is a lot of shame about shame, and so we hide the things that shame us. In the course of a sermon I told a story how a close friend had called to express his joy and celebrate his sixth anniversary of sobriety. I had known some of his story and was glad for the way he had turned his life around. This man is for me a model of resilience and courage who has been transformed from the inside out. I was expecting that people would respond positively to his story, but in both congregations I heard audible gasps and saw people twist their faces in disgust. That was hard to witness, but their response confirmed the discomfort many people find in talking about our weakness, vulnerability and shame. *When it came to the data, I was curious to look for responses that pointed to personal experiences of shame.*

² Albers, *Shame: A Faith Perspective*, 99.

³ Ibid., 5.

⁴ B. Van Der Kolk, “Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and the Nature of Trauma” *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* Vol. II (2000): 7-22.

A second challenge in measuring whether sermons help people gain resilience from shame is the fact that often people are unaware of its presence. Shame can be all around us, as present as the air we breathe, yet invisible to us. Our culture encourages us to look past events that shame us. For example, men might deny that they have issues with shame, while admitting that they struggle with rage. Much of our maladaptive behavior has roots in trauma and shame. Part of the purpose of this project was to raise awareness of shame's power. *I looked for comments in the data that reflected deepening insight into the role of shame in our lives and relationships.*

A third challenge to the research involved the context itself which includes people from both farming and non-farming backgrounds, and people of varying socio-economic backgrounds. *I sought a mix of participants: those involved directly in farming, and those from non-farm backgrounds but who are part of the rural community of faith.*

Exploring a Narrative Method in Pursuit of Reconciliation

Cam Harder's advice around preaching was that stories need to be particular in order that sermons have the power to persuade listeners to pursue reconciliation.⁵ General stories about general problems are generally ineffective in conveying an experience of grace. Many authors suggest that the key to helping people locked in shame is through the sharing of stories. Jones points to a three step process⁶:

1. People who experience shame or trauma need to be able to tell their stories. Their life-shaping events need to be spoken and heard.

⁵ Harder, "The Shame of Farm Bankruptcy: A Sociological and Theological Investigation of Its Effect on Rural Communities," 172.

⁶ Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*, chap. 2.

2. There needs to be a community that commits to creating a safe place, to receive the words, and to bear witness.
3. The testifier and the witnesses need to begin to tell a new and different story.

Sermons have the capacity to testify on behalf of the community and to share the truth in its fullness. Congregations are called to create safe spaces where stories are received that healing might begin. Together, those who testify and those who bear witness are called to re-imagine the future by the interweaving of our story with God's story, in the conviction that in all things God's love is stronger.⁷ Much of the methodology of this project concerned the exploration of narratives as a means to open doors to reconciliation. If preaching is about making meaning, then the nature of the stories we share with one another may be a better measure of effectiveness. *I examined the data collected with an eye for moments of emotional contact and resonance and to ask questions about the effectiveness of stories shared in sermons.*

Research Context

This research was conducted with the partnership of the people of Crossroads United Pastoral Charge which includes the congregations of Carman United and St. Andrew's United – Elm Creek. We are located about an hour southwest of Winnipeg, MB. Carman has a population of 3,000 and Elm Creek about 500. While decidedly rural in context, only a small percentage of the population continues to actively farm. Many families within the pastoral charge are employed in education, retail, agri-business, health care, banking and insurance, construction, manufacturing, and service-related businesses. Many of the subjects who participated in this research are retired and provide essential

⁷ Ibid.

leadership for the church and local community organizations. Their efforts and energy benefit the district and province.

Within the rural church Crossroads United is perceived to be made up of two small, strong congregations. Combined Sunday attendance is typically about 100. The youth and adults of the pastoral charge provide extensive leadership to the wider church. They are seen as progressive people who take on innovative projects in the church and community and enjoy working ecumenically with other denominations. Like many liberal protestant churches Crossroads is aging demographically and worries about future viability. In the midst of that reality, they continue to provide vibrant Christian witness in the place where they have been planted.

The communities of Carman and Elm Creek, Manitoba where I serve in team ministry are also my home. I was born in Carman and raised in Elm Creek. I preach in the church where I was baptized. Many childhood friends continue to live and work in the area, and many of my teachers have been members of the church and even respondents in this research. I experience the close relationships of this ministry context as a remarkable gift and one that grounds the research.

Research Methodology

Qualitative research proves useful for the examination of a wide range of material: interviews, journal observations, surveys, photography collections etc. from a variety of topics and settings. It offers a pertinent strategy for dealing with “soft data”⁸ that richly describes people, their experiences and emotions, conversations, reflections

⁸ Robert Bogdan and Sari Knopp Biklen, *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1992), 2.

and memories that would not fit neatly into statistical columns. I recall a woman from rural Newfoundland remembering with bitterness the cruel poverty out-port families endured at the hand of welfare agents during the Depression. “They give a man with a wife and children six cents a day, sir. Who do you suppose you could feed with that?” “Six cents a day” is quantitative information that fits in a statistical column, but the miserly administration of social assistance that left bitterness in the rural poor is a qualitative statement.

Some researchers express doubt over the value of qualitative research, suggesting that quantitative research and the facts and numbers that accompany it are the preferred method for solving problems. Indeed, I have struggled with the nature of “soft data” and how to find patterns of meaning within it. Quantitative data is only as useful as its application and interpretation, and this too remains subjective.⁹ A central role of research is to assign meaning to numbers and the articulation of the implications of the data. In social science research, numbers are collected at the service of a particular community, and so there is a moral responsibility to respond empathetically. The church has not always taken responsibility for the damage disgrace-based shame inflicts on people. Vulnerable people have been hurt by policies and practices that cause shame. In faith the church is called to do better. It is my hope that this research can offer direction.

The goal of this project is to find patterns for preaching that help people stuck in shame. The word “stuck” implies an inability to move forward. Finding ways to help people rebuild confidence and hope that they may move forward are central to this study. Temporality then is a part of this project as it bears witness to a past hidden and painful, a

⁹ Sean Decatur, “Taking Lessons from Flint,” Kenyon College, <http://www.kenyon.edu/middle-path/story/taking-lessons-from-flint/> (accessed January 29, 2016).

present which is conflicted, and the potential for a better future. One aspect of data I will be attentive to observe concerns people's aspirations, hopes and longings. *I expect context and social placement as components of personal narrative will influence people's reflections.*

The examination of shame is an uncomfortable topic as it probes the researcher's feelings of vulnerability. It requires an openness to enter into the painful places of our lives and to risk exposure. However, there is also privilege here and a sense of holiness, as people share intimate fears for which they have struggled and failed. Shame is a topic that requires sensitivity, solidarity and trust. I have been in my present ministry context for sixteen years and have come to enjoy deep and meaningful relationships. I expect to hear and discover parts of people's narratives that I might never have known without this research. *I have expressed a passion for the subject and acknowledge how my biases on the question may become part of the outcome.*

There is a certain irony in the word "stuck" in my thesis question in that I experienced a point where I became stuck in my progress and was disappointed to have to put the work down. In the interim I continued to read and discovered several new sources that would become foundational to this project and with encouragement was able to restart research. This project included data from two time periods, 2012 and 2015, including sermon surveys and journal entries. All of the data was produced under approved IRB guidelines. I hope the combined data will offer a depth of meaning that is revealing and purposeful.

Preparing for Data Analysis

Sermon survey respondents returned 88 surveys of varying qualities and descriptions. Some people briefly completed surveys in the pews during the sermon or before leaving church, and others took them home, returning papers that looked like journal entries rather than brief responses to open ended questions. Bogdan emphasizes the importance of limiting the field of study in data analysis and encourages the development of a set of open ended questions to provide a focused framework for coding.¹⁰ The following questions were developed for this project:

1. *Where have participants identified shame at work in their lives?*
2. *How has the sermon given the participant greater insight into the nature of shame?*
3. *How has context and social placement shaped respondent's responses?*
4. *How have personal relationships influenced responses by respondents?*

The initial categories for coding data from all sources include the following:

Scripture Connects with Life Story (SCLS)

Clarity (Cl)

Confusion (C)

Community (Co)

Belonging (Bel)

Identity (I)

Confidence (Conf)

Personal Situation (PS)

Perspective Held (PH)

Shame reflection (SR)

Healing Reflection (HR)

Emotional depth (ED)

Relationships (R)

Pastoral Response (PR)

Changing Perspectives (CP)

¹⁰ Bogdan and Biklen, *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods*, 160-161.

Trauma events (TE)
 Christological Affirmations (CA)
 Sacraments (S)
 Strategies Improvement (SI)

I reviewed and coded the data according to these categories using a simple Excel spreadsheet as suggested by Bogdan,¹¹ watching for congruence in comments and patterns observed. The data comes from two time periods, 2012 and 2015, and I was interested to see if my developing insights into the topic became evident to listeners as the project progressed. Finally, the insights gained from analysis were drawn together and summarized in a fashion that reflects the shared experience of sermons preached.

Summary

The concerns raised in this thesis have been on my heart and mind for years. Much has changed along the way, the original question often tweaked, new sources have opened doors for deepened reflection, but the one constant has been the action-outcome statements and the Christological claims which shaped the sermons I prepared for this project and indeed beyond. Chapter Five concerns the results and analysis of feedback offered by dozens of participants. The nature of the results and insights are yet to be determined, but I know that I have been changed through this research. I hope this work may benefit those seeking relief from shame's power.

¹¹ Ibid., 167.

CHAPTER 5

DATA ANALYSIS

1. Comparing Survey Responses to Action-Outcome Statements.

Chapter Four identified four action-outcome statements necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of sermons to help people stuck in shame experience grace. Sermons that help people to gain resilience from shame's power need to:

- i. Honor people's life shaping stories and formative narrative;
- ii. Help people claim their identity in the context of God's acceptance;
- iii. Help the listener imagine a future beyond the present;
- iv. Offer purposeful ways for the church to respond prophetically and pastorally to the experience of shame.

The question is, "Did the sermons achieve these outcomes, and if so, to what effect?" I engaged a four-step process for analysis of data from sermon surveys. The initial coding of sermon survey data was completed using a spreadsheet employing twenty two categories. A sample spreadsheet is located in the Appendix. Second, the coded data from each sermon was compared to the above action-outcome statements and summarized noting connections, resonance, and potential points for improvement. Selected comments from sermon surveys were inserted to illustrate findings. Third, a summary was prepared for each of the action-outcome statements across the ten sermons drawing together insights, patterns and possibilities for improvement. The sermons, survey questions and an example of the coding spreadsheet are located in the appendix.

2. Narrative Characteristics for Preaching Grace Effectively.

The fourth step of sermon data analysis was qualitative in nature and concerned the role of narrative in the effective communication of grace. The data showed some stories were particularly effective in connecting emotionally with respondents and inspired rich and complex written responses. Five stories from the sermon series were examined in detail. For each story a summary statement was created describing the qualities of narrative which enrich the listeners' experience of the sermon.

3. Contribution of Reflection Journal Entries to Core Convictions.

Six reflection journal entries written during the course of research in 2015 represent a separate data set. The journal entries describe the experience of responding pastorally to people who experience shame. They illustrate the complexity of issues shame presents to preaching grace effectively. The experience of writing journal entries helped synthesize core convictions and represented a potentially rich source of data. Each of the journal entries were examined for correspondence to the four action-outcome statements. For each journal entry key insights were noted and a summary statement created affirming a practice for preaching which help people gain resilience from the consequences of shame.

4. Data Analysis Summary.

The overall summary of this chapter is comprised of three components: four sermon action-outcome statements, five narrative quality statements which promote preaching grace effectively; six reflection journal statements that affirm core convictions. These fifteen statements were refined down to twelve core statements which comprise the "tool box" for preaching grace effectively as a pastoral response to shame.

Step #1 Coding Sermon Survey Responses

As noted in Chapter Four, the initial coding of data from sermon survey responses employed twenty two categories related to the topic. The data was organized using an Excel spreadsheet watching for patterns and signs of congruence. A sample of the spreadsheets is found in the Appendix “A”.

Step #2 Sermon Data Analysis

Comparing Sermon Survey Responses and Action-Outcome Statements

Sermon #1 November 2, 2012

The story of the raising of Lazarus is dramatic with the potential to touch people in deep places and to trigger reflection upon heartfelt issues: grief, fear of mortality and doubt concerning our acceptance before God. In the text Jesus commands his followers to complete the miracle by unbinding Lazarus. The sermon sought to encourage the congregation to seek ways to unbind those who are trapped by grief and shame.

1. Honor people’s life shaping stories and formative narrative.

Seven of nine respondents identified connections with their life story and the sermon. A respondent shared a story how she had lost her husband and identified with Mary’s experience. She asked, “Mary’s faith not so strong...did she blame Jesus for not being there?” The respondent expressed concern whether God can “release us from the sins and worries that bind us.” “As I get old, I regret some decisions and mistakes I have made.” The woman connected the death of Lazarus with the traumatic loss of her husband. Shame, grief, and the feeling of ‘not good enough’ intermingle. Long past events still haunt and prevent the woman from moving forward.

Engagement in mission is characteristic of the life shaping narrative of this pastoral charge. Lay members take on projects big and small in order to unbind people from poverty, grief, and hunger. At times they meet resistance and even derision from the community. Seven of nine respondents heard their engagement in compassionate service was valued, and five named it as holy.

Respondents offered suggestions for improvement. Two respondents found the transition between the concern of the text and the concern of the sermon to be unclear. They felt both parts were valid but unconnected. In the course of one transition, I asked, “Do you know what is going on here?” Some did not! Transitions need to be clean for the sake of clarity.

Two respondents named miracle stories as problematic for faith and wondered if an alternate analysis of the text was metaphor. There is shame here too, when people feel that their faith questions are not honored. Shame triggered by doubt is a recurrent theme in the data, as it is in scripture.

2. Help people claim their identity in the context of God’s acceptance.

Chapter Two argued how disgrace-based shame blocks people from experiencing God’s acceptance. People’s feelings of unworthiness impair their capacity to hear God’s grace extends to them. They lack confidence and the assurance grace brings.

Eight of nine respondents affirmed the sermon helped them hear and understand God’s acceptance. However, seven of these nine respondents named God’s acceptance as conditional upon the things we do for others rather than God’s unmerited grace. Five used the adjective “holy” in the context of their work or service, suggesting that their partnership with Christ was a sign of God’s acceptance. Five used language suggesting

their partnership with God's mission, and one stated being part of God's "team." A respondent asked, "Who are the people in our midst who need to be unbound?" and pointed to a personal story about the experience of aboriginal students in residential schools. Eight of nine respondents found the sermon affirmed the value of their service to Christ and reinforced their identity in the context of God's acceptance.

3. Help the listener imagine a future beyond the present.

People stuck in shame long to move forward and imagine a better future. The better future communities and countries long for includes a time when racial divisions end. Part of the United Church of Canada's formative narrative concerns its involvement in Indian Residential Schools. One respondent wrote, "The way our First Nations people have been treated and are still treated is our Berlin Wall." Aboriginal communities and individuals remain bound by trauma and shame imposed by state and church actions. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of which the United Church participated continues to be an agent of truth telling and unbinding.¹ Five respondents named restoring relationships damaged by Residential Schools as a future hope. Six respondents named building relationships with marginalized people as an expression of faith.

Six respondents affirmed the sermon helped them experience confidence for the future and peace in the present. One respondent said, "I know we can't change the world overnight but I must do what I can to be part of the answer rather than part of the problem." If shame is destructive of community and contributes to isolation, then taking action to build community is a faith response to the power of shame.

¹¹ Murray Sinclair, "Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Call to Action," (2015).

4. Responding prophetically and pastorally to the experience of shame.

Seven respondents affirmed the sermon lifted up the church's mission. Five shared comments regarding reconciliation with aboriginal people and two people identified empathy for those "bound" by grief. Eight respondents described their work of pastoral care as a faith expression. Strengthening relationships with people on the margins of society was identified by two respondents.

Sermon #2 December 2, 2012

This sermon's text is the apocalyptic announcement from Luke 21. The text speaks of people's fears in the midst of a chaotic time and how faith overcomes fear. I chose this Sunday to share my experience with my mother's struggle with mental illness and how the community responded with grace in the midst of our chaos. The sermon was crafted in order to create a safe space to talk about mental illness, to bear witness to people's pain and shame, and to testify that healing is possible.

1. Honor people's life shaping stories and formative narrative.

This sermon triggered a change in the quality and quantity of data. About half of the respondents wrote a great deal with many comments, and the other half wrote very little. I wondered if the change in data was linked to the respondents' comfort level with the topic of mental illness.

Ten of twelve respondents found connections between the sermon and their life experience. Four shared stories about mental illness either personally or within their family. Three people spoke of the way they felt stuck in mental illness and that it was hard to move beyond. One person said, "My own mother also suffered from mental illness. Dark times of deep depression were a reality when I was growing up. I remember

only too well, how I tried to make my mother happy, but nothing really helped.” Two people described a sense of call to encourage those who struggle with mental illness. One person spoke in terms of lament, “What is my life for as I grow old?”

One person thoughtfully expressed that the transition between the concern of the text and the concern of the sermon could have been stronger. This echoes comments from respondents in sermon #1.

2. Help people claim their identity in the context of God’s acceptance.

Nine of twelve respondents affirmed that the sermon helped them to hear and understand God’s acceptance. One person wrote, “People suffering from this illness need a lot of compassion from others and to be comforted by God’s love and acceptance.” Five people affirmed the courage and resilience of people who experience mental illness. One person said that sharing my story made them feel safe to express their own vulnerability. Another felt encouraged that I became an empathetic and productive person despite experiencing a chaotic childhood.

3. Help the listener imagine a future beyond the present.

Seven of twelve respondents talked about the challenge mental illness places on relationships. One person responded, “It is my job as a Christian not to worry about things beyond my control or what might happen in the future, but to be available to help...to encourage hope.” Compassion and empathetic witness are named in the research as building blocks for reconciliation. Eleven of twelve respondents spoke of the need to show compassion and empathy toward others.

The paradox of God’s reign ‘coming and not yet’ inspired significant reflection. Many people face realities which seem unsolvable in the present or near future. Five

respondents used language that corresponded to the category ‘stuck,’ as if their situation was/had been intractable. Four respondents remembered times when they felt helpless. “I felt my world coming apart.” Eight respondents reported waiting patiently without resolution of their problems. In the face of adversity they made a choice by faith to embrace hope against hope.

4. Responding prophetically and pastorally to the experience of shame.

Nine of twelve respondents identified that the sermon helped them respond pastorally and/or prophetically to people suffering with mental illness. “Good suggestions as to how to help and give hope to those suffering mental illness (and) a very real invitation to act and respond.” Eight respondents used language suggesting our need to show solidarity with those who suffer mental illness. Ten respondents appreciated that facing the future with hope is a faithful response to trouble.

Sermon #3 Dec. 9, 2012

The sermon text was John’s preaching in the wilderness in Luke 3. The sermon was crafted to encourage people who struggle with shame at Christmas to imagine a better future.

1. Honor people’s life shaping stories and formative narrative.

Seven respondents confirmed making connections between their life and the sermon. Six of seven respondents entered imaginatively into the story and identified with John’s audience. Four respondents connected their own situations of feeling lonely and the situation of those who came to hear John. One respondent reflected how he would

like a verse from this reading used at his funeral, “This is my Son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased.”

