

## The One Who Takes Away Our Shame

- *Homily; Chapel of St. Ignatius*  
- *February 12, 2012*  
- *Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.*

This has been some week with the Super Bowl, the passage of the same-sex marriage bill in our legislature to be signed tomorrow, the protest of the bishops against this as well as several governmental infringements on religious liberty, my own statement supporting the exemption in law from being required as a Catholic university to have same sex marriages on our campus or in this chapel, and President Obama announcing a way to make contraceptive services available for free to women without requiring religiously-based institutions such as ours to pay for them. Some week for all of us! I mentioned at breakfast yesterday that I was going to sit down and write my homily for today. A younger Jesuit gave me great help by remarking, “Steve, this will probably be the most important homily of your life; don’t mess it up!”

It’s a Sunday when the scriptures of the day help us all to put into perspective the concrete matters we face not by resolving them but by seeing how to live them honestly, perhaps more painfully, but with greater Christian understanding. The scriptures are about leprosy, and about Jesus touching the leper and healing him. They touch our subjects not because in any way homosexuality is like leprosy—let me make it clear that it is not—but because the real thing that is healed by Jesus is shame, and that affects all of us and is part of the experience of all of us. Almost a definition of Jesus is, “The one who takes on himself our shame and takes away our shame.” Let me show you how I get there, and then how this helps us as Christians live and understand the events of the week.

The leper comes to Jesus, kneels, down, and makes an act of faith begging, “If you wish, you can make me clean.” Jesus is moved with pity, stretches out his hand, touches the leper, and heals by saying, “I do will it; be made clean.” The leprosy is immediately gone and the man so cannot contain himself in exclaiming on his healing that Jesus has to remain outside towns in deserted places in order not to be overwhelmed by people. The man in his uncleanness had lived outside towns; now Jesus must live outside towns.

The following is the fuller historical reality of the leper and the fuller significance of what Jesus did. This comes from José Pagola’s Jesus: An Historical Approximation.

Lepers experienced their illness differently. Among them were not only people with “leprosy” as we know it today, but those afflicted by different skin ailments (psoriasis, ringworm, boils, tumors, eczema, etc.); when these spread over the body, they were repugnant to everyone. The tragedy of these sufferers is not mainly the physical effects of the disease on their bodies, but the shame and humiliation of being regarded and shunned as dirty and repulsive. Condemned to total ostracism, they could not marry and have children, or participate in feasts and pilgrimages.

Lepers were separated from the community, not for fear of contagion, but because they were seen as “impure” and might contaminate the holy people of God. It was a cruel prescription: “The person who has leprous disease...shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean!’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.” In a society like that of Galilee, where individuals could only survive as an integral part of their family and village, this exclusion was tragic. The lepers’ greatest anguish was that they might never be able to return to their community.

Abandoned by God and by humanity, stigmatized by their neighbors, largely excluded from community life, these sick people were probably the most marginalized sector of the society. But are they really abandoned by God, or does the Father have a privileged place for them in his heart? The historical fact is beyond doubt: Jesus was devoted to them above everyone else. He came near to those who were seen as Godforsaken, touched the lepers whom no one else would touch, gained the trust of those who could not enter the temple, and brought them into the people of God as he understood it. They had to be the first to feel the Father’s mercy and witness the arrival of his reign. His care for them is the best “parable” to show that God is, more than anything else, the God of those who suffer abandonment and exclusion.

We must take this further. Not only did Jesus reach out and touch the excluded, but he himself died degraded, impure, unclean, and abandoned “outside the camp” taking upon himself our shame, taking our shame away from us, bringing us clean into the Christian community, all of us. The author of the letter to the Hebrews can say: “Jesus died outside the gate, to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us go to him outside the camp...”

What’s important in this is that all, not some of us, have experienced and know shame, and that all, not some of us, are made clean and brought into community by the one who took our shame upon himself and has taken our shame away from us. We are the parable of God’s healing compassion, all of us, men as well as women, straights as well as gays, ordained as well as those excluded from ordination, self-possessed adults as well as children more vulnerable to shame, persons of integrity as well as criminal abusers, healthy as well as disabled, diseased, or persons mentally troubled. Shame is fundamental—I want to say an inescapable human reality—and Jesus is the one who has taken away our shame, not just covered over our shame in his graciousness but healed it and clothed us in God’s compassionate love.

