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“Revealed”

Part I of the Sermon Series “Lift High the Cross”

John 13:36-14:7

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For those of you who play Wordle every morning, forgive me while I explain the game. You type a five-letter-word, and each letter goes into a box. After you type a word,

- a box turns gray if it has a letter that is not in the word,
- yellow if the letter is in the word but in the wrong place,
- and green if the letter is in the right place.

With those color clues, you have five more chances to guess the right word.

I am in a Family Text Message Group where we share our scores. I am not the best in the group (daughter Rachel has an uncanny ability to guess in two tries), but I usually come up with the word the game is looking for. Because the game keeps my stats for me, I know that I am successful 95% of the time. I am sure many of you do even better and there is no need for you to email me your stats, but my point is that it is not often that I don't come up with the right word.

But there was this one day when on the second guess I got every letter of the word right *but one*, and all four in the right boxes. I had Green, Green, Green, Gray, Green. I had S H A (Something) E. I had four chances to guess one lousy letter.

So, I guessed SHADE. No, Try again.

I guessed SHAKE. Nope.

I guessed SHAPE. Nada.



Now I have only one more chance., I guessed SHARE. Wrong!
No more chances.

Then, Wordle *was rude to me*. The word it was looking for came across my screen:
SHAME!!!!

I did not know the game could be so judge-y.

With the passage I am about to read, if you stop where your Pew Bible encourages you to stop, judgement is what you will get and “**SHAME!!!!**” is what you will feel.

The New Testament did not have chapter divisions until the 16th century. Most of the chapter divisions make sense. My dad once clued me in that with our passage, it does not. If you stop at the end of chapter 13 of John, all Peter could hear is “**SHAME!!!!**” But I am not going to follow your Pew Bible’s guidance but rather the guidance of Jesus who has more to say.

Listen for Jesus’ word to Peter. And listen for God’s word to you.

³⁶ Simon Peter asked him, “Lord, where are you going?” Jesus replied, “Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later.” ³⁷ Peter asked, “Lord, why can’t I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” ³⁸ Then Jesus answered, “Will you really lay down your life for me? Truly I tell you, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times!

(chapter 13 stops, but Jesus keeps talking. He goes on to say (and I am going to paraphrase a bit:)

14 “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe in me. ² My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴ You know the way to the place where I am going.”

⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

⁶ Jesus answered, “My way. My truth. My life. The way to the Father is through me. ⁷ If you really know me, you know my Father. From now on, you do know him. You’ve seen him.”

(The Word of the Lord!, Thanks be to God!)

What does the cross reveal *about us*? We should be ashamed?

The cross certainly reveals sin and guilt. The execution of an innocent man will do that. Be in a mood as John Calvin was and take that revelation to the extreme and you can say it reveals the T of TULIP—the five points of traditional Calvinism—the T that is our “Total Depravity.” The idea that we are totally depraved is heard in Prayers of Confession offered over centuries in Protestant Churches. We Presbyterians frequently prayed the prayer where we identified ourselves as “**miserable sinners**” and confessed that there is “**no health in us.**”



That sounds harsh, but it is not as harsh as when Lutherans confessed to God that they deserved “**Thy temporal and eternal punishment.**” These classic prayers of confession are saying, “**God we deserve whatever you throw our way.**”

I do not normally use the term “total depravity,” except in classes about theology because it overstates and easily leads to a shame-based spirituality. It is as if all virtue was lost at the Fall. I challenged that in my sermon “Original Virtue” (you can find it online. That’s a good sermon). Sin is not the absence of virtue but the perversion of it.

Overstating depravity is my problem with chapter 13 ending the way it does. Peter thinks too highly of himself. He thinks, “*Anything Jesus can do, I can do,*”—

- not realizing that he does not have the level of courage he thinks he does,
- not realizing what Jesus knows, that powerful forces have conspired and Jesus’ arrest and execution is a foregone conclusion, and
- certainly not realizing the work that God is doing through Jesus cannot be done through another.

For chapter 13 to end where it does is to have Jesus harshly rebuking Peter—*shaming* Peter. “**You say you’ll die for me? Hardly! Before the rooster announces the arrival of the sun you’ll have denied knowing me, not once, but three times.**” If I were to end where the chapter does and we were to say, “**The Word of the Lord/ Thanks be to God**”, the word would be to Peter—maybe to us—“**You don’t have anything to offer that would be of any help, so hush!**”

“**That’s right!**,” some would say. That’s how people come to Christ. That realization is what sends us to our knees in absolute desperation to beg for God’s mercy and help. And I’ve been around long enough to know that this is exactly how it has to work with some folks.

- Recovery folks say it,
- rehabilitated abusers say it,
- people who finally learn how to be a good friend,
spouse,
or partner say it—

sometimes you have to get to the end of your rope—hit “rock bottom” as they say—to realize that there is nothing good that can come for you to continue on the way you are. You have to turn around before you can begin building a new life based on grace.

But I do not think that “Shame” is a great first building block to build a child’s life upon. Some have experienced moral injury for having grown up in homes where, as children, they were taught that they were born sinners, and that they would never get to heaven unless they despise themselves for how bad they are and ask for God’s rescue.

“**You are depraved,**” are not words I will say to Emory or to children of this church. I get what the doctrine is saying. I accept, and I will teach and preach, that there is no part of us that is left untouched by the tendency

- to think too much of ourselves (the sin of strength)
- or too little of ourselves (the sin of weakness).



As someone said in a Presbyterian Outlook article, “With every virtue comes a vice, and tied to every righteous agenda is self-interest.”¹

Was I thinking too little of myself when I didn’t tell you that the someone who wrote that article in the Outlook was me?