2. Help people claim their identity in the context of God’s acceptance.

Seven respondents affirmed the sermon helped them hear and understand God’s acceptance. “God promises acceptance, constant care, forgiveness.” Five respondents understood that God’s acceptance is unconditional regardless of social position. Two people noted God’s identification and acceptance of those who are alone. “John spent his youth alone in the wilderness.” Widows in rural communities have empathy for those who experience loneliness and social isolation. The death of a spouse or divorce can lead to a crisis of identity. “The people who used to be my friends stopped calling.” Respondents expressed the conviction that God has promised to be with us and to enter our lives through the incarnation.

3. Help the listener imagine a future beyond the present.

One characteristic of disgrace-based shame is a disabled imagination where the sufferer is unable to grow spiritually. Our imaginations need to be exercised and without practice wither. The language of faith encountered in scripture and hymnody continually calls us to imagine a future beyond the present. The sermon was crafted to playfully invite the listener to find their place in the story. Six of seven respondents commented that they enjoyed exploring the story. The sermon reinforced a hope that the future is not closed and indeed is opened once more through God’s love in Christ.

4. Responding prophetically and pastorally to the experience of shame.

Six of seven respondents agreed that the sermon offered helpful ways to respond. Three used language that pointed to the need to demonstrate empathetic witness, listening to people's pain and standing in solidarity with them. Three commented that the church's commitment to work for food security and justice was valued.

Sermon #4 December 23, 2012

This sermon was based upon "Mary's Song" in Luke and lifts up the crucial role which singing plays in shaping identity.

1. Honor people's life-shaping stories and formative narrative.

Six of seven respondents were able to make connections between their life and the sermon. Individuals shared revealing and heart-felt comments, three of which reflected on the power of shame. "There are times when it is difficult to sing." "Our voice may be taken either by difficult circumstances or by the action of others." "Mary...poor, unmarried, what will her family and Joseph think?" Six respondents made declarative statements how congregational singing strengthens the community of faith. "Songs have the power to unite and give people a voice." Shame can take away our voice, but song has the power to give it back. Three respondents shared personal stories how singing had been therapeutic and healing for family/friends suffering with chronic illness. Five respondents found they were able to enter imaginatively into the story. "Music has been part of me since I've been in-utero...I would have danced and sang with Mary and Elizabeth." Such is the healing power of the songs we have been given.

2. Help people claim their identity in the context of God's acceptance.

Seven of seven respondents affirmed the sermon helped them hear and understand God's acceptance. Six respondents used language indicating they felt more confident in their faith. "God offers us acceptance and the hope that things will get better." Six respondents used theological language to articulate how singing fosters spiritual maturity. "Songs have great power and we should not only sing them but listen to what they are saying and believe..." Respondents felt purposeful selection of hymns enhanced the power of proclamation.

3. Help the listener imagine a future beyond the present.

Respondents strongly affirmed how this sermon fostered hope and helped them imagine a better future. "Like Mary and Elizabeth believing in what was to be...we too should have a strong faith." "Music has tremendous power to help us imagine a new reality." Four respondents pointed to music-inspired faith as a foundation in tough times. "Music, the universal language, comforting, uplifting." Four respondents made empathetic statements about Mary and commended the courage she demonstrated.

4. Responding prophetically and pastorally to the experience of shame.

Six respondents affirmed the importance of empathetic witness. "Some find it difficult to sing at Christmas. It is up to us to help those people. We need to pray for those who struggle." Five respondents framed their reflections in the context of mission. "Singing actually aids in understanding (faith), then moves through mission and the effect in creating shalom – each of us with a role to play through song." Three respondents found references to the brain's response to music supportive of their faith and personal experience. Three respondents affirmed the use of musical illustrations as

effective. “Your examples make your sermons interesting and show relevance with the Bible and life today.” Seven respondents found that singing is good for the soul, lifts the spirit, and counters the forces that lay us low, including shame.

Sermon #5 – August 16, 2015

The text for this Sunday was taken from Hebrews and describes the role of Jesus as High Priest. This sermon marks the resumption of the project following an almost three year interruption. I was curious if new insights and research might improve the effectiveness of my preaching. I was surprised by the wide variety of engagement respondents demonstrated in their reflections. Six of ten respondents filled the page to the margins, and four wrote hardly anything. There is further reflection upon the crafting of this sermon in journal entry #1, located in the appendix.

1. Honor people’s life-shaping stories and formative narrative.

Five respondents strongly agreed that the sermon helped them make connections between the text and their own life, and four were uncertain. Here is my own speculation for varied responses. People who have experienced shame and needed to hear this message wrote extensively, and those who already understand God’s acceptance wrote considerably less. This is born out in respondent’s comments. One respondent said, “For me, acceptance by God is a given.” The person expressed confidence in God’s faithfulness. Another wrote, “I struggle with understanding how God can accept sinners...I heard the words...but I’m not sure if I felt them in my heart...the sermon touched me...but I’m sorry...I don’t believe I am worthy of forgiveness.” Another person wrote, “Forgiving yourself is so hard.” Shame that blocks people’s capacity to hear God’s acceptance and grace is a crucial fact of many people’s formative narratives. That

is why we need God's grace to enter our lives, to counter shame and to lift our hearts once more.

2. Help people claim their identity in the context of God's acceptance.

Seven of ten respondents affirmed the sermon helped them to hear and understand God's acceptance. Five respondents used language suggesting that Jesus forgives our sinful nature. Two remarked that even if Jesus understands and forgives us, it is still hard to forgive ourselves. Four respondents reflected on their own sense of vocation and God's call upon their lives.

3. Help the listener imagine a future beyond the present.

Five respondents affirmed the sermon helped the listener appreciate and understand how Christ's forgiveness is transformative, and four identified our partnership in the work of forgiveness. Six respondents appreciated how the sermon illustrations helped them re-imagine their role within God's redemptive story, and that each of us has a part to play in God's saving work. "This is the kind of sermon that involves me because it is "every day" people."

4. Responding prophetically and pastorally to the experience of shame.

Three respondents questioned the sermon's description of sacrifice. "The ability to work and care for people – even to do the dirty work does not seem like sacrifice but only privilege." It was a remarkable comment and an expression of unity with Christ. Four respondents described their relationship to others as a potential "bridge" where their actions would help people who are stuck gain confidence. Respondents felt the sermon

encouraged them to help people struggling with a negative identity “by not being judgmental, truly hearing and seeing the people around me.”

Sermon #6 – September 20, 2015

The text for this sermon was drawn from an extended narrative concerning Abraham and Sarah and the birth of their son Isaac. The sermon was crafted to encourage people who know the shame of disappointment to trust that their future with God is open.

1. Honor people’s life-shaping stories and formative narratives.

Mary Albing, a former classmate proposed that people make sense of their lives through stories.² In reviewing sermon surveys I was delighted to discover one faithful respondent who repeatedly answered survey questions with heart-felt and funny stories. Eight respondents made connections between the sermon and their daily lives. The depth of data respondents offered this week was a privilege to read and included many personal stories. All respondents enjoyed and indeed found delight in the biblical story. As improbable as some biblical stories might be, they draw us in that we might take our place within the story in order to make sense of our lives.

Effective use of humor is a powerful way to open the door to conversations about difficult topics. Five of eight respondents affirmed the effective use of humor and three of the five contributed personal humorous stories that related directly to the text. There are many difficult things in life, but humor lightens the load.

Disgrace shame can be triggered by the experience of disappointment and subsequent feelings of inadequacy. The disappointments we experience in life can

² Mary Albing, “Preaching to Heal: Narrative Therapy Practices in Christian Proclamation” (Luther Seminary, 2013).

dominant our personal narrative and block spiritual growth. In the sermon I invited the listener to imagine how disappointment might have lingered in Abraham and Sarah's relationship. Four respondents connected the experience of disappointment in their own life with the biblical text, and two shared intimate narratives which I would call disgrace-shame experiences. Six respondents affirmed a closing illustration about a mother's steadfast acceptance of her troubled son was quite moving and effective.

2. Help people claim their identity in the context of God's acceptance.

Seven respondents strongly affirmed that God is not disappointed in us. God has time for us and accepts us. The data suggests that this assertion was authentic news to respondents. "If I had been reading the passage on my own, I would not have gotten the message of God's overwhelming acceptance." Struggling with shame, this person had previously understood her/his identity through the lens of fall-redemption theology. Viewing her/his life through the theological lens proposed in this thesis, the respondent gained new confidence of God's acceptance.

3. Help the listener imagine a future beyond the present.

Seven of eight respondents found the sermon helped them to trust that our future with God is open and not fixed. Imagining God's acceptance is the key to an open future. One respondent wrote, "NEVER does God express disappointment in them. God's acceptance of us doesn't depend on what we've done or not done. Wonderful thought!" Four respondents connected how the new life bestowed on Abraham and Sarah meant that new life is possible today. "By grace God (has given) me a new beginning."

4. Responding prophetically and pastorally to the experience of shame.

Eight respondents identified ways they might respond pastorally or prophetically as a result of hearing the sermon. Four respondents described the sermon as a call to live faithfully under the umbrella of God's unconditional acceptance. Three respondents connected God's acceptance with their sense of call to seek justice. "I want to be a force for understanding between peoples."

Sermon #7 – October 4, 2015

The text for this sermon is based on the story of Jacob wrestling at Peniel and draws upon the larger story of Jacob's life. The sermon was crafted to encourage people to work for reconciliation within families.

1. Honoring people's life-shaping stories and formative narratives.

This sermon touched a tender spot for respondents and opened the door to many pastoral conversations. Earlier I quoted Frank Thomas as saying, "there is a hunger for real assurance from a real God about real troubles." Estrangement between siblings can be a source of deep shame and can feel like personal failure. Eight respondents described painful estrangement between siblings or within extended families. Three respondents affirmed the sermon's pastoral response to the problem of estrangement.

People found the biblical story very compelling. Four of ten respondents appreciated how the sermon helped to draw a larger picture of Jacob's life and gave insight into Jacob's inner struggle. Hearing Jacob's formative narrative helped the respondents make connections between the text and their own lives. "I did find the part of the sermon where Jacob allows himself to be vulnerable and as a result, Esau comes out

and hugs him, weeps...it was very moving...really enjoyed the sermon.” Stories have the capacity to heal and give us confidence.

2. Help people claim their identity in the context of God’s acceptance.

Eight respondents affirmed the sermon helped them understand the unconditional nature of God’s acceptance. “If God could forgive Jacob’s many sins, then his love and forgiveness are available to everyone.” Four respondents appreciated God’s presence with Jacob in the midst of his struggle. “Sometimes I don’t do everything I should, feel guilty, and I was reassured that God accepts me as I am.”

3. Help the listener imagine a future beyond the present.

Respondents placed a high priority on the value of reconciliation. “Now that we are in the senior generation I’m thinking that reconciliation with siblings is as vital as reconciliation with parents/God.” Five respondents felt encouraged that family reconciliation might be possible. Four respondents experienced the sermon as an urgent and timely message. “I wish I had heard this sermon before.”

4. Responding prophetically and pastorally to the experience of shame.

Seven respondents affirmed the search for reconciliation is an expression of their faith. Four respondents recognized humility as a prerequisite to reconciliation. “We need to accept and recognize our flaws and shortfalls and seek reconciliation wherever and whenever possible.” Four respondents identified reconciliation as a process and something that takes time to achieve. “Sometimes it takes struggle to come to the point of being able to forgive and seek reconciliation...Just work on those relationship that need repair. God will be with us.”

Sermon #8 – October 11, 2015

The text for this sermon is taken from Joel 2 and the context is Thanksgiving Sunday. A terrible drought forced God's people to beg for food from neighbors. The sermon was crafted to encourage empathetic witness towards the land and for all who know the shame of hunger.

1. Honor people's life-shaping stories and formative narratives.

Many of the people who listen to my sermons have agricultural roots. Respondents identified the ambiguity and contradictions within the farming life and the call to act as stewards of the land. Seven of seven respondents made connections between the sermon and what they see happening in the environment. "The idea of grasshoppers eating a farmer's leather jacket is very real to me. Thank God that cycle is passed. I suppose we would use poisonous spray today. Is that good?" The environmental crisis we call the Great Depression continues to shape the imagination of rural people. Two respondents with direct experience of the Depression shared stories about food security and their community's response to hunger.

2. Help people claim their identity in the context of God's acceptance.

God's acceptance was not an intended focus of the sermon; however respondents made some interesting connections. Four respondents named a discomfort with agricultural practices which they see as discordant with their faith. "I have loved the land and am frustrated to see stubble burned, land left bare..." Respondents also felt that society's demand for cheap and exotic food damages the environment. Respondents identified how their participation in agriculture exists under both the watchful eye of God's judgment and the hand of God's acceptance.

3. Help the listener imagine a future beyond the present.

Five respondents acknowledged how our life is both precious and precarious. One respondent noted, “(We have a) young friend of ours who has been diagnosed with terminal cancer at age 36 with three young kids.” Four respondents noted the ecological crisis imperiled the prospect of a better future. “Will our choices today affect our grandchildren?” Three respondents noted that the fulfillment of a better future is dependent on us. “I need to make smart choices that will keep the world strong and healthy for future generations.”

4. Responding prophetically and pastorally to the experience of shame.

Six respondents demonstrated discretionary shame in regard to the ecological crisis. “We need to always remember the connectedness of us to our land, water and food.”

Sermon #9 – November 1, 2015

The text for this Sunday concerned the anointing of David and the bringing of the ark of God into the center of Jerusalem. The text was paired with Psalm 62. The sermon was crafted to help people imagine a new narrative with God at the center where the listener may “rest in God alone.”

1. Honor people’s life-shaping stories and formative narratives.

Respondents strongly identified with the problem of sleeplessness and pointed to family conflict, finances, and never-ending demands as potential causes. “I’m often so busy with family and work that I can’t rest because of the turmoil.” Seven respondents affirmed the positive benefits of a God-centered life. One mission-focused respondent

held the view that God awakens us in the night in order that we might pursue mercy and justice in the world.

2. Help people claim their identity in the context of God's acceptance.

Five respondents appreciated how the sermon reminded them God's acceptance is guaranteed, and not something we need to pursue. "God trusts in me, even when I don't hold God in my center at all times." "Even though we get side-tracked, God is patient."

3. Help the listener imagine a future beyond the present.

Perfectionism blocks our capacity to imagine a future where striving stops. Four respondents affirmed the sermon helped them think about their future in a new way. "It helped me to get my priorities in order." "Everything I need comes from God, I need not worry." Two respondents focused their comments on the problem of family conflict and how the Spirit works in us. "With God's help David found a way to reconciliation and he (God) is there for families."

4. Responding prophetically and pastorally to the experience of shame.

Four respondents affirmed that the sermon encouraged the listener to read the bible for spiritual growth. They found hopeful parallels and resonance between the story of David and their own formative narrative. Three respondents affirmed the role of prayer in spiritual formation. "When I have trouble sleeping and I pray a certain feeling of *calmness* happens." "I liked hearing that there are many ways to find a center with God and that he can help ease my burdens."

Sermon #10 – December 6, 2015

The text for this sermon was drawn from Isaiah 40 and focused on the prophet's conviction that God's love endures forever. The trauma and shame of our modern world calls this assertion into question. The sermon was crafted to encourage those who feel exiled by shame to experience the assurance of God's promise and grace.

1. Honor people's life-shaping stories and formative narrative.

Eight respondents made strong connection between the sermon and their life experiences. The sermon triggered a wide variety of responses and touched people in a deep way. Some respondents reflected on their sense of call and how they respond to the world's pain with mercy, hope and grace. Some respondents showed empathy for those who feel exiled from God's acceptance and love. One respondent shared a detailed story from her childhood that completely corresponded to the text – it left me astonished!

2. Help people claim their identity in the context of God's acceptance.

Seven respondents strongly affirmed how the sermon helped them understand and experience the nature of God's acceptance. During the sermon I quoted a portion of the hymn, "I Have Called You By Your Name" which four respondents named as a powerful affirmation of God's acceptance. Six respondents made a strong connection between the sermon illustration and their understanding of God's acceptance.

3. Help the listener imagine a future beyond the present.

Six respondents expressed confidence that God's unconditional love gives them resilience for daily living. Three respondents wondered if their future is constrained by their sins. "I'm not sure that I really trust that He'll accept me and my flaws." Their self-

image as a sinner acts a barrier to acceptance. Six respondents felt strengthened by the conviction that God values each person and calls us beloved. Many found the articulation of this idea moving. One very elderly respondent wrote, “A short time ago my brother-in-law came to visit. He gave me a kiss and said, “You look sixty-eight you look beautiful.” I didn’t argue with him. I just said, “You can come anytime.”” The affirmation of another person’s self-worth is a rare and remarkable blessing.

4. Responding prophetically and pastorally to the experience of shame.

The data described two ways in which the sermon helped people to respond to shame. Four respondents found the assurance of faith strengthens us to respond to the neighbor with mercy and grace. “Stop believing just in (the) self. Believe in God’s grace and that God wants the best for us. Then we can help those who need help.” Three respondents made reference to the loss, shame and bewilderment Syrian refugees must be facing. Their faith called them to respond compassionately and to offer practical and financial help in the resettlement of these, our neighbors from afar, and God’s beloved.

Step #3 Sermon Data Analysis - Summary

This third step of analysis gathers data from across the ten sermons under the categories of the four action-outcome statements seeking insights, patterns and possibilities for improvement.

1. Honor people’s life-shaping stories and formative narratives.

A large majority of survey responses (73/88) affirmed the sermons helped them make connections with their life-shaping stories. Many respondents offered personal anecdotes and detailed stories that corresponded to sermon illustrations and/or to the

biblical text. Many individuals trusted the sermon surveys as a safe place to share stories, to express their vulnerability, and to ask faith questions. Many respondents gained insight into the nature of shame and its impact on relationships and personal identity.

Many people experience their doubts and faith questions as a source of shame. This is really an aspect of perfectionist shame, where people believe that their faith is “never enough.” Ten respondents affirmed how the sermons gave permission and in fact honored their doubts and faith questions.

Part of our identity includes the faith practices we draw upon including prayer, group studies, reading scripture, and Christian witness and service. Thirty three respondents affirmed the sermons honored and encouraged their varied faith practices. Many respondents found the theological lens employed in the sermons helped them gain insight and encouraged them to look at scripture in a new way.

2. Help people claim their identity in the context of God’s acceptance.

A large majority of survey responses (72/88) affirmed how the sermons helped them to hear and understand God’s acceptance. Respondents indicated how the sermons became more effective in conveying the message as the sermon series progressed. Respondents shared richly detailed stories and made stronger declarative statements regarding God’s acceptance. Doubt can distort our sense of identity. Respondents indicated that the sermons honored their faith questions and helped them gain positive self-image.

Faith practices including Christian witness and service influence people’s sense of identity and acceptance. Respondents indicated on twenty seven sermon surveys that their

discipleship strengthened their sense of identity demonstrated empathetic witness toward the neighbor.

3. Help the listener imagine a future beyond the present.

The problem of estrangement loomed large in the narratives shared by respondents. A large majority of survey responses (66/88) affirmed a hope for reconciliation and/or the willingness to engage in acts of reconciliation. Respondents recognized the value of reconciliation and felt the sermons encouraged and equipped them for this purpose.