I remember as a boy in our house in Juneau in the Territory of Alaska, how my parents and the five of us would be around the dinner table. From the table you could look through the kitchen to the open doorway into what we called the laundry room. That was where our dog, Muggs, was supposed to stay. But during dinner he’d creep over the line of his room expectantly looking at us. Mom would say, “Shame on your Muggs; shame on you; doesn’t your conscience bother you!?” The trouble with that, dear Mom, was that these were the same words I’d hear when I told a fib, or hit my sisters, or stole something: “Shame on you, Steve! Shame on you; doesn’t your conscience bother you?!” I experienced that shame is a very animal thing, embedded in the body, like a physical degradation. “Shame on you, Muggs; shame on you, Steve.” Yes! Jesus is the one who takes away our shame and makes us the parable of God’s compassion.

So the Church must be the parable of God's compassion, must be the place where shame is taken away, must be the place where all who are excluded or shamed are welcomed into the town, where all can know they are not impure, but clean. How the Church struggles to be this and how remarkably in many areas is unequalled in doing so: one in eight in our country in a hospital are in a Catholic hospital; one in ten receiving a social service are receiving it in a Catholic agency; our Church's inclusion and reaching out and bringing in the poor, the immigrant, the orphan, the refugee, the homeless, protecting the unborn, educating those without opportunity in urban schools. No community has the record of taking away shame as does our Catholic community. That's one side of it.

But it may not seem so today for many who can be made to feel shame. I do not believe that our Church seeks to shame anyone. She stands up for some values—as in marriage and reproduction and certainly in regard to abortion—which she believes are essential to the common good of society and the structure of human living willed by God.

Here's where the rub comes, doesn't it? We can try to understand, but may disagree, or chafe, or feel judged, or even feel embarrassed about our Church. We can and should receive and study the clear and official positions of our Church with reverence, but we may not be able to bend our minds into agreement. What I believe we must do in this case are two things:

- First, we must realize and know clearly and admit: "I am not better than the Church; I am not above the Church; I am not brighter than the Church; I am not better educated than the Church; and I am not other than the Church; I am the Church. My faith, my sacramental life, my knowledge of Jesus, my experience of the Spirit in community, all come from the Church." So we must live the concrete challenges of the Church in these times and its engagement with fundamental issues as in this week from within, from being ourselves the Church, not from outside, as if the Church were some other reality. This first thing is not easy.
- The second may be even harder. If we find ourselves in disagreement or alienated from the Church, we should not do violence to ourselves by telling ourselves we do not think what we think. That is dishonest and can do damage to ourselves. Nor should we convince ourselves that we feel differently from how we in fact feel. That too is not to stand in the truth. In other words we should not bend our minds or our feelings. But here comes the hard part, we should bend our wills, that dimension of ourselves alone, and accept as the position of the Church what we may not understand or feel. This bending or submission of the will—if we do it with eyes wide open—does not do damage to ourselves. If it is harder than submitting our wills to the will of God in our lives, then we need to take a look at what living our lives in faith, in submission to the will of God, really does ask of us.

I don't think what I have said today about how scripture shows us how we are the parable of God's compassion in how Jesus takes away our shame and brings us into his community and my applying this to our Church and her difficult decisions to make and ours to accept, answers our questions. Ultimately, these are things that cannot be resolved, but must be lived by us in the

wholeness of ourselves, the wholeness of our faith, and the wholeness of our Catholic community. The fountain of life within us, our faith, the Spirit of the Christian community, and God's love of us as we are are bigger than these tensions and unresolved issues. The place to start is the place where Jesus started, letting him be the one who takes away our shame and brings us into his community. That's where we are in this Eucharist, and that is what this Eucharist does; so it is a great place to be this week, perhaps the best place.