

Naked and Unashamed

II Corinthians 5:16-21

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ April 16, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

Because of this decision we don't evaluate people by what they have or how they look. We looked at the Messiah that way once and got it all wrong, as you know. We certainly don't look at him that way anymore. Now we look inside, and what we see is that anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life burgeons! Look at it! All this comes from the God who settled the relationship between us and him, and then called us to settle our relationships with each other. God put the world square with himself through the Messiah, giving the world a fresh start by offering forgiveness of sins. God has given us the task of telling everyone what he is doing. We're Christ's representatives. God uses us to persuade men and women to drop their differences and enter into God's work of making things right between them. We're speaking for Christ himself now: Become friends with God; he's already a friend with you.

How? you ask. In Christ. God put the wrong on him who never did anything wrong, so we could be put right with God. (II Corinthians 5:16-21, *The Message*)

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My own mother, of all people, has in her possession several naked pictures of me which, for some unexplained reason, she has been holding onto for decades. Thankfully, all of them were taken nearly fifty years ago when I was still just an infant. I have no memory of these scenes, but looking at the photos I'm left with the distinct impression that in those days I must have been exceptionally comfortable in my own skin, happy to let it all hang out. In fact, I'm told that when I was little I had a pair of bright red cowboy boots that I liked to wear along with...nothing else. Just me in my red boots, running around the front yard in my birthday suit.

Things have changed. Thankfully. It's been years since I've run around the yard naked in my cowboy boots and I trust my neighbors, to a person, are glad for it. You see, somewhere along the way I began to become more self-conscious and, as I did, I became aware that there were things about myself, physical and otherwise, that I just didn't want exposed for the world to see. The same thing happened to you, I'm sure. For all of us, there are things we begin to see in ourselves we'd just assume

cover up, not just the way we look but especially some of the thoughts, motives, desires and intentions which pass through our minds and hearts.

This is a natural, even appropriate response, by the way. There is something buried in us that tells us we are not living and loving in the ways we were made to live and love. We begin to realize that in so many ways we are alienated from our Maker and from one another. This awareness is intensified in some of us who have read Jesus' teaching about measuring up in life, that God expects us to love him with all heart, soul, mind and strength, and love every other person on the planet as much as we love ourselves. That is what we were made for, self-less, sacrificial, genuine, enduring love for God and others.

When we *honestly* hold this standard up to our own lives, naked before God's expectations of us, there is always the same reaction. Shame. Also guilt, of course, but I'd argue that shame hits us harder. I feel guilty when I break a law. I feel shame, however, when I've let another down. In other words, shame is always relational; it always has something to do with another. We have failed God or others and now that failure marks us and, we imagine, changes the way God and others see us.

This is why the response to shame is always to cover it up. Right? We can't get rid of our failure and we're terribly afraid of how it might cause us to lose favor, even worth, in the eyes of others, even God, so we do our best to cover it up, mask it over, hide it behind something else, even pretend that it isn't there.

This isn't new, and maybe you remember how this all started? In the first two chapters of Genesis we read that in the beginning God made the world perfect and set humanity, his most treasured creation, in the middle of his perfect world to enjoy it and care for it with him forever. There's a beautiful verse in the end of the Genesis creation account that has become one of my favorite verses in the Bible: "**The man and his wife were both naked and unashamed.**"¹ Whether we take this verse literally or allegorically, either way what a beautiful picture. Man and woman made in God's image and completely exposed before one another and God, not just physically but I believe in all ways, their

¹ Genesis 2:25

very souls bared for all to see, and yet *there is no shame*. There is not a single thing that comes between them and God or between them one to another. There is no reason to hide anything! What a beautiful picture.

Try to imagine what that would be like. What would it be like to stand up here this morning in front of everybody else, God included, and to have your life fully exposed. Physically naked, yes – and that would be hard enough – but also every thought, every desire, every intention, every motive, every single thing which has ever crossed your mind and heart, exposed for everybody to see. You are completely naked and yet, completely unashamed. Can you imagine?

This is the world God intended. It is, however, not the world we live in now. For as the story goes, the man and the woman ultimately rejected God, decided that they knew better than God knew, wanted actually to be in the place of God. And do you remember the very first thing that happened after their sin? Immediately there was shame. We're told that they covered themselves with fig leaves, ashamed of themselves before one another. And then they went off and hid, ashamed of themselves before God.² And not just them, but us all. We've been doing the same thing ever since, only today fig leaves alone don't provide us nearly enough coverage.

How much time and money do we spend making ourselves look physically presentable, not just for the sake of health but for the sake of impressing others? Why do we have such a hard time setting healthy boundaries and saying no to others when we ought to say no to others? Why are we so driven in our work, compromising even what is most precious to us – our relationships and our health – to gain the status of perceived success? Why do the criticisms of others cut so deeply and embed themselves on old tapes that we still replay in our minds years later? Why are so many of us so anxious and afraid? Isn't it true that our constant need to prove ourselves – in academics, in athletics, in career, in knowledge, in appearance, in goodness, in religion, in romance – isn't this need to prove ourselves rooted in this deep nagging sense that we have not measured up and we are using any means necessary to try to cover up that fact?