In psychological terms the emotion of shame is the opposite of confidence. As people grow in confidence about their identity and their acceptance by God, they gain resilience over shame's power. Respondents indicated on forty nine sermon surveys that the sermons helped them gain confidence for the future.

4. Responding pastorally and prophetically to the experience of shame.

Chapter Four discussed a three step process whereby preaching can encourage empathetic witness toward those who experience shame. Respondents affirmed on forty two sermon surveys the importance of empathetic witness as a pastoral response to shame. Many respondents expressed solidarity with those who experience shame as an expression of Christian unity. "You are not alone, we are in this together." Respondents felt empowered to act for healing and reconciliation.

Respondents indicated on forty six surveys how the sermons affirmed Christian witness and service as a prophetic response to the problem of shame. The church's engagement with issues ranging from reconciliation, grief, poverty, and food security sends a signal that people bound by shame have allies in the pursuit of a better future.

Step #4 Sermon Data Analysis

Narrative Characteristics Which Support Preaching Grace Effectively

Chapter Four advocates a narrative method in order to persuade listeners to pursue reconciliation. Harder and Jones encourage the use of stories which open the listener to vulnerability. Stories help us to understand other people's suffering and reveal our shared humanity. In this section I have reflected on selected stories from the sermon series which the data indicated held powerful resonance with respondents. At the end of each story I have offered a statement affirming a practice for preaching which help people gain resilience from the spiritual and psychological consequences of shame.

“Jane’s Story”

Chapter Two asks the question, “How can sermons help people stuck in shame re-author or reimagine their life stories?” There is an illustration in Sermon #10 that is instructive. I call it “Jane’s Story” because Jane is the young woman who showed it to me. Jane is a courageous young woman who has battled bulimia; she demonstrates deep empathy for people who struggle with shame. In the story an amateur photographer approaches strangers on a university campus and asks to take their picture, saying, “I’m taking pictures of beautiful things for a school project. You are beautiful. Can I take your picture?” The people who were approached by the photographer respond first with disbelief, and then delight. They can’t believe a stranger sees them as beautiful. Here is the result. Every person the photographer approached experiences transformation. They lift up their faces in joy and some even dance. The story effectively conveys God’s grace. All of the respondents resonated strongly with the story, and some wrote extensive why it had touched them. They found the story functions on at least three levels.

First, the story bears witness to experiences of rejection many people share about their appearance that lead to embarrassment and shame, and so the story models empathy. Second, as listeners enter imaginatively into the story they take their place before the camera and hear the words of acceptance, “You are beautiful.” Third, the listener imagines picking up the camera and sharing these same words of blessing with other people burdened by shame. The story offers the listener a powerful way to respond in faith to the problem of shame and thereby lift another person’s spirit. The story helps the listener imagine a reconciled future where shame shall be no more and acts a visual experience of the gospel. *Sermons are enriched by stories which help the listener respond with empathy toward people in need of God’s grace.*

A Boy Named “Trouble”

As confidence grows, shame diminishes. In Sermon #6 a story is told about a boy whose confidence is shattered by teachers who stereotyped him as troubled. The boy’s mother sees only potential in him and never loses confidence in her son. Out of love, the mother moves her son to a new school where he blossoms academically. The boy known as “Trouble” was admitted to a prestigious American university on full scholarship and became one of the great success stories of our town. The story held great resonance. Respondents wrote extensive comments from the perspectives of students, teachers, and parents. The story functions on several levels.

First, many people shared experiences of being marginalized or bullied at school. Shame experiences may linger like a dormant virus in our subconscious and awaken to diminish our identity once more. Telling the story honors their experience. Second, people felt empathy for all of the parties involved; the student, the parent and even the

teachers who shamed the boy. People wrote passionately about the mother's steadfast love for her son and her response which redeemed the boy named "Troubled" and gave him a new name, "Honored." *Sermons are enriched by stories which honor our shadowed experiences. They help us imagine our partnership within God's redemptive story.*

Shame and Mental Illness

I am thankful to be part of the conversation to destigmatize mental illness. In Sermon #2 I shared my personal experience of growing up with a parent who suffered with schizophrenia in a time when treatment was unavailable. In the sermon I expressed appreciation for the supportive people who understood and helped me become resilient, self-reliant and reintegrated within the community. As in the experience of telling "Jane's story," the listeners demonstrated a visible and empathetic response. The story generated many pastoral conversations where people wanted to share their struggles with mental illness and the shame it sometimes precipitates. Respondents to sermon surveys shared extensively and honestly of their personal journeys with mental illness. Sharing the sermon and reflecting on respondents' responses became a watershed moment in the development of this thesis. Here is what I learned.

Authentic conversation can only exist in the context of mutual vulnerability. Trust grows in communities when we discover the freedom to share our formative narratives without fear of judgment. This is a critical insight born from this research. Often in preaching pastors put up a shield of invulnerability pretending that they have never had a struggle, doubt, or moment of shame in their lives. To be anything less than perfect would be to admit weakness. Congregations need to know that the person addressing

them is one of them. Risking vulnerability from the pulpit enriches pastoral conversations while breaking down walls that divide lay people and ordered ministers. Sharing aspects of our personal narratives that reveal heartache and shame does not deny that there is suffering in the world, but declares that God's love is stronger. *Sermons are enriched by stories that open us to mutual vulnerability.*

Re-imagining Our Identity through the Lens of Baptism

Baptismal identity offers a counter narrative for people locked in shame. While shame declares we are never good enough, baptism affirms that our value and worth are established by God's unmerited love and faithfulness. In sermon #10 I used an illustration which referred to the popular baptismal hymn "I Have Called You by Your Name" in order to reinforce the understanding of God's acceptance. Respondents found the words to the hymn created a particularly powerful moment in the sermon. They reflected extensively about baptism and affirmed how the words and imagery of the hymn gave clarity of purpose to the sermon. This is my speculation why this illustration was effective in conveying God's grace. Baptism is a highly experiential act which is felt in the body. The whole congregation senses participation and ownership in the sacrament. Baptism is a promise that is not only spoken in words but embodied by the congregation. Speaking the words evoked a deep memory in the listeners, and a 'moment of celebration.' It triggered what Frank Thomas describes as "the remembrance of a redemptive past and/or the conviction of a liberated future which transforms the events immediately experienced."³ *Sermons are strengthened by the creative use of stories,*

³ Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*, chap. 5.

hymns and shared experiences which create moments of celebration within the preaching event.

The Healing Power of Congregational Singing

There are many events in our world that make it difficult for us to trust God's acceptance in the context of great suffering. Sermon #4 was written as a pastoral response to the pain caused by the Newtown massacre on December 14th, 2012. The sermon sought to lift up the powerful gift of singing as an ordinary means of sharing grace and as purposeful response to suffering. In one illustration I described a pastoral visit with a person suffering from advanced dementia who was unable to speak. After a brief and futile effort to engage the person in conversation, I haltingly sang "Amazing Grace." The person looked up and joined in song. Both the visitor and the visited experienced a moment of holiness. Respondents deeply appreciated the story and described how it worked on several levels.

First, many people understood the great loss of self and identity which dementia and Alzheimer's disease brings. The sermon honored a fearful part of their personal narrative. Second, the sermon described the feeling of weakness and vulnerability we often experience in the face of suffering. "What can I do?" Third, singing was the purposeful response which brought healing and restored community. Even in the midst of suffering we may experience moments of celebration and grace. *Sermons are enriched by evocative imagery and rhythmic power found in our songs of faith.*

Contribution of Reflection Journal Entries to Core Convictions

Journal Entry #1 – August 17, 2015

This journal entry asked questions about the qualities of effective sermon illustrations. The focus concerned a story used in Sermon #1 that sermon respondents found emotionally connective. Why did this story provoke such a powerful response? The conclusion reached in the journal entry was that the story followed a pattern that was universal in nature and easy to follow: situation, complication and resolution.⁴ Furthermore, it addressed the topic of shame in a direct and particular fashion. Several authors including Jones, Harder and McClintock advocate using particular stories about real people and contemporary life as a means of connecting emotionally with the listener. One respondent wrote, “Sometimes I find it hard to understand the scriptures, but when it is related to everyday life it becomes very clear and useable to me.” *Sermons that use particular stories about everyday life help the listener to connect emotionally.*

Journal Entry #2 – October 21, 2015

Journal Entry # 2 tells the stories of three different couples who suffered shame experiences in their marriages. It describes the corrosive consequences upon their family relationships and their standing within the community. All three couples experienced conflict over money. Two of three couples experienced such estrangement from the community that they fled the country to find a new start. All three couples stopped attending church or changed congregations. Their sense of identity had been severely damaged and no place where they could tell their story.

⁴ Ibid.

The journal entry asked whether fall-redemption theology is pastoral appropriate to help people who experience disgrace-based shame. People stuck in shame need the freedom to tell their story without fear of judgement. *Sermons need to bear witness to the pain of disgrace-based shame, trusting that God's love is stronger.*

Journal Entry #3 - November 23, 2015

Journal Entry #3 tells the experience of a person who suffered disgrace-based shame as a result of parent's action. The story underlines how much of our identity is grounded in familial relationships. Children have a deep need to feel pride in the narrative told about their family of origins. In the case of this story the person felt shame on Remembrance Day for being the child of a soldier who fought against Allied forces in WWII. The same diminishment of identity might be experienced by people who are adopted and do not know their parents. Their sense of pride and confidence has been interrupted. What biblical resources might help bring awareness of God's unconditional acceptance? There is an echo in this story of the Samaritan's experience of being an outsider for no reason except their family of origin. *People who experience a diminished identity through shame can experience God's welcoming grace through the act and promise of baptism.*

Journal Entry #4 – November 24, 2015

Journal Entry #4 describes how the shame of addiction ruptures community. It tells one family's painful experience with alcoholism and points to the widespread suffering addiction brings. Friends, family and neighbours might witness the change in behavior brought on by addiction, but often do not know the cause or how to respond. Many church communities continue to attach great stigma toward people who suffer from

addiction. One of the more common reasons for adults to drop out of church concerns shame arising from the illness of addiction within the family. Research shows a strong correlation between mental illness, addiction and shame. Shame builds barriers that only grace and mercy can overcome. *Sermons are enriched by stories that evoke God's unconditional acceptance as the antidote to shame's power.*

Journal Entry #5 – January 1, 2016

This journal entry shares three stories of individuals and couples who suffered great losses resulting in a diminished sense of identity and a growing experience of isolation. One individual shared a story describing their struggle with depression. A second describes the devastation of a spouse dying unexpectedly, and the third related a series of losses within a family that rivaled the suffering of Job. All three individuals acknowledged how life can be cruel. Their observation is an existential one and all too common. When people feel trapped by life's cruelty, what is the gospel response? *Sermons are enriched by stories which connect life's hardships with the assurance of faith which flows from a theology of the cross.*

Journal Entry #6 – January 4, 2016

This journal entry describes a pastoral experience with a person who experienced shame arising from domestic abuse and assault. The pastoral conversation was unusual because a portion of it directly involved the sermon. The person seeking help arrived shortly before church was to begin. She had a difficult and painful narrative to share that included being thrown down the stairs by her spouse. Unable to respond to the person's need immediately, I assured her she was safe and welcome to stay. I promised to talk to

the person following the worship service. Unknown to me, the person stayed and listened attentively to the sermon.

The woman was weighed down by many burden of shame in her life. She asked, “Where was God when all this was happening?” As a result of our conversation and hearing the sermon the woman showed a new resilience and determination to reclaim what her abuser had taken from her – her sense of dignity and self-worth. *Sermons that convey an atmosphere of acceptance lessen the fears of people locked in shame and strengthen them to imagine a new future made possible through the grace of Christ.*

Data Analysis Summary

The following statements were created in response to sermon survey data and reflection journal entries. Together they comprise the “Toolkit” of practices that promote preaching grace effectively as a pastoral response to shame.

“The Toolkit”

Sermons that help people gain resilience from shame’s power need to:

1. Honor people’s life shaping stories and formative narrative;
2. Help people claim their identity in the context of God’s acceptance;
3. Help the listener imagine a future beyond the present;
4. Offer purposeful ways for the church to respond prophetically and pastorally to the experience of shame.

Effective narrative practices for preaching God’s acceptance include:

5. Sermons are enriched by stories which help the listener respond with empathy toward people in need of God’s acceptance.

6. Sermons are enriched by stories which honor our shadowed experiences. They help us imagine our partnership within God's redemptive story.
7. Sermons are enriched by stories that open us to mutual vulnerability.
8. Sermons are strengthened by the creative use of stories, hymns and shared experiences which create moments of celebration within the preaching event.

Convictions of what sermons need to proclaim God's grace effectively:

9. Sermons need to use particular stories to help the listener to connect emotionally.
10. Sermons need to bear witness to the pain of disgrace-based shame, trusting that God's love is stronger.
11. Sermons need to connect life's hardships with the assurance of faith which flows from a theology of the cross.
12. Sermons need to convey an atmosphere of acceptance so that people locked in shame might imagine a new future made possible through the grace of Christ.

CHAPTER 6

EVALUATION OF RESULTS

Chapter Five used a four-step process to distill data from sermon surveys and reflection journal entries in order to create a “toolkit” of preaching practices which promote preaching grace effectively as a pastoral response to shame. Chapter Six describes how project goals were met, identifies particular strengths and weaknesses of research methods and suggests possibilities for improvement.

Project Strengths

An Engaging Topic

One factor that helped me stay engaged through the duration of this project has been the experience of working with a compelling topic. I have enjoyed identifying preaching practices which help people gain resilience from shame’s power. The goal has always felt urgent, achievable and with wide practical application. Shame is present in every period of our lives from childhood to death and is found in all cultures and contexts. Shame is a driving force shaping identity and relationships. Shame is an underlying factor in almost every news story that involves conflict. Finding ways to help people let go of shame and take up a new identity benefits the whole church. Sermons that effectively preach grace as a pastoral response to shame have the potential to change lives.

Contributions of the Literature Review

I gained confidence in the purpose of the project through the literature review which offered a broad range of sources and perspectives. Cameron Harder's research was always the starting point for my understanding of shame from a pastoral perspective. Albers, Stockitt, Fowler and Jones offered tremendous insight into both the psychological and spiritual dimensions of shame. I appreciated how Jones was able to ground much of her contemporary work on trauma in early scholarship including Calvin's *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*.¹ Jones demonstrates how the problem of shame is not only a modern concern but has also connects to the tradition of the church.

Dealing With the Problem of Fall-Redemption

A significant challenge for the project was the collision between shame and fall-redemption theology. It was not my intention to be theologically controversial. The problem with fall-redemption is not so much the idea, but its pastoral application in inappropriate circumstances. If a patient is allergic to ASA, prescribing it can be fatal. Albers pointed out how shame demands an alternate theological lens. The literature review helped to connect the theological lines between core sources and offered a path to explore and develop shame as theological category. Stockitt provided the biblical basis for a theological model which imagines shame as the presenting problem for the human condition. Harder presented the Christological model which described how grace overcoming shame's power. The literature review strengthened the project and underpinned the research that followed.

¹ Jean Calvin, James Anderson, and Society Calvin Translation, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Edinburgh: Printed for the Calvin Translation Society, 1845), Kindle edition.

Biblical and Theological Framework

Chapter Two provided the biblical and theological framework for the project and identified essential preaching resources tested in the crafting of sermons. Although the research analyzed data from ten sermons, in reality the biblical studies from this project informed all of my sermons for more than the past year and allowed me to explore new avenues including sermon series on the book of Hebrews and the Psalms. I found the work begun in Chapter Two renewed my energy and enthusiasm for the task of preaching. The theological reflection initiated through this thesis deepened my pastoral skills and helped me to grow in empathy for the people pastors are called to serve.

Development of Action-Outcome Statements and Christological Claims

Two project components which flowed from the literature review and the biblical and theological framework were the Christological claims and the action-outcome statements which guided the crafting of sermons. Even though these statements were developed at the early stages of the project and many significant sources would broaden the research in later stages, the original statements remained largely unchanged. Their strength and validity as guides for crafting sermons was reinforced by a growing set of theological and psychological sources as well as by the data analysis. The action-outcome statements and Christological claims remained the strong center which informed this thesis.

Revised Research Plan

The revised research plan generated eighty eight sermon surveys from ten sermons and six journal entries. The open-ended questions crafted for the sermon surveys resulted in rich and varied responses. Rather than simple yes/no answers to questions,

many respondents chose to share personal stories and extended theological/biblical reflection. They offered critical reflection and honest feedback pointing to potential opportunities for improvement. People felt a confidence to share deeper responses on paper than might have occurred through an interview format. Taken as a whole, the sermon surveys provided a remarkable base for measuring sermon effectiveness.

The reflection journal entries were used to examine and reflect theologically about rural people's lived encounters with shame and how effective preaching might help them move forward. The journal offered the opportunity to take a step back and to ask questions concerning everyday events in pastoral care. Much of what was discerned from the journal was reinforced by insights gained from the analysis of sermon surveys. The correspondence between the two sets of data reinforced the validity of outcomes observed and preaching practices suggested.

Sorting Sermon Survey Data Though Two Filters

The survey responses from each sermon were coded and tested against the four action-outcome statements. Correspondences were observed and illustrative comments from respondents inserted. Employing the four action-outcome statements as categories enabled efficient and organized data analysis and generated results applicable to project goals. The summary of all responses demonstrated how the action-outcome statements were effective tools for shaping sermons for the purpose of the project.

The data showed some sermons were more effective than others in conveying grace effectively. Invariably, what stood out for respondents about these particular sermons were certain stories and illustrations that helped them make connections between the text and their life experience. Five stories were examined to determine why they

functioned effectively and a summary statement was crafted for each story supporting a practice for preaching. This turn in the research offered a greater depth of insight and reinforced conclusions reached about the action-outcome statements. While the first examination of survey data showed correspondence to the action-outcome statements, the second sorting employing narrative analysis offered answers to some of the “why” and “how” questions and demonstrated how narratives enhance preaching. Narrative analysis of the data provided key components for the “toolkit” of effective preaching practices.

Filling a “Toolkit” for Preaching Grace Effectively

Chapter One identified the goal of creating a preaching toolkit for proclaiming God’s reconciled future. Chapter Five presented the results: four action-outcome statements, five narrative practices that enhance understanding of God’s acceptance and six core convictions of what sermons need to proclaim grace effectively. The first four statements describe what sermons need to do, and the following eleven statements describe preaching practices which help make it happen. The toolkit concisely expresses the results of this thesis. Developing the toolkit enhanced clarity in my sermons. It provided a coherent preaching structure for dealing with a complex pastoral problem. The development of the toolkit provided a means for achieving three further goals: gaining skills in responding pastorally to shame, developing insights for congregational mission and sharing pastoral and preaching insights with the wider church.

Return to Project Criteria

Chapter One identified three benchmarks for project success: identify practices for preaching to help people gain resilience from the spiritual and psychological consequences of shame; develop insights for crafting sermons that celebrate our identity

within a reconciled future; provide a resource for rural preachers who seek to articulate the problem of shame and how to address it in a pastoral and prophetic fashion. Chapter Five demonstrates how these criteria were achieved. Further exploration of these goals will be developed in the following chapter.