Am I thinking too much of myself in asking that question, letting you know that it was me who wrote that article? (You can find the article online, it’s a good one.)

I’ll leave those as rhetorical questions. My point is that while I don’t often use the words “total depravity,” I *am* fine with talking about how we are all sinners who fall short of the glory of God, that we cannot perfect ourselves, but need the grace of God who sees not just sinners, but children.

The cross reveals our sin. Yes, it does and you are going to hear that point made multiple times in our sermon series. But I think even more, the cross *reveals our humanity*. The cross reveals that we are not gods who can rise above our limits, but we are human and we need to accept it. Because Jesus, who dies, submits to the limits of being human, there is more to be found in the truth of the cross than the *condemnation* of sin. There can be found the *affirmation* that God found human life worth living. We will not be perfect, but if God finds life among us worth living despite having to die... then *life is worth living despite our having to die*. By accepting death, Jesus showed us how to live. With all our limitations and imperfections, we can

- show compassion,
- stand for what is right,
- show mercy
- and love each other in a way that reflects how Jesus loved.

Let’s go back to the exchange between Jesus and Peter and pick up at the beginning of chapter 14.

- If Peter’s sin of pride was just exposed—
 - if Jesus just let him know that he will not and cannot
 - do what it is only for Jesus to do—

he goes on to make sure that Peter is not condemned or rejected. “In my Father’s house there is lots of room. There is room enough for you, Peter, even though you can’t be what you vow to be. You’re not God, but you are family.”

Last week, I said that there is a difference between illustration and definition. There also is a difference between sin and limitation. The cross can lead us to confess the first and accept the latter—

- confess those things
 - that we did

¹ <https://pres-outlook.org/2018/02/leadership-saints-sages/>



- and were capable of not doing
 - or ought to have done
 - and were capable of doing,
- but also accept that there are limits to what we can know or do,
 - and that there are some things others can do that we cannot.
- Some things only God can do,
 - such as forgive and make room for those we most hate as our enemies.

I talked about David Zahl's book, *Low Anthropology*, in a sermon not that many Sundays ago (you can find the sermon online). Zahl talks about how it is important we understand the distinction between sin and limitation. He says we can find a self-acceptance at the cross if we will accept that there is an inevitability to us

- getting things wrong,
- making mistakes,
- having to learn,
- and falling short of what we expect of ourselves.

If you were here that Sunday, you'll remember that he said

- there is a difference between a *High Anthropology*,
 - which has unachievable expectations for being acceptable in God's eyes and ours,
- and *Low Anthropology*
 - which sets expectations based on what is realistic and possible.

His book could be based on a text that is the quote, "[Perfection is the enemy of progress.](#)"

I said earlier that there are sins of pride (thinking too highly of ourselves) and sins of weakness (thinking too little of ourselves). If we confuse limitations with sins, both sins are somehow joined. In assuming we can achieve some ideal—

- be always true in our thoughts and actions,
- achieve perfect justice,
- root out completely some personal or social evil we are fighting,
- wipe away whatever ism that plagues us—

we, as Peter did, commit the sin of pride thinking we are capable of what only God can do. Then, when we inevitably fail, we commit the sin of weakness and are left with nothing but blame and shame. Yes, arrogant pride and self-loathing might be different from each other, but they are fraternal twins.

Having just burst Peter's *High Anthropology Bubble*, and reminding Peter he's only human, Jesus then reminds Peter that he is also God's child who belongs in God's home.



Then Jesus died on the cross under, let's say, far from perfect circumstances. But before he dies, he asks that those who made this happen be forgiven—And if we understand from this that God forgives us while we were yet sinners, then certainly God forgives us for simply being human—as if that needed forgiving at all.

With his being crucified, the self-righteous bubbles of political and religious powers are burst—our pretensions to perfect righteousness are burst—and we are reminded what harm we can do when we forget our limitations. But then, in Jesus asking for our forgiveness from the cross, we are reminded, limited humans though we are, that we are God's children.

If God accepts our limitations, and *if* we can do the same, it “works a strange alchemy: it frees us to have compassion on ourselves and others and [helps us] see how much we need each other.”² We learn to abandon the habits of

- cancel culture,
- virtue signaling
- and self-righteous bullying of those who make the mistake
 - *of making a mistake*

because we have to grant others the grace we need.

And then, you know what? By surrendering the expectation of perfection, we might actually grow as individuals.

- The impatient might become a bit more patient,
- the quick tempered a bit more under control.
- The sexist can become less sexist,
 - the racist less racist,
 - the liar more truthful,
 - the self-centered a bit more considerate.

By God's grace, we can grow into better selves.

So, it is for our world. History is this ebb and flow, and certainly things can get worse. But those who are not able to notice when and where things have gotten better in terms of social ills like poverty, violence, race relations, dysfunction in families, education, whatever... Those who are so good at seeing the failures that they cannot see the good, can, by only seeing failure, contribute to failure.

Those who can accept the limitations of what is possible in our world may not receive the praise the Medieval Church promised for martyrs and saints, but they might become what the Reformed tradition has always said is possible for us to become: those who actually can make some kind of a difference.

Brothers and sisters in Christ...

Brothers and sisters in sin,

² David Zahl, *Low Anthropology*, Brazos Press, 2022, p. 46.



Brothers and sisters of our species
who will make mistakes,
have much to learn,
and who will fail at perfection,
hear this:

Our humanity is a cross that Jesus took on himself by living and dying as we must live and die. To take his cross on ourselves is to accept the reality of our flaws and limits. It is to know that we are loved by God anyway and that there is a place for us in God's home. And it is then to live with faith and hope, bearing witness not to what we cannot be and do, but to what by God's grace is actually possible.

