

March 10, 2019
First Sunday in Lent, Year C
The Rev. Jakki R. Flanagan
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church
New Haven, Connecticut

Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Romans 10:8b-13
Luke 4:1-13
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

There's an interesting Podcast, called, Heavyweight.¹

It has absolutely nothing to do with boxing – at least on the physical level.

Heavyweight's host, Jonathan Goldstein, interviews someone each episode. And spends the entire episode looking back in time, 10, 20, even 30-years or more... with a person that's holding an unresolved issue.

That person tells the story of a past incident that happened to them, how it made them feel then, how it still haunts them now. And then together, they explore it, sitting with the uncomfortableness, by interviewing other people that were involved in the incident...asking delicate and complicated questions regarding motivations, goals... feelings then... feelings now...

And one of the things that I deeply appreciate about Jonathan's way of handling these interviews is that he's so very sensitive and compassionate. He has the ability to name some difficult observations, gently, as if cupping a baby bird in his hands and then showing it to someone else.

One episode had to do with a close knit group of middle school girls, that, in the summer before high school, suddenly turned on one member of the group.

Another episode was about a guy who sat on a jury for a murder trial. And that guy's regret, over his vote regarding the sentencing.

The spectrum of exploration is vast. Yet none are treated casually. It appears Jonathan recognizes that the hurt done to a 13 year old girl, as well as, an adult man, can carry a lifetimes' ripple effect of self-doubt.

Frequently, the person that the podcast is focused on...who is haunted by, and bears this... heavy weight, experiences some level of shame associated with the incident.

A new book by Nadia Bolz-Weber, bears the title, "*Shameless: a Sexual Reformation.*" I haven't read it yet, but already am intrigued by the *cover* of the book. On the spine of the book, "Shameless" is written as one word. Yet on the front cover, where there is plenty of room, the word "Shameless, is written with a hyphen, "Shame hyphen Less"

and it got me wondering about being shame, less...or perhaps... having less shame.

Lent seems intricately and intimately tied to Shame... And much like the podcast, Heavyweight – Lent often has us pondering... goals... motivations... the feelings then...the feelings now....

We hear in today's Gospel About how Jesus, after being Baptized "full of the Holy Spirit" was led into the wilderness and "*for forty days he was tempted by the devil.*"

Now we never hear *how* the devil tempted Jesus, during those 40 days, only how it was done at the end of them...

And there's a certain irony in beginning Lent with Jesus being tempted, when what we see doesn't look like *he * was tempted *at all*... not truly... not like we would be...

And so, we return to a biblical theme as old as Adam and Eve... Shame.

And the question of Why we are so focused on shame, and why we are made to start Lent with this *impossible* to live up to, reading?

I mean....*seriously??*

It's almost as if to point to our failures before we even get started.

Like we're shamed right from the beginning, nearly taunted – by a big voice from the clouds...or perhaps even more damaging, a small repeating voice in our own heads, asking “and how do you think YOU would have done, with all those 40 days and then these last few tempts...don't even kid yourself that you could have done this.

No chocolate for 40 days – ha!

Try no arguments over things like:

- ~ the kids' homework for 40 days, or
- ~ who's getting up to feed and change the baby,
- ~ or not being late to work...

Or for those who take something on during Lent... flipping it into doing something, every day, for 40 days, like:

- ~ finishing that job,
- ~ working on that presentation, dissertation, article, or book
- ~ going to the gym, or for a run...
- ~ cleaning... organizing

... pick your poison... or perhaps....your point of self-ridicule...

And I wonder... Do we start Lent in shame, because we let Jesus be killed??

And IF so -

What is the goal?

What is the motivation?

What are the feelings?

Who is it that thinks we will **only** respond appropriately, if we are shamed??

Last Sunday we heard Derek preach that Lent is:

“about reexamining our relationship with God, seeing what needs pruning, seeing what needs nurturing” ...for us to “try to face the things in our lives that cause separation from God.”ⁱⁱ

And that reminds me of how Adam and Eve hid from God when they first felt shame. They separated *themselves* from their relationship with God.