Evaluating Preaching Over an Extended Period

One of the unintended features of this project was the employment of sermon data generated from two distinct time periods in 2012 and 2015. During the interim period considerable research and theological reflection continued to take place. Chapter Four asks whether the insight gained from new sources and further theological reflection is evident in the characteristics of the sermons crafted in 2015. Chapter Five demonstrates how the 2015 sermons series gained clarity and were more effective in proclaiming God's acceptance. The opportunity to compare the effectiveness of sermons over an extended period of time was a surprising benefit of the project and a source of encouragement. This project feature will find further discussion in Chapter Seven.

Project Weaknesses

Trouble and Change within the Research Plan

My initial research plan employed three sets of data sources: six sermons evaluated by twenty respondents filling out sermon surveys; four follow-up interviews per sermon; and a set of reflection journal entries. It became apparent that congregational participation was not as high as hoped. The average number of sermon surveys returned was nine per sermon. In order to expand the quantity of sermon survey data, the number of sermons was increased to ten, including four sermons from 2012 and six sermons from

2015. The response to follow-up interviews was largely unsuccessful due to scheduling conflicts with participants. Respondents showed considerable interest in the project, but their timely participation was unpredictable. I ended up dropping the follow-up interviews as a data source.

Strategies for Strengthening the Literature Review

Developing the literature review was a pleasure, but how it was accomplished underlined the importance of a rigorous search method. Two core sources come to mind. In searching for resources concerning improving survey questions, I enter “Fowler” looking for a particular book that had been recommended. What I stumbled upon was James Fowler’s *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life*. Nothing in the title or description of the book hints at a connection to this project, but Part II of this volume reads like a textbook for the topic and found wide application for this thesis. Its discovery was pure accident. A methodical exploration employing a wide variety of search terms is critical to development of the literature review.

A second core source turned out to be Serene Jones’, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*. I came upon Jones’ work after a casual conversation with a librarian about this project. The librarian pointed out the physiological link between shame and trauma, and suggested I use “trauma” as a related research term. Jones’ volume led to the discovery of Van Der Kolk who lays out the connection between shame, trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder.² Enlisting the support of librarians is an essential strategy for developing the literature review.

² Van Der Kolk, “Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and the Nature of Trauma” 7-22.

Strengthening the Research Method

Developing effective research methods and practices was the greatest challenge for this project and an area for potential improvement. It wasn't easy soliciting survey responses about socially uncomfortable topics. The sermon data could have been examined to determine which survey questions were least effective in eliciting responses and thereby offer insight into questions appropriate for topic. Faithful respondents experienced a certain amount of "survey fatigue" which resulted in a drop-off in total sermon surveys at different points in the study. I was disappointed when the post-sermon interviews described in the original research plan became so difficult to schedule that the decision was made drop them from the data set. Including a variety of data sources in research projects improves the depth of potential material and offers backup should some research strategies turn out to be ineffective.

I was successful in obtaining a rich supply of data from the sermon surveys and the reflection journal entries. I was challenged by an unfocused plan on what to do with it. Additional reflection and redrafting was required to make connections in the material for the purpose of organizing results. Creating a clear outline for Chapter 5 prior to writing it would have represented a more effective strategy.

Summary

A number of factors contributed to the success of this project including an engaging topic which continued to be a source of great personal interest. While some ministry colleagues expressed skepticism about the purpose of the project, the literature review confirmed the validity of the research. I was daunted by the challenge shame presented to fall-redemption theology, but was encouraged to discover diverse

theological and Christological resources which informed an exploration toward the development of a theology of shame. The action-outcome statements and Christological claims identified in Chapter Four guided data analysis and evaluation. The research plan and its revisions provided a methodological challenge but the addition of the narrative category to data analysis added a new dimension to the project.

The center of this thesis is the preaching toolkit described in Chapter Five. Much of the experience of shame is experiential and how shame is manifest in the body. When the toolkit was finally assembled during the second draft of Chapter Five, I experienced a great sense of relief to witness the project summarized in two pages. What had started out as a set of sometimes unconnected themes finally made sense. The project goals laid out in Chapter One had been achieved. The project faced challenges related to research methodology and analysis which point to strategies for improvement. The insights gained into developing preaching practices as a pastoral response to shame has been very rewarding.

Chapter Seven contains final reflections about the project and how the research responded to the original stated problem. It addresses how my preaching practices have been influenced by the research and points toward possibilities for further study.

CHAPTER 7

REFLECTIONS

Chapter Six describes the unfolding development this project and identifies its strengths and weaknesses. About five years past since the seeds of this project were first planted. Two laptops gave their life for this project! It feels like a long journey has come to its conclusion with the final destination being the creation of a toolkit of preaching practices to help people stuck in shame. I am shocked to consider how the toolkit is summarized in just over one page. I feel satisfied with the insights gained and conclusions reached. From the beginning this project has been about the individuals who deserve freedom and release from shame's power.

Many years ago while serving as a student minister I walked into the darkened sanctuary of our church and discovered a woman weeping. I sat down beside her and asked what was wrong. The woman whispered, "I've never done anything worthwhile in my life." What a heartbreaking lament! The woman didn't offer her name, but I recognized her distinctive voice as belonging to one of the first ladies of Canadian country music. I said to the woman, "You may not think you have done much in your life, but I have your CD in my truck. I listened to you this morning on my drive to work." I have met too many people with similar stories who feel trapped by the weight of shame and unworthiness. These people deserve the church's compassionate attention. I am convinced that preaching grace effectively unleashes the potential of congregations to offer their faithful response and care.

Unique Challenges of This Project

This project (and indeed the Doctor of Ministry program at Luther) challenged me in many ways and my preaching is more effective because of the study and research required. For some time in my ministry I have felt a discomfort with fall-redemption theology and its effectiveness in addressing many people's problems. This project afforded the opportunity to develop an alternative lens for reading scripture that took into account the problem of people stuck in shame. It also required me to reexamine my Christology and to articulate how the cross and resurrection help people today overcome shame's power.

The project challenged me to look at scripture in broader and more thematic ways and to clarify my core convictions about its unifying message. This project has given me the confidence to engage a far wider range of texts in my preaching. The congregation has appreciated how my preaching helped them enter imaginatively into the biblical story and has improved their biblical literacy. They have experienced how biblical stories can show remarkable correspondence with our own stories. Placing their story alongside the biblical story, many people have been enabled to imagine their identity in a new way in the context of God's grace and acceptance.

The project has challenged me to have higher expectations of what my preaching can accomplish. Some congregations and their pastors have lost confidence that preaching can effectively address the problems many people face. This becomes a missional crisis for the church and its message of grace toward the world and an identity crisis for preachers. I deeply appreciated classes with Dr. Frank Thomas and his books which I found transformative for my attitude and perspective on preaching. Dr. Thomas

encouraged his students to craft sermons with a clear objective in mind in order that the listener would enjoy an experience of grace and respond with purpose.

A fourth challenge this project presented (which flows from the third) concerns the structural clarity of my sermons. This project allowed me to employ preaching resources taught through course work to craft sermons which help the listener make connections with their own life. The clarity concern has been more than structural, but also extends to a desire to be clear in the expression of narrative, theology, scripture, and application.

The varied challenges this project presented have been stepping stones toward addressing the original question, “How can I craft sermons to help people stuck in shame gain resilience and grow in confidence and hope?” The original question has continued to be a challenge and inspiration to move forward, trusting that shame’s power can be overcome by grace.

How the Project Has Strengthened My Preaching

A successful thesis required me to know more about the topic. I needed to gain insight into the psychological dimensions of shame and how shame functions differently than guilt. I needed to understand the contours of shame and how it affects our sense of identity and social placement within the community. Shame is manifest differently in men and women, and I needed to examine how gender impacts what is heard through proclamation. The research pointed out the limitations of fall-redemption theology and I needed to find a way to build upon it without dishonoring its strength and value. The topic required the articulation of Christological claims not only in the manner in which Jesus understands our condition, but also how the cross and resurrection overcomes

shame's power. The project proposes reading scripture with shame as the interpretive lens, and so that shifted my interpretation of many texts. The biblical-theological chapter and literature review helped me to think about shame in a new way and laid the groundwork for sermons which would become the basis of research.

The success of the project required me to know more, but also to share more, and to risk being vulnerable. Pastors need to demonstrate empathetic witness to the things which shame people before the listener will risk opening themselves to God's acceptance. The Bible remembers how Jesus continually crossed boundaries which shame erects and demonstrated that he had no fear of standing with those who experience shame. People who have shame experiences in their present or past need to know that their problems are not just their problems, or that they are a problem, but that their burdens belong to all of us because we all belong to God. Empathetic witness restores people to community and opens the door to God's reconciled future. It softens the heart and gives people courage to risk their own vulnerability. I found that when I risked being vulnerable from the pulpit people found the content more relevant and connective to their daily lives.

One of the preaching practices that helped people hear God's acceptance was the use of very direct and particular language. For example, sermon #7 asked Jacob's question, "How O Lord, may I be reconciled with my brother?" This is not a general question, but a very particular one. The question held great resonance with listeners because almost everyone knows someone who has asked this very prayer. Jacob's question became the listener's question and showed how God in Christ is working to reconcile the world one relationship at a time. People need to hear their problems addressed directly in order to trust that the person speaking has their interests at heart.

People who experience disgrace-based shame have absorbed a false narrative about their identity. They need to hear the good news of God's acceptance articulated with clarity. Frank Thomas quotes one of his teachers saying, "I do not think any sermon should be preached or even written (...until the Behavioral Purpose Statement) has emerged, clear and lucid as a cloudless moon."¹ Respondents experienced a growing clarity in the structure of my preaching which helped them to hear and understand God's acceptance. The affirmation of structural clarity helped me to gain confidence that the goal of this thesis has been fruitful.

Benefits of This Research for the Company of Preachers

I hope this thesis may benefit preachers in a variety of contexts. Honor-shame culture rears its ugly head most dramatically in economic downturns. Many North American communities dependent on resource extraction face an uncertain future. When people are losing their jobs, homes or farms shame becomes highly operative as people's identity and self-worth are strained. Divisions can open between neighbors as judgment sets in. The closure of prominent businesses and institutions can affect the morale of entire communities and cause collective shame. I hope this thesis can be a resource to pastors seeking to open conversations about how we care for each other when economic inequality is growing.

I hope this thesis can be a resource for pastors who seek to understand how shame arises from the trauma of sexual abuse and family violence. Research shows how traumatic events damage the dignity and identity of many individuals. People who have experienced such trauma often feel that their voice has been taken away and carry painful

¹ Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*, chap. 5.

secrets within them. If the church never acknowledges the reality many people experience by speaking plainly about it, then it feels as if the abuser has won. People trapped by traumatic events in their past need to hear their experience named aloud. They need supportive communities with the courage to bear empathetic witness that together a new story may be told.

I have developed a growing awareness how addiction and mental illness contribute to the formative narrative of many families and can trigger shame. Many people who experience addiction and mental illness feel shame for their condition and fail to seek help. I hope this thesis can support conversations among pastors and in congregations that lead to purposeful and compassionate responses. Pastors have a role to play in encouraging treatment and to reduce fear and stigma against those who suffer in silence.

The insights of this thesis may benefit congregational analysis that takes place during interim ministry. Shame is a driving force in many relationships and can disrupt congregational identity. Congregations that operate out of honor-shame culture can be very hard on pastoral leadership. Interim ministry affords the opportunity for the sharing of formative narratives that leads a renewed sense of mission. Using shame as an interpretive lens for reading scripture in this context may help faith communities analyze their situation and begin to move forward.

Further Research Ideas

One area of this thesis which merits further exploration regards the relationship between gender, shame and preaching. Shame affects men and women equally but is manifest in different forms. Honor-shame culture attacks men whenever they show

weakness or vulnerability. Men sometime respond to shame experiences with rage. Some men have a particularly difficult time showing vulnerability by disclosing their formative narratives. We have seen progress through the courageous action of abuse survivors telling their stories, but much more work needs to be done. I think this is a particular concern for the church and for men who listen to preaching hoping to hear their stories named and honored.

A second area of study that could be developed more fully concerns traumatic events and preaching. Traumatic events are often the trigger for shame experiences. Some people recover from traumatic experiences quickly, while others remain stuck in the event for decades. They feel confusion and shame for their inability to get on with life. They lack confidence to find a path toward a purposeful future. Some people who experience traumatic events find themselves isolated from the community, unable to talk about what has happened. Why is it that some people fail to recover? How might preaching help people affected by trauma discover healing and recover confidence?

A third area that merits further study and which offers potential for another thesis concerns the role of narrative in effective preaching. I name this topic because I noticed in my data how certain stories were more effective in conveying an understanding of God's acceptance than others. Frank Thomas and others have made significant contributions to our understanding of the way narratives articulate meaning.² Mary Albing's thesis addresses healing through narrative therapy practices in preaching and

² Ibid., chap. 2.

offers significant insight.³ My preaching would benefit from a clearer understanding of the way stories help people make connections between life and faith.

The great surprise in preparing this thesis has been the task of reviewing and analyzing data from sermon surveys. In my years of ministry I have rarely pursued or received purposeful evaluation of my preaching. This project was different. The congregation took ownership of their participation. Respondents understood how their responses contributed and were essential to my theological education. When it came time to review what they had shared, I was truly moved. They answered much more than the questions they were asked. They shared significant parts of their lives, and their reflections were poignant, funny, thoughtful and insightful. It became clear that effective preaching matters to them, and that they took delight in partnership with this project. One respondent shared a poem in her reflections that I thought would be an appropriate last word.

“Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul
And sings the tune without words
And never stops at all.” - Emily Dickinson

³ Albing, “Preaching to Heal: Narrative Therapy Practices in Christian Proclamation,” 5.

APPENDIX “A”

Sermon Survey Sample**Sermon Survey for December 6, 2015 Advent 2****Text: Isaiah 40: 1 – 11**

Thank you for your responses. Be as honest and straightforward as you can. Please provide as detailed an answer to the questions as you can. All of your responses will be kept confidential. Your feedback will be helpful to me in my studies in preaching.

1. The sermon was based on a particular Bible passage.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Uncertain Agree Strongly Agree

2. Write a brief summary of the passage.

3. The sermon had a clear theme.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Uncertain Agree Strongly Agree

4. The theme was...

5. The sermon helped me connect the biblical story with my own life. If so, how?

Strongly Disagree Disagree Uncertain Agree Strongly Agree

6. The sermon helped me to hear and understand God’s acceptance. If so, how?

Strongly Disagree Disagree Uncertain Agree Strongly Agree

7. The sermon gave me some ideas on how to respond to the message. If so, how?

Strongly Disagree Disagree Uncertain Agree Strongly Agree

8. Was there a part of the sermon that was distracting, or left you confused? If so, what?

9. What parts of the sermon, if any, were particularly moving to you?

10. Do you have any other comments or questions you would like to explore?

Sample Sermon Data Survey Spreadsheet

sermon 2 dec 2 12 data spreadsheet													
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
5	Belonging												
6	Confidence			4,	5,								
7	Personal Situation	7,				7,	9,11						8,
8	Perspective held	7,		4,		7,						8,	
9	Shame experience	10,				7,	9,11,						
10	healing	7,10	9,			9,							
11	emotional depth	7,		11 4,		11,	9,11,12	12,	8,				11,
12	relationships	10,		7,									
13	pastoral response	7,10,	9,	7,		12,		9,8,	9,	9,	11,		
14	trauma			7,	11, 6, 7,12	2,					7,		
15	Christology	7,	6,	1,	2,7,10,	8,	6,			8,			
16	Mission			7,11,			9,			9,			
17	Sacraments						9,			11,			
18	Time	10,		1,		7,		8,	7,			2,	
19	Stuck	10,	9,			7,							
20	Strategies Improvement						12,						
21	positive self-image	7,		8,			11,			11,			
22	freedom	7,		8,									
23		S10	S11	S12	S13	S14	S15	S16	S17	S18	S19	S20	S21

Thesis Sermons

Sermon #1 November 1, 2012

Here is my pop quiz for today. If you could name three modern saints, who would they be? Mother Theresa of Calcutta would likely top the list for her lifelong devotion to the poor. Above all others, she personified holiness to modern people. From an early era, many would lift up the name of Lutheran Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer as one of the saints. By this strength of faith and character, he stood against the Nazis regime of his homeland, and lost his life in a concentration camp. And certainly Archbishop Oscar Romero was revered and respected around the world for his fearless devotion to democracy for all people, a devotion that cost him his life. But what makes someone a saint? Picture the person beside you - Would you dare call them - holy, a saint?

I know that might some of you smile, but consider this. When St. Paul was writing to the Corinthians, the beloved community he founded could barely be described as holy: fighting, bickering, immorality, lawsuits, behaving very badly. Still, Paul addresses them, "To the church in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints..." If they are so named, then there is hope for the rest of us, to have our names lifted up as those numbered among the saints of God.

Our gospel lesson today uses a very familiar event, a death, to point to what it means to live a life of purpose, a life that matters. The 11th Chapter of John begins with Lazarus, the brother of sisters Mary and Martha becoming very ill. Jesus loved their family and

had found hospitality in their company many times. One day, Lazarus falls ill and dies. It's a sad scene to be sure. The funeral takes place. People are coming and going – offering their prayers and consolation to the sisters. When Jesus finally arrives, it is four days since Lazarus has been placed in the tomb. Both Martha and Mary, are grieving, and anger bubbles out of them. "Lord, if you had been here, our brother would not have died." Some savior, he can't even rescue his best friend!

Jesus too, is upset. "Greatly disturbed," says the text, a picture of Jesus we don't often hold. Jesus is human, and his friend has died too young. Jesus orders them to take away the stone, and open the grave. Can you imagine? Can you see Mary and Martha? This is their brother. Believing, hoping, they do it. Jesus prays, and cries with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped in bands of cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Do you see what is going here? Raising Lazarus was the sign everyone had been waiting for. As we walk through the gospel, Jesus heals, feeds, forgives, and finally raises and redeems to new life. Immediately many believed and came to follow. But many who were in power feared Jesus, and sought to kill him. He raises Lazarus, and commands the community to unbind him. Believing themselves to be merely bystanders, Jesus invites the community to complete the miracle.

This past week, we have all been witnesses of the devastation and chaos wrought by Hurricane Sandy. Even this morning, there are still thousands who have no power, and no place to lay their head or call home. But when your own people are in the midst of it, when tragedy strikes and lives at stake, should we just stand around, as curious bystanders? Or do you want people who care, and know how to take action? Framed that way, what holy and miraculous things does God have in store for us? And where are there people in our midst, who need to be released from the things that bind them?

In our own lifetime, we bear witness to God at work in our world. People of faith came together from around the world. helping to unbind those trapped by apartheid in South Africa. The Berlin Wall was toppled and an empire defeated with nary a shot being fired. Those were huge moral risks where people stepped forward. Prayer, determination, and faith can energize communities to do great things.

Closer to home, Canada and many of its churches have taken steps in moving toward right relations with First Nations people, and addressing the legacy of Residential Schools. Residential schools are Canada's Berlin Wall. Through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, aboriginal people have told sacred stories of the things that have bound them. There is a holiness and a strength when people speak truth. There are many miles to travel on this journey, but progress is being made. At the National level, there is a movement to replace the nonsensical Indian Act with legislation that matches the aspirations of what we want for this land. For too long, Native people have felt they did not count, and this was reinforced by an Act which said they were not equal citizens. We as a church and as a nation have the opportunity to be more than bystanders. We can

be advocates and partners in removing the grave clothes that bind and hold First Nations people back from participating in all this country has to offer.