Have you ever caught somebody unmasked and been startled by what you find? The Sacramento Bee has recently decided that it's costing them too much to get our morning paper on the front porch and is instead just tossing it at the end of the driveway. This is making many people unhappy. Not necessarily because

people are lazy, but because people don't want to have to trudge out there to the sidewalk every morning in their pre-showered, pre-groomed state for all the neighbors to see. Aren't you startled sometimes when you catch somebody in the morning before they've had the chance to put themselves together? You're thinking to yourself, "Wow. You look different in the morning."

Have you ever been with somebody you thought you knew well but then one day without warning something slips out you didn't know was in there, some bit of hatred, some bigotry, some jealousy, some pettiness, some greed, some deceit? You act surprised but you shouldn't be. That stuff is in you as well, as it is in me, though sometimes the masks we've designed for ourselves are so intricate, so well-fitting, that they even conceal our true nature from ourselves so that when something of that nature slips out of us, even we are surprised. "Where did that come from?" we wonder.

So we cover ourselves up, hiding everything within that is the source of shame. Tragically this infects the church as well. A friend of mine recently told me that during a time of failure in his life he avoided the church above all places because it was his perception that it was filled with shiny, happy people who had it all together and he couldn't hide the fact that he didn't. Even the church can become a community of people all wearing masks. It reminds me of the well known preacher who was known to pray before his sermons, "Lord, if these people knew everything about me that you know, they wouldn't listen to a word I'm about to say." Are all of us destined to live forever masking our shame? Is the possibility of living before one another and God naked and unashamed lost to us forever?

Listen to me closely. Here is the astounding hope and good news of the Christian Gospel which I want to declare to you this morning. The God who made us, the one who desires from us nothing but love, the one who knows everything about us and sees clearly how much of the time we have failed to love, this God loves us anyway. In the same way that a parent cannot stop loving her child even though that child rejects and never returns that love, God's love for us never wavers! This is partly because we were made in his very image, and thus are of infinite worth to him even in our tarnished state. This is also partly because God is love and, therefore, can no other but love.

Out of love, therefore, God came to save us. In the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, God came himself to our world, not just to pass through the world like some ghost but to literally take on human flesh and become a part of our world. Jesus was born into a family

² See Genesis 3:1-8

complete with all the beauty and mess you find in families. He went to school and struggled to learn and grow. His work as a carpenter left his hands calloused and his back stiff. He made friends, some faithful to him, some not. He sweat, and was hungry and thirsty, and faced disappointment, and laughed, and cried, and winced in pain, and smiled with joy, and bled. In every way God in Christ became one of us, every way except one. He lived a life with no shame. Because he loved his Father and others in every way and at every moment of his life, there was no sin in him which might cause shame. He lived completely naked and completely unashamed.

And yet...

Listen to me. And yet, though shame was not his to own he took it on himself anyway, willingly - took on the shame of the whole world. The one who lived a perfect life of love, a life worthy of only favor and blessing from his Father in Heaven, this one, Christ, set aside this place of favor and, in going to the cross, took upon himself the place of ultimate shame. He was stripped naked, beaten, tortured, spit upon and mocked. He was betrayed, denied and deserted by those closest to him. He was assigned a means of death and a grave reserved only for the worst of the worst. And as he hung on the cross he faced the greatest shame of all, forsaken by his very Father in Heaven, the one to whom he had been united in love for all eternity. In his sacrifice, he took your shame, and my shame, and the shame of all the world, and consumed it, swallowed it, wore it, dealt with it once and for all.

But it did not end there on the cross. And that's why we're here this morning. On the third day after he was consumed by our shame, Christ rose from the grave. This is why Hebrews 12:2 implores us, "**Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.**"³ Look closely at Jesus. His life modeled for us the life of love God desires for us all. There was nothing in his life to bring him shame, only favor from God. And yet he set that aside and endured the cross. But in doing so he made a mockery of shame by taking shame with him to the grave. But while shame stayed there in the grave, Christ did not. He was raised to life, to the very source and pinnacle of life, to the place of highest honor at the right hand of God.

Consider this. When Christ was raised that Easter morning he was not only raised in spirit, but in body as well, in human flesh restored to its once-intended glory. As he sits even now at the right hand of God in heaven, Christ still exists fully divine *and* fully human. He did not shed his humanity when he returned to God. And do you know what this means? Humanity itself, in the person of Christ, is today in God's presence, there in the place of highest honor and most affectionate favor, the place where there is no shame. Jesus Christ, by his life, his death, his resurrection, has made a place for humanity, for us, to find our way out of shame forever and into God's eternal favor. He went himself to the place our deepest shame. If we now trust him, place our faith in him, we find ourselves beside him in the place of his well-earned favor and blessing. As the scripture text we read earlier put it, "**God put the wrong on Christ who never did anything wrong, so we could be put right with God.**"⁴ In Christ, God clothed himself with our shame so that we might one day again stand before God naked and unashamed, clothed ourselves in God's favor and blessing. The old is gone; the new has come.