And from Ash Wednesday, in Keri’s sermon, we hear :

“It’s common to talk about giving something up for Lent or taking something on for Lent. Neither tactic is an end, but is rather the means to an end. The goal is to clear out some debris, so that we might edge closer to God and God’s fullness. Lent is an opportunity to replace that which is lifetaking, with that which is life-giving.”ⁱⁱⁱ

So, What if we changed our approach to Lent, made it a kind of scientific experiment.

And along the lines of science considered our mistakes/regrets/or missing our goals, much like experiments with different outcomes, as simply information.

Now obviously not *all* mistakes, or missing the mark, are simply information, But what if we attempted to reframe them that way...

as information,
rather than personal failures.

What if like that book cover, we were Shame-Less, or at least, we less often shamed... each other, and particularly... ourselves...

In one of his podcasts, Jonathan Goldstein states:

“For all the bad rap it gets, shame offers a certain safety. It provides a comfortable hole to hide in. Away from the judgment of others. But it can also lead to isolation and inertia.”^{iv}

And so, I wonder...

if we lived in a world where we could admit “failures”
with-out all that self-recrimination ...
If confronting our regrets didn't feel like such a Heavy Weight...
would we own our mistakes, more readily, and make amends?

Would we, then, be better able to address issues of Racism, Misogyny, Anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, Transphobia... to name but a few.

What I'm talking about is Accountability Without Shame.

If we can actually separate out the Puritanical Judgments that seem to permeate this country...

Would we make more progress in addressing societal ills...

Sometimes in the Hospital, in the Emergency Room, I'll say to the patient:
“I'm sorry this is happening to you.”

Often times the person will respond, “That's all right, you didn't do it.”

Many of us have experienced similar situations, when hearing of a friend or family member who has experienced a tragedy or received bad news, a death in their family, diagnosis of Cancer, lost a job, getting divorced...

In those situations, **we do** feel sorry for what is happening, without feeling shame. Now, of course, it's easy for us, when we truly *didn't* cause the situation... but what if we could embody that same feeling,

even if we did.

We heard today, in Paul's letter to the Romans :

"The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame.""

I wonder, if for Lent, we could REFUSE SHAME

For these 40 days,
do our best to embrace that
we don't have to experience shame
to experience empathy and regret.

Or even to
look back in time, in the some way, and
be our own Jonathon Goldsteins, to re-examine moments, filled with discomfort
and gently hold them, while attempting release.

In the shadow of Jesus...or any other figure or institution that seems larger than life...

Would we be more kind, as a people, if
refused to interpret scripture,
or hear our own inner critics,
through a lens of shame...
as though a personal failure...

Can we stop comparing ourselves to what we perceive to be perfection
Refuse what is life-taking and embrace what is Life-giving

And for this Lent, at least,
embrace our learning,
via our mistakes, or missed goals...

as useful information...

ⁱPodcast, *Heavyweight*, Gimlet Media <https://www.gimletmedia.com/heavyweight>

ⁱⁱ Sermon, Sunday, March 3, 2019. The Rev. Derek Stefanovsky, delivered at St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, Connecticut.
http://www.stthomasnewhaven.org/uploads/1/7/7/8/1778288/stefanovsky_march_3rd_sermon_at_st._thomas.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Sermon, Wednesday, March 6, 2019, Ash Wednesday. The Rev. Keri Aubert, delivered at St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, Connecticut.
http://www.stthomasnewhaven.org/uploads/1/7/7/8/1778288/march_6_2019_-_ash_wednesday_-_st._thomass_new_haven.pdf

^{iv} Podcast, *Heavyweight-Season 2, October 18, 2018, Episode 18-Sven*, Gimlet Media.
<https://www.gimletmedia.com/heavyweight/18-sven#episode-player>

^v NRSV Bible, *Romans 10:8b-13*