What other miraculous things might Jesus intend to do in our communities, in us, with us, and through us? One of the things I admire about you as church, is the way you take your faith into the community. I think of the prayer shawls (we blessed this morning) that are created here with loving hands. More and more, these shawls are going out beyond the membership of the church, to people you know, or have heard about, who need comfort in the midst of illness and loss. That is a powerful thing. Whatever the acts are, great and small, God in Christ wants to continue to do miraculous things through us.

You are a community with the capacity to do great things. That is an extraordinary thing to consider on this All Saints Sunday. The Saints include those who have died and are safe with God. Every time we worship, every time we gather, we affirm their presence, and the resurrection they now enjoy. We have to but close our eyes, and call them to mind, and they inhabit our hearts, a role call of faithful people.

But the saints are more numerous than that. The saints are those who have been set apart for holy work. That means all of us. Our Master taught to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," sanctifying and making holy the people who grow and prepare food. Our Savior said, "Let the children come to me," and so those who teach, coach and care for children in our midst, in church, in school, at the rink, have been entrusted with holy work. He also taught us, "Blessed are those who are persecuted," and so when we stand with people have been made to feel small for who they are, we are doing holy work. When we help people who are disabled live a full life, we are doing holy work. When we encourage people who are bound by shame, maybe they have experienced bankruptcy, and point the way to fresh start, we are doing holy work.

Can you see where I am going? There are precious few places in our lives, where God cannot be found, opening the door to miracles of grace. Your work is holy – and together we have the privilege of standing alongside, doing our part to unbind others and to let Christ's light shine.

For far too long we have tried to keep words like 'holy, sacred'" within the confines of church walls, and where clergy were the only people with a calling. The holy and sacred is much larger than that. I invite you this week, watch. There are saints among us, beside us. You are called to be saints, a people set apart for holy work. May the days God has given you, bring healing, comfort and peace. May the peace of Christ be in you, and flow through you - for are holy. Amen!

Sermon #2 December 12, 2012

Our gospel lesson opens with a frightening image:
*There will be signs in the sun, the moon, the stars,
 and on earth distress among the nations
 confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves."*

Jesus seems to saying “Watch! It’ll be as if the whole creation is coming apart at the seams.”

People in Biblical times looked up and looked around, connecting floods and earthquakes and all manner of heartache with the judgment of God. They used the knowledge basis they had. They had no scientific framework to understand the natural order around them. We modern people are less likely to do that. But can you feel with the writer of this gospel? Does this text still seem current, even today? Do you ever feel like your world is coming apart at the seams, as if an earthquake were shaking the ground beneath you?

Advent is a time of watching and waiting. First, we prepare for the coming of the Christ born in Bethlehem. But equally important, Advent is a time to watch for signs of God’s coming reign. Most of us I hope, will never see be awakened by the sound of the stars of heaven clattering upon the roof, but we all spend time plenty of time watching and waiting, and hoping that somehow, things will be set right.

I don’t know about the cosmic signs this lesson points to, but closer to home, have you ever spent time, waiting, watching, hoping that a loved one would get better? That can feel as if your world is coming apart, as if the very stars from heaven are falling, and you feel – helpless to do anything about it.

I remember as kid I spent a good bit of time waiting and watching for my mother to get better. It would take decades, but in the end, she did. Some of my earliest memories of my mother were how she heard voices and had countless arguments with people who were not present. There were days for her when the voices were very loud, and days when they receded into the background. Most of the time she functioned wonderfully, but there were other times when it was pretty crazy to be around her. That was a tough time for her and for the whole family. She never had any medical help or even a diagnosis. It was the 1960’s, and so we really didn’t know have a lot of resources or knowledge to deal with such problems. Today, you would likely call her illness *schizophrenia*. About 1 in a hundred Canadians suffer from it. That would mean that in town like Carman, there might be 30 people who will experience symptoms of it in their lifetime. Or think of a school, with say 300 children – you can almost count on three of those children whose families are trying to cope with such an illness and make their way forward.

One thing I do remember. I am always thankful for people who helped our family in large and small ways in that time. They did it with kindness and with grace. They didn’t know how to make things better, but they offered the encouragement I needed to know - a better future awaited. Eventually, for my mother, the voices stopped, and she could find some semblance of peace.

Schizophrenia, like all mental illnesses, affects the whole family. WE know a lot more now than we did in the 60’s, or certainly more than in Biblical times. Science tells that mental illness arises from an issue in the brain, where something is not working right. There may be connections from one part of the brain to another that are not functioning

like they should, like a broken wire, that leads to a chemical imbalance. It's a brain problem, not a moral problem. It's not that different than say, if your hip joint was grinding, you'd not be able to walk with comfort. But somehow mental illness causes a whole lot more fear in us than say a fractured wrist. It can seem as if the sky is falling. There are a lot of preconceived notions about people whose lives are marked by mental illness. Sometimes, when the person who suffers it is in front of us, it can be frightening, as if they were possessed, and we don't know what to do.

When I was young, I was confused and ashamed by my mother's illness. But now, when I think back on her journey, and how difficult it was at times, I am incredibly proud of her. She supported her children in wonderful ways, worked tirelessly for us, grounded us and challenged us. People with mental illness deserve our deepest respect and care. We in the church can do a great deal, I think, to break the silence and shame of those who live with this disease. Responding with care and not fear, we can make all the difference, and open the door to healing.

One of the most important gifts we can offer those with special needs is our patience. Patience, as it turned out, may be exactly what was at issue for the fledgling Christian community as it awaited the Day of the Lord. The need for patience, endurance and trust may well have been amplified when to all appearances, the promise of Christ's return was untrue.

Patience in this life is often the key for building and sustaining relationships. Patience in the face of promises yet to be kept, patience in the midst of enduring illness, patience after all our patience has run out. Patience has the potential to open doors of understanding. I remember vividly a visit to a soup kitchen in North Winnipeg, where a group of us were sitting with the cook, and we were working to prepare the evening meal for about a hundred hungry people. I asked the cook, "What keeps you going?" The cook was peeling potatoes, and he looked up thoughtfully and said, "To do this work, you have to be in it for the long haul." Patience is key in watching for signs, in living the gospel, and in our daily lives.

This lesson from Luke offers not fear, but hope and expectation. God in Christ is coming, not out of anger or judgment, but because God loves us. Jesus wants us to be ready, to keep alert, to place our hope in a loving God whose sign approaches in the Child born in Bethlehem.

If you want to see a sign that a new world is being born for people with mental illness, I would commend you to Christmas Concert offered by the Friendship Group on December 10th. The Friendship Group provides support to adults with special needs and is hosted by Grace St. John's Church in Carman. Each year, they put together a beautiful evening of worship and song when the Christmas story is told in a most moving fashion. To see it is to sense how God is with us – especially in the presence and person of those who are vulnerable.

We live in a world where many people struggle with all kinds of things. They wait for the opportunity that someday things might be set right, and community restored. They long for acceptance. Our broken selves and our broken world need Christ to come with healing. The good news of Advent is this: Christ's coming means we can have hope, even when the threads of our lives are being pulled apart. Just as the green shoots of the fig tree offer hope that spring is near, so God's Word promises new life. May this church and our lives be a place of shelter for the Prince of Peace, the Bethlehem child, our Risen Savior. Amen!

Sermon #3 December 9, 2012

This is a sermon about promises. Some people's promises have all the endurance of a snowflake that lands upon your tongue. They offer persuasive, even attractive promises, yet they melt away. They are not made with a whole lot of sincerity. People often point at politicians and their broken promises. But the truth be told, we all struggle to keep the promises we have made. We make promises to spend more time with the people we love. We promise to be more realistic in how we how spend our money and more diligent in how we save. We make promises to our work, and the deadlines they demand. We make promises to let go of bad habits and to take better care of our health. Do you know what I'm talking about? What kind of promises are weighing on you? When you pile them all together, the competing promises can be overwhelming. In a world that demands perfection, people just feel bad for the promises they cannot keep. You can feel weak, trapped by a debt you can never get in front of. For many households and families, the burden of unfilled promises is especially acute at Christmas.

We also know the beauty of simply promises, promises that hold firm and true, promises you can count on, promises that bring freedom. The joy and exuberance of children can a powerful symbol of promise. Sometimes when I'm in my office working on a sermon, I can hear the children at the elementary school playing outside at recess. Do you know what that sounds like? It's a good and joyful sound. The world needs more of that sound ringing in our ears as we go about our daily lives, reminding us what really matters. We hope for that day when all God's children will be exuberant and joyful in their play, for such is a sign that God's peaceable kingdom is near.

Our gospel lesson begins with a list of seven extraordinary people whose names we often skip over in telling the Christmas story. As important as they were, their promises fell by the wayside. The story begins with Emperor Tiberius. He promised unity for the civilized world. His rule brought misery. Herod is here too. He promised to cut taxes, increase services, balance the budget and create jobs. Herod might have done many things, but history remembers him for a tragic massacre of infants in Bethlehem. Pontius Pilate is also in this long list of promise keepers and promise breakers, along with the high priests who would charge Jesus with blasphemy.

In the wilderness God's word came to John, son of Zechariah. God whispered in John's ear a promise that would be fulfilled. John spoke a different kind of promise, a good news promise that we sometimes miss. The promise is this: God is not yet finished. The last

chapter has not been written. God is about to do a new thing, God continues to work through an unlikely cast of characters, even you and I, and this church.

Alongside all this list of seven people of great influence and power, Luke tells a story of two vulnerable babies, cousins, John and Jesus, who will grow up and transform how we think about the world. The gospel is like that. In the gospel, God's mercy and love is almost always hidden, disguised as small and weak. Luke claims that God is at work in tiny babies, in unwed mothers and barren women, in a wild-eyed prophet named John, and in a Roman cross.

God continues to work through unlikely characters. Think of the people who will have contributed to the work of the Christmas Cheer Board this year. There will be some unpopular teens sorting canned goods. There will be out of work adults who contribute the gift of time. There will be some unhappy people there, whose hearts were warmed and they wanted to give. There will be executive types who normally wear ties and smart looking suits, shoulder to shoulder with farmers in blue jeans and ball caps. There will be grandmothers making phone calls, and all sorts of people running around in their vehicles. There will be underpaid secretaries and even some exuberant children will be there to hold open doors and to help in any way they can. All of these people will work so that more than a hundred families in our district will know that God's redemption is real, tangible, and that a hamper of gifts may be a sign of God's mercy and grace.

It's quite something how the gospel begins. On the one side are all these powerful people, emperors, governors, rulers, the high priests. It's as if the forces of this world, the political, economic and religious powers are massed like an army. Against them stands one, John, son of Zechariah, the prophet speaking from the wilderness. It hardly seems fair. But John is not without resources. He has been given God's promise, the very Word of the Lord. This word is like no other. This word can fill valleys, level mountains; straighten crooked places, smooth rough places, all in order to build a direct path by which God can deliver mercy and grace.

I say this because I suspect there are many among us who feel small today, with precious few resources and energy to keep the promises that weigh upon them. It may not be the emperor who makes life miserable. It might simply be the strain of declining health and the demands that can make on the whole family. It may not be blue suited governor that brings grief, but a personal struggle with addiction. It may not be the ruler of the day who threatens to destroy and turn our lives upside down, it could be the experience of being bullied at school or online. It may not be an official that seems to have power over us, but instead a struggle with depression.

To all of this, Luke says, "Take heart." These things will pass, and will become but a footnote in a larger, wider witness to God's miracle of mercy and grace. We tell this story in Advent, knowing that waiting is hard work! But the promise is this: God is not finished loving us! God is with us, and within us, holding us fast.

Sermon #4 December 23, 2012

This sermon is written for anyone who finds it hard to sing this Christmas.

How many people here love Christmas music? There is so much glorious music this time of year – I think of the Sonatrice Community Concert that happen a couple of weeks ago. How many people wish at times that Christmas music would just go away? Don't get me wrong, I love Christmas carols. So many of the lines are so evocative, painting pictures in your mind: "O Little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee rise, above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by." Beautiful poetry. But when they start playing carols over loud speakers in shopping malls on November 1st, in order to get you in the mood to buy stuff, some of the shine is taken away.

It's not only the endless repetition that can drive us crazy, sometimes it's just hard to sing. I think that is especially true when our heart is not in it. There are lots of people for whom "Joy to the World" rings with a discordant note, and for whom joy seems far away. All of us have been thinking this past week about the families from Newtown Connecticut whose memories of Christmas will be forever changed. The whole world has been watching and listening, trying to process and deal with the incredible sadness and grief that has descended upon that community. For most of us, it's hard to describe the sense of disbelief. People are justifiably angry and are demanding action – that such a thing can never be allowed to happen again. Nearly all us are in shock. And for many people, young and old, their faith in the goodness of humanity has been shaken. They wonder, "How could God have allowed this to happen?" Is it any surprise, that some find it hard to sing hymns at all?

I say this in the context of today's reading from Luke – which begins not unlike a piece of musical theatre, or dare I say, an opera. Luke has a different strategy as goes about planting the good news, God's word of promise, deep inside us. The angel Gabriel sings to Mary – the amazing but perplexing promise – that she will conceive and bear a son. "Really? How could this be?" Mary trusts and believes. She runs headlong, she runs and runs to her cousin's house – It's quite a scene, and you know something is afoot, God's Spirit is loose. Elizabeth is beyond what we would consider childbearing years, perhaps twenty five years her senior to Mary. Young Mary sings to her cousin – praising God, for they both are about to have a child. Later, the men will join the chorus, and Simeon and Zechariah sing. And of course, the grand finale to this gospel of new birth is announced by an ensemble called the heavenly host, an absolutely sublime choir. 'Glory to God in the highest.' Luke uses a lot of songs to tell the story, and to help us remember and take it in. You teachers would know what I am talking about. When we sing the lesson of God's promise, it sticks with us. There is something about a song that imbeds deep within us.

I remember one moment in particular when this was made plain. I was a student minister and visiting a lady in a personal care home – she couldn't speak. The few words she had would come out in a jumble. How best do we care for someone when you're not sure if what you have to share is heard or understood? At one point, I decided to sing (humbly)

to the lady “Amazing Grace.” This lady, whom I had never heard speak a sentence, began to sing the beloved song. Science tells that music and songs are remembered in a distinct part of the brain. And so when we get that point where we don’t recognize our own spouses or children, we still may be able to remember the words to songs that have touched us. I say this because – you know how music is such an enrichment for seniors in personal care homes. If you take your guitar and your voice and share with people – they join in, even if only in their hearts. Songs have the capacity to reach us and touch deep inside us.

Songs are powerful. But there continue to be times when it can be hard for any one of us to sing. Everyone at some point knows what’s like to feel small and lowly. There can be days, no, there will be days, when it is as if a whole lot of little things come together, one thing after another, a cascade of trouble, and it feels like a great heavy weight is upon us. Do you know what I’m talking about? It can be hard to sing. It can be as if someone has taken away our voice.

This past year, there have been a series of videos aimed at supporting young people who have been bullied at work or at school. When someone is bullied, its not that it happens once to them, they experience it again and again and again. They feel shamed. It can take a long time to recover from that wound inflicted upon their sense of self. The videos were produced by people in different walks of life who know who it feels. The message is this, “It gets better.” It gets better. For all of you who feel your voice has been taken away, it gets better. You may not be able to sing Mary’s song right away. But with the support of others, there will come a time when you can breath again, and fill your lungs, remembering as the new Creed reminds us, “We are not alone,” there are people who will help you once again to lift up your heart and voice.

Singing is powerful. Singing “gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.” It helps us to take God’s promise in and to have hope. More than that, singing with hope changes us, and how we see the world. So when people sing, “We Shall Overcome,” they not only believe it, they make it happen. When a children’s choir is before you and sings “May There Be Peace,” you understand inside - why peace is so urgent. Songs unite us with the One to whom we lift our voices.

Do you know what Mary sings in this lesson we read today? She sings of God’s loving kindness. She sings how God will lift up the lonely, the downtrodden, the oppressed, not only of her day, but ours as well. We come here today, and we take up her song. We pray for all people this Christmas whose voices have been taken away, whose lives have been turned upside down by violence or war. We remember those who find it hard to celebrate because of depression or chronic pain. We pray for families that struggle with addiction.

We sing with Mary, not only of God’s steadfast love in the past, but how God is loving us right here and now. We have a God who has been making and keeping promises since the days of Abraham and Sarah. God’s faithfulness is from everlasting to everlasting.

That's why singing matters. When we sing, we enter into God's promise, and help it come alive for others. When we sing "O Little Town of Bethlehem" we experience how the hopes and fears of all the years are met in the child Emmanuel, God with us. Singing is more than words and melody. Singing helps us imagine a new reality, that we might become the hands and feet and voices that lift the lowly and fill the hungry with good things. May your heart and voice be strengthened to sing and to tell of God's loving kindness – we know in Christ, who has come and is coming closer. To God be the glory!

Sermon #5 August 16, 2015

I must say, when I came to our text today from Hebrews, I had more questions than answers. There is all this heavenly talk about Jesus our high priest, images of priestly sacrifice, and how Jesus is lineage of Melchizedek king of priests, the highest of high priests. All this talk of high priests offering high sacrifices, it must seem so far removed from the earthly Jesus who walked hot dusty roads, fed the hungry and lifted up the lowly. But this ancient book is filled with surprises. It turns out, a priest might be just the thing this hurting world needs. We just need to figure out what a Priest might do. Could we pray? As the heat has broken, and a new week begins, we take time to pause O God, that we might listen and hear and find refreshment. There is no Word of Life that does not come from you. Help us to sense the wonder and graciousness of all that you are doing in the world that we might respond and serve your children with great joy. Amen.

The first problem that jumped out at me as I read this text is that we don't have a very positive image of priests today. I don't in any way intend to disparage people called by God to serve as priests. I work beside them and go to school with them. They are my colleagues. They serve God's people with great humility. But a high priest? What on earth might a high priest do in 2015? What terrible trouble would require a high priest to make sacrifice for us?

There are times when we need special help, expert help. If your hot water tank cracks in the night or if you find your drains backing up you might call a plumber to come and save you. Not so long ago, I was doing the dishes and pulled the plug on the sink, and lo, the water did not go down. I plunged the sink, and it still did not go down. I started taking the pipes apart to trace the problem, and I discovered the blockage was the worst place, the drain deep in the basement where the pipes connect to the floor. When I took the connection off, I found the big pipe where everything goes in was completely blocked with a black grease, as dirty and smelly and heavy and sticky as molasses. It was quite a thing to deal with. I got very, very dirty trying to clear that totally blocked drain. Lord, have mercy. Please let the water go down again. Ashamed and feeling defeated, I almost broke down and called a plumber to deal with the mess I had gotten myself into. I took a deep breath. I was very thankful for a piece of wisdom I once learned from a caretaker. "You can wash *anything* off your hands." After some difficult struggle the drain was finally cleared. I thought, "This is what plumbers do for us! They rescue us! They quietly clear drains blocked with black stinking grease, so that we can enjoy our life and our homes. That's quite a sacrifice."