Imagine a young couple on their wedding night. Earlier that day they stood before God and a crowd of witnesses and pledged their devotion to one another as husband and wife, to love and cherish one another as long as they both shall live. For richer, for poorer. In sickness, and in health. For better, for worse. At a wedding you get to hear your partner vow to you what no other person has vowed to you, that he or she will love you and remain true to you both on your best day and on your worst day.

It is on that wedding night, therefore, after these sacred vows have been spoken, that there now exists the freedom to stand naked before one another without the fear of shame or of being shamed. It's why God teaches us not to strip down with one another until after those vows are made. This includes physical nakedness, of course, because before you stand physically bare in the presence of another, you want to have assurance that that person will love you and remain true to you no matter what you look like, now or 50 years from now. But the nakedness is more than physical. More than in any other human relationship, the marriage vows set two people free to expose to one another not just their bodies, but their deepest thoughts and dreams, the intentions of their hearts, their lowest points of failure, and trust that the other will love them still because when the other promised better or worse they meant better or worse. Naked and unashamed, perhaps in

³ NIV. Other verses in the New Testament which speak to the forsaking of shame include Romans 1:16, Romans 9:33, Romans 10:11, and Philippians 1:2.

⁴ II Corinthians 5:21, *The Message*

marriage we get as close to that first vision of God as we do anywhere else in life.

Is this not a hint of what we now have with Christ? Jesus has pledged his love to us, pledged it in blood. At the cross God made infinitely clear that he loved us for better or for worse, on our worst day as much as on our very best day. Our sin, our failure, our inability to live as he desires us to live, none of this has changed God's love for us. Better yet, by taking our shame upon himself, that shame has been swallowed up. It's gone! Because of Christ, even with Christ, Easter is our wedding night. We can stand before God naked and completely exposed and know that we stand before One who will love us no matter what. There is no longer shame.

But we must believe this to be true. We must have faith, that only Jesus can make this possible. We cannot get rid of our own shame. As I once heard it put, trying to get rid of your own shame by your own efforts is a bit like trying to sit in your own lap. It can't be done. The more you try to be good as a means of earning your way out of shame, the more you fall short and then the more shame piles up. In order to break the cycle we need somebody before whom we can put aside the masquerade, trusting that when he sees us for who we really are he won't wince, or turn away, or look on us with disgust or, worst of all, laugh. This is Christ.⁵

So here is the invitation extended to us all this Easter morning, especially to those of you tired of trying to hide your shame. We live in a world full of impressive people wearing impressive masks. As a matter of fact, we all look pretty impressive here this morning. But beneath so many of the masks there is fear and shame. We may believe God loves us but also suspect that he probably likes us a whole lot better on our best day than on our worst. And so we dare not remove our masks, even before God. Maybe *especially* before God! And all the while we grow bone-weary of the charade, dejected, even numb.

For you there is this invitation, to trust Christ enough to take off the mask and step into the exposing light of God's grace. There is nothing you can hide from God that God has not already seen. Yes, as you stand bare before him you will have to face the reality that there is still much about you which ought to cause shame. But now, because Christ has scorned your shame, dragged it with him to the grave, God only sees in you his righteousness. Christ's place at the right hand of God

has become your place if you would only receive it in faith.

As you may know, that beautiful vision we are given in the opening chapters of scripture, that vision of people standing before God and one another naked and unashamed, is a vision that is set before us at the end as well. In the closing chapters of scripture, in John's Revelation, we read these words about the new reality Jesus has promised to finally and fully establish on the day he returns, bringing heaven with him to earth. On that day,

The dwelling of God is with people, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death, or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.⁶

I would add shame to that list. In that day there will also be no more shame. For if we dwell with God and one another and there is nothing between us, and all tears are gone, along with all pain and even death, then I can only envision that we will then be standing before God, before God and one another, at last naked and unashamed. In Christ, all will have been made right, meaning there will not be the need to hide or cover ourselves up ever again.

Amen.

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The Next Step A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read II Corinthians 5:16-21 again. This is not a text traditionally read on Easter. What, if anything, does it have to do with Easter?
2. In this passage we read that because of Christ, "The old life is gone; a new life burgeons!" What do you take this to mean?
3. In response to the question of how we might possibly become friends with God, Paul responds, "How? you ask. In Christ. God put the wrong on him who never did anything wrong, so we could be put right with God." What is Paul teaching us here?

⁵ Fredrick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (Harper & Row, 1973), 34-35.

⁶ Revelation 21:3-4, NIV

4. Where does shame come from? And why do we spend so much of our lives hiding ashamed behind masks, not wanting others to see the truth about ourselves?
5. Is our church a place where people can take off their masks with one another and be messy and real, not posing but each telling the truth about himself or herself? Why or why not? And how might we become more so this sort of 'unmasked' community?
6. Hebrews 12:2 declares, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." What does it mean that Jesus scorned the shame of the cross?
7. What do you think about this vision of being able one day to stand before God (and one another!) 'naked and unashamed'? Do you believe such a day will come? Has it already come?
8. What is something you have sensed God trying to teach you or show you this Easter season? What are you going to do about it?

Table to Table Question
A question for kids and adults to
answer together

How would things be different if Jesus died on the cross but never rose from the dead? Why does Easter matter?