Plumbers get dirty for us, sacrifice for us, and most of the time, we don't even know what they face. Who else in their life and work make high sacrifices for us, in order to save us? I am thankful there are high priests called "Gastroenterologists." They don't fix the plumbing in your house, they work on the plumbing *inside* us. They do those fancy scope tests that we would rather not think about. Like a plumber, they too deal with unpleasant blockages filled with undetermined substances. Some people are embarrassed and avoid going to the doctor when trouble arrives and our bodies aren't doing what they are supposed to do. Guess what? You can't shock a gastroenterologist. Like a plumber, they have seen it all. And so we shouldn't be afraid to seek their advice. These doctors just do their tests, and help you and I enjoy our life. If you think of their commitment to helping people, that's quite a sacrifice. I want to say that all kinds of people do incredible things for us that can be messy and call for sacrifice. When I was a child and got sick with the flu, my mother looked after me, tried to get fluids into me, cleaned up after me. It's what parents do out of love. It's called sacrifice.

What kind of problem requires the extraordinary help of a high priest like Jesus? What trouble could there be? I think of a man who, many years ago, when he was young and but a boy, how he and his brother were out hunting, and a gun went off and a tragic accident happened. The accident was terrible; but almost as painful were the cruel words people spoke even years later, never letting him forget and move forward. Always ashamed by a wound never healed, the man bottled up rage inside. Then the rage would explode and he struck out at his family. "How could I do this?" What a burden to carry. One day a wise grandson said, "Grandpa, what happened that day with your brother was an accident. Be gentle with yourself. Let it go."

Peter Short, the former moderator of the United Church said, 'people come looking for a God who helps, not because they are wise, or have everything confidently figured out. They come to God because there is a battle being waged in their life, and so they come looking for something or someone to show the way. Jesus comes to show us the way, because he knows the battles being waged inside our hearts and minds.

And the reason he knows? Jesus became one like us. Jesus is not out of touch with our reality. Jesus has been through weakness and testing. He knows what we endure, and the burdens we carry. Because he gets us, and is for us, Jesus deals gently with our failures and heartache. Isn't that a beautiful thing? Jesus deals gently with our failures and heartache. (That is chapter 5, vs. 2) It's exactly those things, the fears and failures that wage battle inside us, that Jesus comes to redeem through his sacrifice. Maybe you know someone who feels defeated by their past, and are stuck, unable to move forward. Here is good news to share with them. Jesus is not ashamed to call you "brother" or "sister." Jesus rejoices when new people come to know the wonder and peace of God. Friends, we can come to Jesus with our burdens, our failures and fears, trusting that he will deal gently with us.

So, Jesus our brother reaches into our lives, transforming suffering that we might live in grace and gratitude. But what about us? What is our role in all this? Here is a tiny history lesson. One of the innovations of the Reformation, Martin Luther and so on, was a new

vision, and a new understanding of priests. In the Reformation, the whole distinction between lay people and clergy or priests was abolished. What we were left with was the Biblical idea of the ‘priesthood of all believers.’ It is God’s intention that you and I serve as priests to one another.

When we get past the hurdle of what a priest might look like or how we feel about them, here is a biblical idea of what they actually do. Priests are a bridge. Priests help people bridge the gap between God’s dream and our reality. Priests help others take the first steps towards the healing and hope and peace at the heart of God’s promise. I want to say, you can be a bridge for others. You have a tremendous capacity to stand in the middle and be a bridge for others. I think of Jan McIntyre from Clearwater and others who have worked on behalf of the United Church as bridge between the forces that divide God’s people in Gaza. I think of the ministry that is happening with migrant farm workers, bridging the gap and helping them to improve their language skills. I have heard and witnessed how many of you have been a bridge for neighbours who are walking through grief. Can you see yourself as a bridge, standing in the middle, when a family relationship is hurting; standing in the gap between those who have and those who have not, that all may be fed and all have enough; standing in the middle holding fast to God’s vision of a renewed and peaceable future? What a blessing you have to share! Deal gently with one another, as Christ deals gently with us. And may God’s healing flow through you and find a home in you, as you stand together with your brothers and sisters in Christ. Grace and peace to you this day. Amen.

Sermon #6 September 20, 2015

Do you ever look back at the end of the day and feel a bit disappointed for how things had gone? Maybe you’ve laid awake at night and thought your life hadn’t turned out like you had hoped for? Or maybe you have regrets that weigh on you or your family. If that is the case, this sermon is for you, and for all who have experienced the pain of disappointment. Might we pray? We thank you God, for the gift of your Word, as beautiful as a precious pearl. We know there is no word of life unless it comes from you. Help us to hear and take in your promise of never failing love that we might have the courage to live according to your will and find delight in the days you have given us. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

There are so many parts of this story of Abraham and Sarah that are odd, or impossible or unfathomable, it’s hard not laugh. Sarah is promised that she will have a baby when she is 90 years old. There are lots of miracles in the Bible, and big ones. But even Sarah, this faithful biblical woman laughs at this impossible possibility. Consider, we don’t even have a maternity ward in our local hospital anymore. Do you think they are planning to build one as an addition to Boyne Lodge? 90 year women and hundred year old men don’t expect to become parents. Through God’s unswerving faithfulness, Sarah and Abraham become exactly whom God promised they would be. But that isn’t the big miracle in this story. There is something even greater that happens, and more wonderful...

And although Abraham does much of the talking, this story is really about Sarah, (and the God who never gives up.) “Sarah” means princess. It’s a beautiful name, and from all the other stories we read about her, we learn that Sarah was a beautiful person, with a wonderful sense of humour, courageous, creative and faithful. God delights in Sarah. What is the first thing we learn about Sarai? ‘Sarai was barren, she had no child.’ That is the description that follows her. In her time and place, when a woman was unable to have children, it was seen in the community as a hard thing, and a sign of God’s testing or God’s disapproval. There are many stories in the Bible of women who had difficulty bearing children. Some felt that they were defective and a disappointment, and their sad sighs are remembered in the stories we read.

Abraham married Sarah, his princess. Abraham wasn’t a prince of a husband, at least not at first. (You can read the story of their life together in chapters eleven through twenty three.) Like all of us Abraham and Sarah did some wonderful things and some not so great things, but God was with them all the days of their lives.

It always troubled Abraham that he and his wife were unable to have children. Abraham prayed to God about it. “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir to my house is a foreigner?” Abraham talks often with God about it. If he talked to God about it, there is no doubt he expressed his disappointment to Sarah. I wonder how she felt? God relentlessly promises that Abraham would be the patriarch of a great nation, that he would be a prince among his people. What a promise! It was like a dream. Abraham dreamt that such a thing might come to pass; except for Sarah his wife and the disappointment they shared.

The Bible is a very ancient yet courageous book, and it speaks of things that touch the heart. There is no more corrosive thing to enter a relationship than when one feels disappointed in the other. There is no tougher thing than to go through life feeling like you are a disappointment. Some of the most successful people go through life feeling they haven’t accomplished anything. What a burden that perfectionism brings! Sarah knew the sting of disappointment, that sense that she was somehow, responsible for all their family’s trouble.

That’s the back story for today’s story we read in chapter 18. Here we find Abraham and Sarah, they are 99 and 90 years old respectively. Still on the farm, the elderly couple haven’t moved to town yet. Sarah is still the farmer’s wife cooking for unexpected guests. On a particularly hot day, Abraham is snoozing in his chair when three men appear at the door of their tent. Abraham and Sarah live in the hill country, and they don’t get many visitors. Jumping up from his chair, Abraham falls down at their feet and offers his best hospitality. “Please stay with us. Let me bring some water so that you can wash your feet, and some bread to eat, and then you can pass on.”

You can sort of tell that Abraham didn’t know his way around the kitchen, and had lost his mind. We can do that when guests arrive unexpectedly. “Sarah, Sarah!” Guests! Guests!” “Yes my dear?” Abraham says, “Three measures of choice flour, kneed it and

make cakes. Hurry!” Now, three measures is about 20 kg of flour, enough to fill a five gallon bucket, and more than enough to make 25 loaves of bread. How on earth could anyone, let alone a 90 year old living in a tent, kneed quickly the dough for 25 loaves of bread and bake it? The text doesn’t say, but I wonder if Sarah laughed, and instead she made her beloved Abraham a pan of scones. In like manner, Abraham goes to the corral puts a rope on a choice calf and tells his slave, “Kill and barbeque the whole animal.” Maybe people had bigger appetites in those days but a whole animal and 25 loaves of bread along with cheese and fresh milk and all the trimmings sounds like a big much to feed three people. Abraham didn’t want his guests to feel disappointed, and so he sort of overdoes things. Thankfully no one in history has ever done that again.

Whatever they ate that day, the guests enjoy their host’s hospitality. The conversation turns to Sarah, Abraham’s wife. Somehow, these three know not only her name, but her future. One of the guests speaks up. “I will surely return in due season, and your wife Sarah will have a son.” What a topic for strangers to bring up with seniors! I wonder if Abraham blushed? Tent walls are not thick. Sarah overhears this fanciful promise and bursts out laughing. The guests overhear her laughter. “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” Well, the guests seem to know a lot about Abraham and Sarah, and they show a certain grace toward them. They repeat the promise that Abraham has been told again and again in his life, that Sarah shall bear a child. It’s a promise that seems too good to be true. Personally, I pray that I am not be raising children when I am 99, it tires me out at 53. But we all know people who have become parents by choice or circumstance for a second time around, who have raised children and grandchildren and neighbours children as their own, and blessed our communities by their actions. And however it came to take place, by miracle or graceful hospitality, Abraham and Sarah welcome a new life into their home, in due season, and they named him, “Isaac” which means laughter.

Here is the great truth I want to lift out of this story for us today. Sarah might have felt that her life was a disappointment. Abraham might have felt disappointed in himself or how their life turned out. But never once does God express disappointment in this couple. Disappointment is never upon God’s lips. God persistently comes to these two, that they might know they are God’s chosen, and God’s beloved. God sees in Abraham and Sarah only possibility and future yet to be fulfilled. Isn’t that beautiful? What difference might it make for you to know: God does not look upon you with disappointment? God delights in you since the day you were born. That is the great miracle of this story, more than the improbably birth of a baby. The one thing God has on God’s side, is time. God is patient, and God never gives up on us, keeps repeating the promise, “I will never leave you, you are mine.” Even if takes God till we are 90 and 99 years old for us to believe and to trust this promise, God is willing to go the distance with us. What wondrous love is this, that in all we have said and done and even what we have left undone, God is not disappointed in us?

This is the difference grace makes. Grace heals. Grace is the antidote to the disease of disappointment. Too many people carry burdens of shame and disappointment that twist the heart. But the Bible tells us that God’s grace has the power to heal people, heal you

and I, and make us new. Friends, I pray that you will live and let go of disappointment, and to share that grace and promise with others.

Think of grace as a new way of seeing; and almost like a set of spectacles we put on. How we look on people can make all the difference. I remember someone who I went to school with, and how he struggled. He was brilliant, but carried a label on his forehead, "Trouble." All of the kids in his family were known to be trouble. What a terrible thing to label children! The boy lived up to the expectations people had of him, trouble. But finally, his mother intervened. She saw promise, and future yet to be fulfilled. She moved her son to a new school for a new beginning. Do you know what happened? The young man who had struggled with C's and D's and F's, and endless detentions became an A student, and went on to university with a full scholarship at a prestigious school. You and I have been given a great grace, and the capacity to see our loved ones, our spouses and partners, our children and even our crazy cousins, and indeed the world - through the eyes of faith. May God's grace strengthen you to see beyond yesterday's disappointment and may you witness to the promise and possibility that awaits. To God be the glory!

Sermon #7 October 4, 2015

A few months ago I was in the office and someone from the community came to ask me a question, a pressing question. I thought perhaps the person was seeking advice about something a minister ought to know, like, "where version of the Bible should I read," or "What is Heaven like?" The person's concern was blunt and to the point. "Can I ask you a question, Can I ask you a question? Why are families so screwed up?" I was a bit taken aback, but it is actually a wonderful question to ask the Bible. Many people know where this question comes from. It's an ancient question, and our ancestors in the faith wrestled with this very question. One of them, Jacob, whom we meet in Genesis, once asked, "How Lord, can I be reconciled with my brother?" Today we might ask, "Where can I turn when my family is not speaking? The Bible is a practical book that speaks to our deepest needs. It has good news to share for those times when we struggle with the reality of our families. Might we pray? Holy God, we thank you for Jesus who knows our hearts and who does not count our trespasses against us. We thank you that we are not alone, that you are beside us - working to make things right. Help us to see and imagine your promised future where brothers and sisters are blessed to meet face to face.

I want to point something out that you may not realize about the Bible. The Bible explodes any illusions we might have about perfect families. You and I might be embarrassed when conflict arises in our own families, thinking, "This only happens to other people." When it comes to conflict in families, the Bible wants us remember "you are not alone." There are no perfect families. Your family is not the only, or the first, or the most dramatic. That prize I think goes to Jacob and his family, right there at the beginning of the Bible so you wouldn't miss them. God stubbornly loves Jacob. God promises to stick with Jacob, to walk with Jacob no matter what. Jacob is deeply flawed. "He can't be that bad," you say. "He's in the Bible, he must be good." Well, listen!

Jacob had a twin, Esau. Their mother Rebekah remembered how those boys fought from the very beginning. Even in the womb they struggled, and at birth it was like a wrestling match. The whole tale of Jacob's trickery and deception would make anyone blush. Being a proponent of traditional marriage, Jacob married two sisters, Rachel and Leah, and immediately favors one sister over the other. That causes problems. Imagine! Wanting to treat his wives equally, Jacob blesses each of his wives with servants. Jacob sees opportunity, and marries both of the servant women, and had children with them. Four wives. That caused problems. Imagine! He did a tricky business deal with his father-in-law, and cheated him out of herds and flocks. That caused problems. Imagine! And if that isn't complicated enough, Jacob tricked his twin brother Esau out of his share of the family inheritance, and later stole his brother's blessing on their father's deathbed. And through all these twisted relationships and questionable business dealings, Jacob prospers. He becomes very, very wealthy and powerful. Jacob has wives and children and flocks, herds, servants, and gold. Jacob has everything, and nothing, for Jacob is estranged from his brother Esau, so much so that Jacob lies awake at night fearful that his brother may come and kill him. The trouble torments him. He cannot look his brother in the eye.

Jacob asks the Holy One, "How can I be reconciled with my brother? How can I set things right?" Jacob thinks and thinks. His plan? He will BUY his brother's forgiveness. He divides his herds, his flocks, his wealth and sends his servants to Esau that they may bring a peace offering. That did not go well. Imagine! The servants reported that when they discovered Jacob's brother Esau, they found he him commanding an army of 400 soldiers. "Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed." That is the back story for today's story, and where our reading today picks up.

Fearing that his lies and deceit have finally caught up with him and brought disaster upon his family, Jacob spends the night alone in turmoil. He sends his family, his flocks, and his herds across the river. Drifting off to sleep, Jacob is gripped by a man; how terrifying! What a nightmare! They wrestle all night. Jacob is bruised and bloodied and his hip put out of joint, but Jacob would not give up. And when the morning light begins to break upon the horizon, Jacob demands that this stranger bless him.

What an odd and ambiguous story. Who is this stranger, an angel? Is it God? If so, how could Jacob dare to ask God for another blessing? He spent a lifetime stealing other people's blessing, and now he asks again? Is there no limit to what we can ask of God? Jacob calls the place where he wrestled, Peniel, "for here I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." Seeing God's face is crucial to understand the beauty of this story, and what God is doing. Imagine this. When we are estranged from someone, when we have argued with someone, felt betrayed by someone, we cannot look at them. We don't want to see their face.

It's a huge problem, and a deeply spiritual problem, this dream to be reconciled. It may be the biggest problem we humans have. We long for a future where brothers and sisters, where people of different races, religions, and nations are no longer divided by difference, but find the grace that brings us together in peace.

So what grace can we take away from Jacob's story? The first thing is, "we are not alone." No matter your situation, you are not alone. Just having the courage to tell Jacob's crazy story and put it in the Bible is a signal that gives permission to all of us to tell our own stories of own stories of brokenness. We don't have to keep our stories hidden. One person shares a story, and another, and another. We don't have to tell the whole world, but I think it is crucial to have someone you can talk to, someone you can trust without fear of judgment. Being able to tell our stories is freeing, and is one way God works in us and others, for healing and for grace.

The second thing I want you to remember about Jacob – is where Jacob finds God. God is not stuck in heaven, and God is not far away. God comes to Jacob, God is with Jacob in the struggle, because the struggle is right here, in our lives, whenever we find ourselves wrestling, longing for peace. God is a living presence, with both feet on the ground, unafraid of what we might say or do – for God has heard it all. The good news is God is not against us, but for us, loving us, that we might be reconciled to our brother and to God.

In a little while, we will hear the call to Christ's table to share in Christ's meal of Holy Communion. We will rise to share the peace of Christ. Peace is God's gift. At the sharing of the peace we see one another for who we truly are, sons and daughters of the living God. Christ calls us to be at peace with one another.

If you were writing a story about Jacob and his wrestling match with God, how would you have it end? I was once told, "Don't tell half a story, or no one will hear the rest of the sermon." Here is the rest of the story of Jacob and Esau. After the struggle by the river, Jacob is determined to set things right. He sets out to meet his brother, with his herds, his flocks, his family and his gold, only this time, Jacob is in front. He makes himself completely vulnerable, falling down before his brother Esau and the 400 soldiers. Here is the stunning moment of great grace. "But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept."

Do you know a story like that? Doesn't that sound like Jesus' parable of the lost son? "I was lost, but now am found." This is what St. Paul has to say. "In Christ, God was reconciling the world, not counting their trespasses against them, but entrusting the message of reconciliation to us."

Friends in Christ, for all of you who struggle and pray for new beginnings between brothers or sisters, may Christ's living presence be your blessing today. May God bless you and keep you, May God's face shine upon you and be gracious unto you. May God look upon you with kindness, and grant you peace.

Sermon #8 October 11, 2015

On this Thanksgiving Weekend when many people will be gathering with friends and family to share a meal of blessing and celebration, it made me wonder, "What does Bible have to say about our daily bread?" This is sermon about food and faith: the gift of prayer and blessing of pumpkin pie, and the living God who sustains us all. Might we

pray? Holy and gracious One, we humans join the honking geese of the autumn skies and even the rich humus soil of the fields, and rejoice this day! You are our God. Even when life seems precarious and our future is uncertain, you come to bless us. We depend on you. Your grace feeds and sustains us. Give us eyes to sense your presence and ears to hear your hope and promise, that all have enough, and none go hungry, and none be afraid, and that blessing and gift be yours today. Amen.

I said this sermon is about food and faith, and it is, but first it is about the land and the ecological crisis. What do I mean by that? You can see signs of it everywhere: two feet of rain in South Carolina last week, or a 4 year drought in the high country of California, and wild fires that never seem to end. Scientists reported this week that our beloved Lake Winnipeg is once more in crisis, this time from spawning Zebra Mussels that threaten the food chain for fresh water clams and pickerel and perch. Or maybe you have noticed song birds and Monarch butterflies disappearing from our flower gardens. It's a beautiful day, but we experience how the natural environment is strained. The Land, the ecology is out of balance; and our food comes from the land, and so that's a problem. The waters in distress, the birds and God's creatures in distress, the soil in distress. You can't separate one from the other. That's a problem.

That's why the reading from Joel is so striking. "*Do not fear O soil; be glad and rejoice. Do not fear you animals of the field, do not fear, O children of Zion...*" God speaks to the soil, to the animals of the field, and to humanity say, "*Fear not! Rejoice!*" Which seems weird and strange, for how can dirt rejoice? Do coyotes and ground squirrels really yip for joy? Many people today dismiss the Bible because they believe the people who wrote it were ancient, uninformed, and strangely superstitious. But Biblical people had a wisdom that we seem to have forgotten: they looked to the heavens and the hills, they beheld could look at grapes hanging heavy from the vine and knew that God made it all. It was something they could never forget. The Bible helps us connect the dots: how the earth all its abundant green growth, its flying, creeping creatures, and humans, together, we are One with the God who made us all. Biblical people were primitive, but they were not stupid. They knew that disorder or harm or peril in one area was bad for everything else.

Here is the context of our reading from Joel. The ancient people of the Bible were living through a terrible drought. The rains stopped, the fields were barren, and the vines withered. The pastures dried up. Does anyone have memory of what comes after the rains truly stop? Grasshoppers. The text says, "I will repay you for the years that swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, the cutter, my great army that I sent against you." My grandfather told a story from the Dirty Thirties and the three dry years when grasshoppers ruled. They cleaned the fields bare leaving nothing but sow thistles. Grandpa said that he left a leather jacket on the seat of the tractor and the grasshoppers chewed everything, leaving hardly more than the buttons and snaps. Did prairie farmers like him wonder if the drought and the hoppers were a sign of God's judgement? Part of the reason many people of past generations, our parents and grandparents would do things like can food incessantly, filling the basement with quart sealers of every imaginable food was the fear that those hard times might return. If they ever did, they

swore that their children would not go hungry. The jars lining their basement walls were an insurance policy they hoped they would never have to cash in.

We read in the book of Joel of a time when a drought had come, and the people were not prepared, and they could not feed their own families. The people felt ashamed. The whole nation was hungry, and even their faith in God was called into question by people who worshipped other Gods. Their neighbours who had food in reserve said, “You can’t even look after your own, what kind of men are you, and what kind of God do you worship?” It is an awful thing when food is scarce, and the reason why feeding the hungry was so close to Jesus’ heart.

If you’ve ever lived through a crisis like the Great Depression, or a drought that dries up the land, if you’ve ever lived through hard times and wondered how to put food in your fridge for tomorrow, you learned a lesson and know this is true: **we live a precarious life.** A turn in the weather, a turn in the economy, or a turn in your health could change everything. The prophet Joel knew that, and prairie people for generations have lived that truth. If God is Creator of all that is, then we are completely dependent on the grace and mercy of God.

Ask a farmer or a gardener this question, “Can you guarantee next year’s weather? What will the crop be like from our fields and gardens, our orchards and vineyards?” Who knows? You who tend and serve the land are wise stewards and carefully prepare for the coming year, and for years to come; but ultimately we are dependent on God. We have our part, but what we receive in the bin and on our table is a gift from God. That’s a faith statement. By faith we understand that the food on our tables is not a stock market commodity, but a gift and a blessing from God.

If food truly is a gift from God, then how shall we live? A first step to always remember the connectedness of all things. We can’t separate our love of God and our responsibility to care for the land and water that feeds us. If we and God and the land are connected, then the abundance we enjoy in this season of Thanksgiving calls us to repentance and a change of life.

One of the ways we can examine our lives is to ask questions of the food we eat. Where does our food come from? What is the real cost – to the soil, to the air and to the water sources which sustain the growth? What happens to all the fruits and vegetables we grow that aren’t uniform, perfect and blemish free? Will our choices today mean our grandchildren have to pay much more tomorrow?

If we were to consider, to pick and behold in our hands this gift of food and where it comes from, it might change the way we think about buying, eating and sharing food. For instance, there is very good chance that the garlic in your fridge was grown in China, and the pickles in your cupboard were manufactured in India. (Really, check the labels!) Trade is wonderful and brings the world together, but I can’t help but think that eating local and seasonal fruits and vegetables is a good idea. Even the vegetables and fruits that

you grew in your yard help to remind us of our connection to the soil that sustains, the water that refreshes, and the God who provides.

I know that buying local vegetables and planting gardens is largely symbolic. But people of Biblical faith have long value symbols. In the church we call them sacraments, signs of God's presence and participation with the earth. When we practice them and use them, these symbols work on us, and in us, changing us. These symbols help to bring our lives in line with what God intends. Think of this – the food we eat today may be the best reminder we have that our lives are blessed, that your life and mine are both precious and precarious, and that we are all dependent on the God.

There is a song we have been given that helps to tell the connections between, food and faith and the land, and God's phenomenal generosity. It's 227 in the hymn book and it goes like this: For the fruit of all creation, thanks be to God. For the gifts to every nation, thanks be to God. For the ploughing, sowing, reaping, silent growth while we are sleeping, future needs in earth's safe-keeping, thanks be to God. It's not a bad song to sing around a table - at Thanksgiving. Grace and peace to you this day, in the name of our Savior. Amen.

Sermon #9 November 1, 2015

Do you ever have a restless night where you can't get to sleep? It's surprisingly common. You toss and turn, but no matter what, you just can't turn off your brain. Restless nights can start with the most mundane of things: unopened bills, a leaky roof or a squeaky furnace, or a pain inside that we don't understand. Sleeplessness is an affliction that can grip people for weeks, even for a whole life. When conflict is the source of sleeplessness, it can wear people down. The Bible has good news for anyone who seeks relief and comfort from sleepless nights. Might we pray? Holy God, God of the starry night, God of daylight and darkness, God who creates, blesses and loves us as we are, we praise your name. You are our center, and our home, and in you we find our rest and peace. Through the night, help us to glimpse your light shining, that we might be awakened to your word of promise. Through Christ we pray. Amen.

This might not come as a surprise, but one of the top things that can cause sleepless nights, is the stress that comes when family doesn't get along. We've all had moments when worries over strained relationships have been as source of trouble. The Bible has something entirely realistic and eternal to say to us. "It's not just you!" Much of the Old Testament is a story of how the family and household of God struggle to get along. There was hardly a time when this great extended family, - Abraham and Sarah and all their kin, brothers, sisters and cousins all - were profoundly dysfunctional. By flesh and blood, they were one family, but two nations, Israel and Judah, north and south. You could make comparisons to the division of families in North and South Korea, or the divisions between north and south that led to the civil war in America. The context of today's reading is a bitter battle between brothers and the nations they led. Conflict, violence and bitterness left visible scars and a house divided.

One day, the Hebrew elders of the two kingdoms came together at Hebron to meet with David. Hebron was such an evocative name; it was remembered as a site of terrible bloodshed and battles, but also the burial place of Abraham and Sarah, their common ancestors. There they met to ponder their future. David, the southern King was anointed and called to bring unity to both north and south. This is no small task, to repair and reconcile this fractured family. What could David do that might bring healing?

If you were to read the whole story of David, you'd know he didn't always get things right. But this day, he did a couple of visionary things. The first was his choice of a capital. David might have chosen his own home of Hebron, a southern city, to be the place of government and worship. But instead, David moved the capital to Jerusalem, half way between the two kingdoms. I can't help but think that this was meant as fresh start, and a sign of reconciliation.

It wouldn't be enough to simply build a palace and hold a parade to celebrate a new beginning as a unified nation. Israel needed something at their center to bring people together that was not north or south. Many years before following a disastrous battle, the Philistines had captured the Ark of the Covenant, the box that contained God's Word. The Ark brought suffering to its captors, and it ended up back in Hebrew hands, but people didn't know what to do with it or understood its power; and so for many years the Ark was left on a hill, almost abandoned like an old car driven out into the bush.

Here was David's big idea, and it undoubtedly saved the nation. Accompanied by 30 Legions of soldiers, David's army marched to this hill, BAALE – Judah. They brought home the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem – they placed it at the center of the people. What was the Ark? Why was it so treasured? The Ark was a great wooden chest overlaid with gold. The chest was thought to act almost like a platform or even a footstool about which the Divine Presence appeared. But what was inside was what truly mattered. The Ark held God's Law, the Ten Commandments. This was to be the guide and center for both David and God's people.

David didn't get everything right, and made plenty of mistakes. Indeed, David's life is an open book: there is hardly a soul we know more about than David, his every failure and triumph, his inner most thoughts and prayers remembered in the Psalms. But David made a crucial decision that shapes everyone who follows in faith. David places The Ark, the home of God and resting place of God's Word at the center of the people. What we trust to be our center and foundation affects everything we do.

What does it mean to have God as our center? How does life change when God is our center? I want to say that a life centered in God is a less anxious life. Pursuing a God centered life brings inward peace where we can as the Psalm tells us, 'rest in God alone.' There are lots of things that we allow to take over the center of our lives. How many of us at different times have led a work centered life? Don't get me wrong, meaningful work is good and a gift – but there is always a danger when work becomes the be all and end of our days. More than a few people find recognition and praise in their work. Just imagine you were a member of parliament – it's an important job, long hours, days and weeks apart from family and all the strain that brings, great sacrifices. Some people give their lives to public service. They put all their trust in the wisdom of a political party. But

one day, an election comes, and they are suddenly no longer politicians. If you are not prepared for the day when work stops, that change in your routine, that transition in identity, can leave a deep hole. You are left asking, “Who am I?”

You could say the same thing about being parents. One day people know me as Matthew and Elizabeth’s dad, these cute little kids, and then they grow up and one day, parents know, our children move out, and the house becomes very quiet. Sometimes we don’t realize how much our children become the center of our lives. There is nothing wrong with that, it’s just that when the change comes, and they appear to no longer need us in the way they once did, it can leave us wondering “Who am I?” and “What is my purpose?” The trouble is, when I put the wrong thing at the center of my life, it becomes exhausting.

There will always be other things that want to bully their way into the center of our lives. They will want to be your masters, tell you who you are, what you should be doing. They will even tell you that you couldn’t live without them. Don’t believe them. It doesn’t have to be that way.

The Bible offers an alternative, a God centered life, where we don’t have to be responsible for everything and everyone. Because God is the Creator, it’s not all up to us. A God centered life brings freedom, and the promise that we can rest in God alone. There is not a right or wrong way to make room for God as our center. Some people find that serving God, visiting the sick, or hammering nails on a Habitat house, preparing Christmas Cheer hampers, and so on, it helps them remember our neighbours in need. Some people find that music helps them center in God, so they sing in choirs, or they play the piano at home, or for others, because it is good for the soul. Some people use prayer to center themselves – there is actually a simple spiritual discipline called “Centering Prayer.” Some people find evening prayer helps – taking time to name people and situations that are close to their heart. There is more than one window, one path to God. Whatever that window or path might be for you, they all point to the One who is our foundation, our center and our home.

Finding our center means deciding in whom we will trust. You can hear this truth especially in the Psalms of David. David says, ‘There are days when I don’t get everything right, God, but I will trust in you. When I make mistakes, I will trust in you. When my enemies stand against me and my future a mess, I will trust in you. When my life is under attack, I will trust in you. When my family is falling apart, I will trust in you. When I am sick and my body failing, I will trust in you. When it makes no sense to trust anyone, I will trust you anyways, for where else would I turn? When you are my center, O God, my home is safe with you, my name and my worth, is safe with you. In life, in death, in life beyond death, I will forever be safe with you. What a blessing it is to rest in God alone! Be at peace, and may God be your center. To God be the praise and glory! Amen.

Sermon #10 December 6, 2015

What do you possess or take care of that has lasted for a very long time? Perhaps you have a spruce tree in your yard that was planted by a previous owner - if it is very tall, it might be 70 years old. Will it last forever? You might even have a classic car in your garage – a family heirloom that only sees the light of day on sweet summer afternoons. Will it last forever? I have a simple pocket watch that was given to my grandmother on her 13th birthday in 1900. It still ticks away, keeping time, but will it last forever? Not likely. Lifetime guarantees aside, nothing lasts forever. Even the Pyramids of Egypt will one day blow away in the wind. Our scripture lesson today makes the incredible promise: there is one thing you and I possess that never expires - God's Word. God's Word endures forever. This Word is not just an abstract word, it is a particular word and a particular promise spoken for you to give strength in good times and tough times. God's word for you never wears out. Isn't that a beautiful thing? This is a sermon for exiles who sense God's absence. Might we pray? Holy, holy, holy are you our God. Your grace for us is real and true, from everlasting to everlasting. Your goodness is eternal. Help us to hear your Word and strengthen our faith that we might blush and find delight in the good news you announce for all. Through Christ we pray. Amen.

If you've rolled your eyes at the preacher's announcement "God's Word endures forever," you are in good company. Lots of people have good reason to wonder about the permanence of God's promise. A bit of background to today's reading: The prophet Isaiah was speaking from a time when God's people were stunned into silence by an overwhelming national disaster, something akin to a Biblical 9 -11. The Babylonian army had just invaded, flattened and burned much of Jerusalem, beginning with the Temple, burned the farmer's fields, and deported anyone who was able-bodied and strong to work as slaves in Babylon. It's hard not to draw parallels between that day in Jerusalem and the terror running rampant in the streets and falling from the skies in Syria. The people were afraid. War is a great trauma on the human soul. To say that God's word endures forever without acknowledging that collective pain would be so much pious wind.

Who wouldn't have doubts? More than wars and disasters can do that to us. If you or a family member are sick and feel health and strength slipping away, God's promises of healing and peace can seem far away. Many people have been transfixed by what occurred in San Bernardino and the 14 people who died. I was struck this week in the immediate hours following the terrible shootings in California how silent many people were. Did you notice? People didn't say anything. No one, it seemed, had a word to address what had taken place. Some things just leave us speechless. In the silence, when our own words fail us, God speaks: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'

This is a road construction metaphor. God says, "Get ready. Build a highway, smooth and straight. Fill in the rough places and make a cut through the hills. I am coming to bring you home." Before the prophet could get out a word, God says, "Cry out, preacher, cry out!"

The prophets says, “Highway in the desert? There ain’t nobody gonna build a highway! You want me? You want me to preach, to cry out? What should I cry, Lord? These people have lost everything. Their spirits are worn threadbare by worry, dried up a broken blade of grass. If I cry out, they won’t listen to me. They don’t respect me, they don’t believe me. They laugh at me. Read my lips, I do not want to do this, they will not listen.” (This is a sidebar: You can tell Isaiah is a prophet, because true prophets always resist God and have a reason to say NO!)

The Lord says, “I know my people have been crushed. I know they blow back and forth like grass in the wind. I know they don’t have the backbone to stand up. That’s where you come in. You. You will give them strength. You will renew their spirits. You are going to give them the one thing they need, my Word. My Word is forever. When everything else has failed, my Word if from everlasting to everlasting.”

I don’t you to be misinformed. The whole Bible is God’s Word, but God’s Word for each one of us today is a living thing, and a very particular word. We find examples of it sprinkled throughout the pages of the Bible and indeed inspiring our songs of faith. “I have called you be your name, you are mine.” I have gifted you and ask you now to shine. “I will not abandon you. All my promises are true. You are gifted, called and chosen, you are mine.” Maybe you are in a place today where you don’t think very highly of yourself. Perhaps the word you need from God today is to remember that God calls you, “my beloved.” There are promises in the pages of scripture and in our songs of faith enough to go around for everyone in every step and stage of life. These promises, these words of life do not go away when we stumble or fall or have doubts. God’s word for you endures forever.

There is so much in this world that tears people down; Poverty, addictions, abuse, prejudice, and terrible things that have happened in the past leaving scars. Carrying that stuff around in your head and heart is a heavy load. It can make you stop believing in yourself and what God has to say about you. You might even feel exiled from the place and the person you once remember. This is a sermon for exiles who long to return home. God has some very particular words of grace for you. God knows what you need. Our job is to come alongside and help other people believe once more in God’s beautiful promise, God’s beautiful word for them.

Here is my confession. The kernel of this sermon came from a YouTube video a family member posted on Facebook this week. In the video this young woman in college designed a project. She walks up to people on campus, some of them strangers, and says, “I am doing this project. I am talking pictures of beautiful things. You are beautiful. You have such a cool look. You are amazing. Can I take your picture?” With the camera pointed right at them, the people said, “Me? You talking about me? Beautiful?” They would blush. Then some of them would do a little dance. In each case there was this moment of realization when a look of delight came across their faces, knowing that a stranger had just called them “Beautiful.”

What a privilege it is to help other people enter those moments of light when they walk in the glow of God's promise, knowing they are beloved, valued and beautiful in God's sight. It might be the very best thing we can do. Your particular word to another person might be just the gift they need this Christmas, and the promise that lifts them to look at the future and their lives in a whole new way! Such grace! So beautiful! Friends, there are things that can tear us down. There is one thing that can lift us up; God's word for you endures forever.

APPENDIX “B”

Reflection Journal Entries

Journal Entry #1 August 17, 2015

[This reflection concerns the crafting of last Sunday’s sermon, which is found in the appendix “A”.]

In beginning this project, I had decided that a set of biblical texts would be carefully selected appropriate to the goal of the thesis: *crafting sermons that help people stuck in shame gain resilience and develop strength for purposeful living*. The list is easy to generate, for the authors consulted all have favorite texts that speak to the problem of shame and how God’s grace works to overcome it. The problem is, creating the list felt like I was setting up a whole new lectionary for a singular purpose. That was not the direction I wanted to go. For this project to be useful for others, the methods found needed to work with established lectionaries or no one would consider it.

Would it be possible to use the lectionary readings to explore the problem of shame? Fowler and Stockitt believe that the problem of shame is a theme or thread that runs through scripture. (The biblical basis for their assertion is laid out in the chapter 2 of this paper.) If shame blocks people from enjoying fellowship with God, and God is at work seeking to release those bound by shame, then it should be evident throughout the Bible, and not only in selected texts, or obvious places. Shame then becomes a lens through which the human condition is viewed.

I made a preliminary test this summer, preaching a sermon series suggested by the Narrative Lectionary on the Psalms, followed by a series on Hebrews. I discovered I could find references to the problem of shame throughout these texts. There was never a day when I thought, “this won’t work, and I’ll have to pick a new text.” This past Sunday, August 16/15, was the first of six Sundays when I will collect data. The text was Hebrews 4:14 -5:10, “Jesus the high priest.” On the face of it, the text appeared an unlikely candidate for the subject. However, the text says that ‘Jesus the high priest deals gently with the wayward and ignorant’. I made the turn suggesting that Jesus deals gently with us, redeeming our mistakes, failure and shame through the sacrifice of the cross. I haven’t reviewed any sermon surveys, but comments after worship were many and positive. People who hate the book of Hebrews because of its high Christology found the sermon especially helpful.

Harder affirms that shame must be spoken of in a particular fashion. Generalities won’t work, and a particular word needs to be spoken to particular problem. Preachers need to tell real stories of people’s experience of shame, so that those who are listening will know that their stories are honored. My key story in the sermon was about a man who

accidentally shot and killed his brother while hunting when they were boys. The community shamed the man for much of his life. The shame of the accident haunted the man and was the cause of much grief including family violence. The man was finally redeemed by a grandson who dealt gently with him and assured his grandfather that he was forgiven. I found that the congregation was able to enter into this story and imagine both the shame of the man, but also to experience the transformation forgiveness makes possible.

Here is what I learned. When lectionary texts come up which describe Jesus healing people of their shame, we can use them. However, it isn't essential to use a biblical narrative to address the problem of shame. All that is required is a point in the text that shows God's shame-redeeming grace, and which we can use to link to our own experience. Because of the incarnation, our stories can be agents of God's redemptive work. Healing begins when people can trust that their lives and narratives are honored and heard.

Here is something else that I found is pertinent, and I need to reflect upon. Part of the liturgy in our context is a story called "Sharing Faith Sightings," at the beginning of the service. The story is an opportunity to engage all ages and often connects to the theme of the sermon. This Sunday I told a story about the moral struggle our young people experienced at camp when skunks were discovered under the dining hall, and what to do about it. We live a rural context, and so the adults' immediate response was that the skunks needed to be shot for fear of rabies. The young people strongly objected and persuaded the adults to move the skunks rather than shoot them. The purpose of the story was to honour the faith journey of children and how children can remind us to live in God's way. Many people commented on the story after the service.

When I picked the story of children dealing gently with skunks, I had no idea how it paralleled the key story in my sermon. Prior to the service, it hadn't occurred to me that both stories involved shootings, death, and children acting to save life. The pairing of these stories in the children's time and the sermon was completely unconscious. However, was the pairing of the stories accidental? I want to say, "no". There is something in the creative process of crafting sermons that makes connections happen without planning or reason. Life is like that. We often only see God's hand at work in our lives from a distance, and upon further reflection.

Journal Entry #2 Oct. 21, 2015

This is a reflection on the effect of shame in relationships. Part of the reason I have taken up this topic has been to seek ways to help people and families who have been wounded by shame. These stories are all about real people, but the names and details have been changed.

George and Gladys

George and Gladys enjoyed a normal life in a little town I once served. Though work was sometimes scarce, they managed to make ends meet through a mixture of seasonal

employment, regular turns at Employment Insurance, and the resourcefulness of rural people who know how to live off the land by hunting, fishing, and gathering food in season. They were connected to the community and attended church on a regular basis. One day George came to Gladys at the dinner table. He couldn't understand their bank statement and how their account had become significantly overdrawn. They had both just come from work and so had tried to put some money aside for the winter when work was harder to come by. Gladys broke down and admitted that she had become addicted to gambling, lottery tickets, VLT's and bingo. Unknown to George, his wife had racked up almost \$40,000 in credit card debt feeding her habit.

Their marriage survived this crisis. Gladys received counselling for her addiction, and over a period of many years the couple was able to put their financial situation in better balance. Gladys' relationship to the church however, became harder. Word got out about what had happened. She became a less and less frequent attender, until she finally dropped out. She felt guilt for her actions, but shame for what she perceived people were saying about her. Many people had experienced alcoholism in their families, but gaming addiction seemed strange.

Gladys became more withdrawn socially. "I feel so stupid, those damn VLT's..." Her husband was able to move past this episode, but Gladys found it hard to forgive herself. This once bright active woman felt like a fool.

Part of the history of our denomination is a strong aversion to gambling and the monies raised through its profits. I can't say I was ever given much in the way of training or tools to help people with such an addiction. The experience of counselling and coming clean with what had taken place helped Gladys to recover, but the shame of her experience was easily relived and brought to mind.

Andrew and Gertrude

Andrew and Gertrude were young farmers. At that time, farming was often a precarious business with high interest rates and low commodity prices. Gertrude worked off the farm doing books, and Andrew ran a farm services business on the side to supplement their farm income. Hard working, Gertrude was outwardly cheerful and very involved in church as a parent and faithful volunteer. You could tell upon visiting their home that all was not right. Gertrude was very stressed about money, and Andrew was rarely around. "He works so hard..." Both tried unsuccessfully to shield their young children.

The community was shocked one day when it was announced that Andrew and Gertrude were having an auction sale, and everything would go: machinery, their home and possessions – everything they had worked to establish. They also announced that they were leaving the country, and would seek a fresh start. Word went around that they were fleeing bankruptcy and the foreclosure that would soon arrive. Many people were not supportive and assumed that Andrew was a poor manager.

Their departure seemed impossibly sad, and the loss to the community was significant. It was especially difficult for Gertrude's parents, who were also farmers and church

members. Gertrude and Andrew did not return to Canada for many years, and the grandparents missed their granddaughters terribly.

Their silent departure without a farewell at church was also sad, for many of the older members of the church had experienced financial difficulties of their own in farming. They had been down that road, and had battled the banks and red ink on their statements. No one was able to use their experience to help Gertrude and Andrew, for the shame of bankruptcy was never something they had been given the tools to talk about. Unlike George and Gladys, Andrew and Gertrude's marriage did not last. The struggle to become re-established and the social isolation of a new country took its toll. They became involved in an evangelical church that relied heavily on an honor-shame culture. They had to hide their background and the reason for moving to a new land. Andrew became especially enamoured by his new found faith and became more authoritarian towards his family. About a dozen years later, Gertrude returned with her youngest daughter to start over once more. Still hardworking, pleasant and cheerful, Gertrude joined an evangelical church and found employment. She speaks rarely of her experience, as if hardly anything had transpired. I often wonder what might have transpired if members of the church had been able to offer support, and if a different path for their life together may have been found.

Hal and Marie

Hal and Marie were long time members with deep roots in the community. Hal was more reserved and focussed on work – what he did was a bit of a mystery, but it was understood that he was involved in the mining industry. Marie was a respected counselor and very beloved in the community with deep friendships. Their comfortable life began to unravel when Hal's business affairs became splashed across the papers. He was accused of committing a complicated fraud, and although never charged, his reputation was in tatters. For almost two weeks, there was a fresh story in the paper detailing the sordid business deals Hal had been purported to have committed. "Hal was a crook!", the paper proclaimed. Through it all, Marie stood by her husband. The emotional toll on Marie was written across her face. Once a joyful person, her skin colour lost its vibrancy. The whole affair was messy and very public. Like Andrew and Gertrude, Hal and Marie decided it was best to leave the country. Once more the community was devastated. People had questions about Hal's business affairs, but recognized that no charges had been laid. The community responded pastorally. Marie's friends rallied around her, physically surrounding her when she went out in order that she would feel safe, offering protection. Moreover, two months prior to their departure, a party was held to say farewell and to extend best wishes.

Common Threads

All three couples lost considerable status, and two felt it necessary to leave not only the community, but the country. Money and how it impacts honor-shame within the community was key to their stories. All three couples found it difficult or impossible to share the details of what had transpired, and so secrecy became the fuel for shame's power. All three stopped attending church, or changed congregations. Marie's story was

the most hopeful of the three because of the steadfast friendships she enjoyed. As difficult as her situation, her friends choose to stand with her.

If you were one of these couples, would you want to come to church to be reminded of your sinfulness? Mainline denominations slight communities of faith which practice shunning, but we are hardly better and often reject people who feel stuck in shame. Naming the things that trigger shame in us can open the possibility for dialogue and allow people to listen and share their experiences. In the intersection between the gospel and our own stories of brokenness, grace can take root and healing begins.

Journal Entry #3 November 23, 2015

“When Remembering is Hard”

Late in the afternoon of November 10th, the day before Canada’s Remembrance Day ceremonies honoring the fallen, Fred called my office. (I serve as Padre to our local Royal Canadian Legion branch, and offer leadership for Remembrance Day services.) Remembrance Day continues to be filled with meaning and emotion for the life of our community and nation. Fred was profoundly upset, “My father was a child soldier, and a Nazi. He shook Hitler’s hand. What am I supposed to do on Remembrance Day? Hide?” The biggest event in the life of the community, Fred felt he couldn’t step foot in the door. Fred described himself as “damaged” by his childhood. Unlike other children, Fred never told proud stories of his grandparents and parents heroic efforts to become established in Canada. Remembrance Day was for Fred the most painful day of the year.

Fred’s story is far from unique in western Canada. Following the Second World War, Canada received many immigrants from Eastern Europe who were seeking a fresh start. Certainly, some had fought alongside armies allied with Canada’s enemy. Arriving on our shores, they would change names and try to create a new identity while forgetting the past. Some would be successful, while others would find their hidden stories and obscured origins a source of shame.

Does Fred need to hide? Are the children of my enemies also my enemies? What does that mean as we work and pray for God’s reconciled future? Will there truly be a day when the wolf shall lie down with the lamb, and lions will eat grass?

The bottom line is, Fred wanted me to know his story. He wanted the Legion to remember ALL of the casualties of war, including the children who bear a shameful past not of their making. As a nation, we do honour those who made the ultimate sacrifice. But so much of war is unspeakable and morally reprehensible. To speak of great victories and glorious battles without acknowledging the cost seems shallow.

Part of this project is to find ways to craft sermons that help us honor the Fred’s of this world. Shame pushed Fred to the margins, and made him like an alien in his own town. Those who walk in Fred’s shoes need a new narrative. Healing begins when we find a safe place to tell our stories without fear of judgment. Wouldn’t it be something if those who were once enemies on the battle field could one day sit together in peace? May it be so.

Journal Entry #4 November 24, 2015

“Shame Ruptures Community”

Alice was once quite involved in the life of the church, attending regularly and serving in a variety of capacities. At one point I could sense she was struggling and she dropped out of her regular routine. When I came to visit, she shared how her daughter had become caught up in addiction. The family had finally convinced her to enter rehab, but the process was expected to take a long time and was very costly. The burden of dealing with her daughter's addiction and the added responsibility of suddenly having to take on parenting roles once again had become too much, and Alice stopped coming to church. Once Alice's daughter had received help and returned to the community, Alice still did not return to church. I made some enquiries, and more than one friend said that Alice herself was struggling with alcohol. I was saddened by this news. In recent months, I have encountered a six people approaching 60 who are struggling with addiction issues. All of them were once involved in the lives of their faith communities, and all have dropped out. In some of these individuals, sexual abuse was part of their life history. Alcohol is a pain killer and a common form of self-medication for deep wounds. My reading for this thesis has made me aware of the connections between addiction, depression, and shame. Listening to people's stories has taught me that some of the most common reasons for people to drop out of church are related to shame. Shame ruptures community and makes it hard for people to feel acceptable. Helping people gain resilience over shame's power may open doors once more, and fulfills the mandate to “seek the lost.” May it be so.

Journal Entry #5 January 1, 2016

“Life is Cruel”

This may seem like an odd title for a journal entry, but it is actually a quote from three different people who said these identical words to me in the past seven days. (As in the previous entries, names and details are changed to protect anonymity.)

Andy and Mabel

My wife had made cookies as a Christmas gift for an elderly couple, and in the rush of the season I decided to drop by their house unannounced. Mabel met me at the door. She had tears in her eyes. ‘You must have known,’ she said, and let me in.

Andy and Mabel had stopped coming to church some time ago. Andy is a strong man accustomed to working with his body and hands. Many years ago, Andy retired from a laborer type of work, but kept busy doing maintenance jobs, cutting grass and gardening. Doing this type of work made Andy very happy and gave him a reason to get up in the morning.

Alas, the time came when Andy was no longer able to do this routine, and one by one his customers let him go. Many people expressed concern for him, saying things like, “I

don't want Andy to fall shovelling my driveway." The transition to not working was an extremely difficult one for Andy, but more so for Mabel who lived with Andy's grief. With no purpose in life, Andy was afraid when his wife would leave the house.

When I arrived at their house, Andy was standing with the aid of a walker. His face was bruised. He too, had tears in his eyes. Shocked, I asked what had happened. Mabel explained, "Two weeks ago, when the heavy snow came, Andy went out to shovel to deck and the sidewalk. I told him not to. Our grandson had promised to shovel, but Andy is stubborn. There was ice. He slipped." Andy showed how he had gone down on his knees and elbows, bruising them badly. Andy said, "The doctor said no more. What am I going to do?" Mabel said, "Life is cruel."

Depression among seniors is an acute problem which can be deadly. Elderly men (who make up a large percentage of congregations) have a particularly high risk for suicide. These men who have spent a lifetime providing, protecting, and just doing things to help people find that they no longer are needed or have a purpose. They feel useless and ashamed, and let down by their bodies. They have a very hard time talking about their loss of ability and mobility.

I hope I can find a way to craft sermons to respond to Mabel's lament, "Life is cruel." Her observation is an existential one and all too common. Andy had done nothing wrong but felt diminished. How are we to live in the moments when we are brought up short by the cruel nature of life? Listening for people's fears and giving voice to their challenges is part of that proclamation. There are cruel moments in life, and the response is to be patient and kind with one another.

Bill

Bill was the second person this week who told me that life is cruel. Bill is not a member of my congregation, but out of circumstance I got the call from the hospital. A man's wife had died unexpectedly, and he had asked for a minister to sit with him. I arrived at the hospital, and fairly quickly Bill told me what happened. His wife had been experiencing some health problems, and as a result she had fallen at home and broken her leg. No one considered this to be too serious. Bill spoke to his wife Louise prior to surgery and assured her he would be there when she woke up. It wasn't to be. Prior to surgery, Louise went into cardiac arrest. The doctors tried but were unable to save her. Bob arrived at the hospital expecting to see his wife recovering from anesthetic, only to hear the news that she had died.

This happened on the last day of school before Christmas. Bill's daughter June was a teacher, and had expected to see her mother on the following day. Bill tried frantically to get in touch with his daughter, but to no avail. We thought she had gone out for supper and a movie, and had her phone turned off. After five hours of trying to contact family and with no success, I drove Bill home from the hospital. It was only as we arrived home that June called her parents and discovered the sad news. Understandably, the family was in shock and disbelief.

Bill talked about his life with Louise, and what a wonderful person she had been. He talked about the ways his wife cared for neighbours and family. Bill said, “Life is cruel, there is no doubt about that.” Bill’s response to loss was different than Andy’s. Bill was determined to be thankful for Louise, and to hold his family through this moment. For today, that would be his purpose. That too is part of the proclamation and response to the reality that life is cruel. Sometimes all we can do is to hold one another in our loss, and to be with each other, trusting that God will meet us along the way.

Gunther and Mary

Gunther and Mary are immigrants, coming to Canada about a dozen years ago with their adult sons. Like many immigrants, theirs has been a remarkably difficult journey. They raised cattle in Europe, but were caught up in the BSE crisis and near bankruptcy. They made the move to Canada for a fresh start, especially for the boys.

An industrious family, they jumped into farming wholeheartedly. It was never easy. Operating the business was complicated by health problems. One son experienced mental illness and was only able to work part-time. Both Gunther and Mary had complicated health challenges for which there was little treatment. Looking after one son who was disabled by mental illness, running a farm and always running to medical appointments, they have done their best to move forward.

The family had experienced significant isolation. Mary was an only child, and with the death of her mother, she had little contact with her family. Gunther was estranged from his only brother, and so he too had little contact with the community back home in Europe. Compounding the isolation from family was the challenge they experienced integrating into Canadian society. Their accents noticeable, the family found it difficult to make friends.

I made a point to stay connected with Gunther and Mary. Faith had been crucial to their journey, and they had been regular attenders at worship despite living at a distance from our church home. As their health deteriorated their ability to get to church lessened. One day I decided drop by their home and to wish them a Happy New Year. Mary met me at the door. “You must be psychic. I have been thinking about you and hoping you would come.”

Mary said that she had been diagnosed with a new chronic illness that would eventually take her life. She had prepared a detailed biography of both herself and Gunther, marking the highs and lows they had shared together. With the biography, she included service details for both of them in the event of their death. It was a humbling thing to receive. Mary said, “Life is cruel, but Gunther has been my rock.”

Like the previous couples in this reflection, Gunther and Mary had confronted many and unexpected challenges in their life together. Physical and mental illnesses, money problems, isolation, family conflict, and more, they knew how life could be cruel. They were steadfast though, that faith, or rather faith in God’s grace was the answer to what

life had dealt them. I felt that her experience of writing biographies and sharing their stories must have been healing for both Mary and Gunther, for there were tears at this encounter as well. God's grace is the one thing that covers the memories that shame us, and the only thing that makes us whole.

Journal Entry #6 January 4, 2016

“What Happens When You Talk about Shame in Church”

Yesterday was my last Sunday before beginning a sabbatical time. I was hoping the weekend would be quiet for pastoral emergencies so I could tie up some loose ends in the office. Well, the phone rang before 7 a.m. Saturday morning. Early morning phone calls are never a good sign. The caller demanded, “I need to see you. I need to see a priest.” Now some early morning calls are about needing food, but this request was different. I agreed to meet the person at 9:30 a.m. Arriving at the church at 8:45 a.m., the person was already there waiting for me.

A woman came and described her tragic experiences with domestic abuse and assault. She freely showed me fresh bruises to illustrate her story. You didn't need to see the bruises on the outside to know this person had experienced abuse. She had come to the church with her face wrapped in a black shawl in order to hide her identity. Her outward appearance was almost ghostlike – she was a shell of a person. There was no sparkle in her eyes and no hint of a smile. We talked for an hour, and we discussed some strategies she might take in order that she might feel safe, offering to connect her to a shelter if that was needed. Because I was beginning a sabbatical, I asked her to come to the church on Tuesday when a female colleague might provide follow-up.

I serve a two-point rural charge and conduct two Sunday services. Arriving at the second service just before 11 a.m. the woman was waiting in the lobby to see me. She had come at 10 a.m., hoping to talk to me. The congregation was gracious to her and offered her hospitality. Because I was running late, I had to tell the woman that I would speak to her after church. It was about 12:20 p.m. when I finally caught up with the woman. She had waited more than two hours to see me. We had more conversation about her safety, and the safety of her children, but also about her struggle with faith. She couldn't understand why these terrible things had happened to her, and why so many people down through the years had betrayed her and caused her harm. She had listened to my sermon, and had some theological questions about her situation. “Where is God in all that has happened?”

The text for Sunday was Mark 1: 21 – 45 which tells of Jesus teaching, healing and casting out demons. I described what demons did in the story and how they made people feel unclean. People possessed by unclean spirits were robbed of their place within the community. While we may not have direct experience of demons, most people understand what it means to feel unclean. There are forces in the world that shame us, but Jesus gets our shame. The gospel writes a new story upon our hearts that displaces the

lies and shame that demons whisper. This woman, in need of a word of grace, stayed to hear what I had to say. She stayed and wanted to talk about the sermon. She has been weighed down by shame much of her life. I hope the sermon reinforced for this individual and the congregation how grace is the one thing that heals the forces that shame us. As a result of our conversations and hearing the sermon, the woman showed a new resilience and determination to reclaim what the abuser had taken from her. This encounter testifies how the gospel is alive in the world.

From my experience in preparing this thesis, this is what happens when you talk about shame in church. People come to tell the shadowed parts of their lives, and where they have felt the power of shame diminishing their dignity and robbing them of community. It's a natural thing, and not unexpected. When we create safe spaces in worship where people can name and expose the demons they face each day, their fears are lessened. They can imagine a new future made possible through the grace of Christ.

I make it a practice to track my working hours, and have tried as much as possible to stick to a 40 hour week. What I found in the past 6- 8 months is that try as I may, I have been working consistently above 50 hours and beyond. I have been trying to put my finger on what that is about. The only thing that has changed in this time has been the conscious engagement with this topic. Opening the door to conversations about the things that shame us has resulted in a corresponding increase in pastoral care. Relationships have deepened and trust from the congregation increased. I know I need to adjust my priorities in the light of this new reality, but this project has engaged the congregations I serve in a new way. I hope that together we may gain resilience from shame's power and experience healing and celebration.

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