

The Lord will take delight in you

Zephaniah 3:14-20

December 13, 2015

You can't see his face. Oh, yes, you can see his face, the face he presents to you, and it is a pleasant enough face: smooth skin and kind eyes and a ready smile. He smiles whenever he sees you and asks how you are doing and keeps his focus on you as you answer.

But you can't see his face, his true face, the face he keeps carefully hidden, the face furrowed with deep creases of doubt and resignation and shame, the face shadowed by grief and failure and regret. You can't see his face, because he is so good at keeping it covered, but it is there. It is there, but as long as he keeps his true face hidden, he is not.

Who is he? Maybe, it's you. Maybe, it's me. Maybe we are the ones who are ashamed.

This is shame: retreating, hiding, covering up, hands covering your face, so no one can see you, because their eyes on you, their eyes seeing you as you are, would be more embarrassment, more humiliation, more rejection than you could bear. But they never get a chance to judge you or reject you, because you have already done that yourself and you keep that shame locked up inside, the shame that is a reflection of your self-judgment, the huge divide between what you want to be or what you feel you should be and what you are.

Shame may be rooted in a particular action: something you said without thinking, a promise to another or to yourself you failed to keep, a trust you betrayed, an act of selfishness or an act of careless neglect, an embarrassing faux pas, or even just doing something less well or less thoughtfully or less nobly than you thought you should have been able to do.

But, more often, shame is amorphous, more generalized, not connected to any specific action or personal deficiency. You just feel inadequate, unfit, unworthy, not good enough ... for no good reason. Shame is a sickness, a sickness of the soul, and, if left untreated, it is fatal. But there is a cure.

But first, more about shame. Is shame a good thing or a bad thing? It seems absurd even to ask the question because shame works hard to destroy the beauty of what God has made. Shame denigrates the beauty of the body God has given you. Shame devalues the wisdom of the mind God has given you. Shame debilitates the freedom of the spirit God has given you. Shame pulls you down and closes you off and defames God.

But shame can also be a good thing. In one of his recent homilies, Pope Francis even called shame "a true Christian virtue" and C. S. Lewis wrote, "unless Christianity is wholly false, the perception of ourselves which we have in moments of shame must be the only true one."

Shame can be a virtue because it is the manifestation of a tender conscience, of a willingness to acknowledge our own frailties, of genuine humility. When we say of someone they have no shame, we mean they say whatever they want, do whatever they want, regardless of the consequences, not caring at all whom they hurt. Shame serves as a check on destructive behavior, but shame also exposes our need. Shame reminds us that we cannot make ourselves whole. We need something we cannot do for ourselves. We need somebody. We need to be loved.

The Lord will take delight in you ...

Hear it! The Lord will take delight in you! Not just take notice of you. Not just take good care of you. Not just watch over you. Not just guide you. But take delight in you.

Do you have someone who takes delight in you? Who is always excited to see you? Overjoyed just to be with you? Happy just that you are you?

I saw it for myself last Wednesday night, waiting in the Waterloo airport to welcome home our Nicaragua travelers along with Greg and Michelle, and Rocky and Mary Kay, with Evan and Drew and Alicia and Maria's Dad ... and Katy. Katy was so excited she literally could not contain herself. She tried to stand there calmly waiting -- or maybe she didn't even try because she couldn't. The emotions filled her body and she jumped up and down in place, so eager, so excited, so delighted about seeing Japhy.

The Lord will take delight in you. Can you imagine it? In you! I mean you! Hear me! Because some of you are not going to believe me. Some of you are going to think I am talking about somebody else. But I am talking about you. Not just the person sitting next to you. Not just "the good people." Not just the people who do not have to carry the load of shame you carry. But you. The Lord will take delight in you.

The Lord will take delight in you, and in his love ... This is where it gets interesting, because translators have struggled to interpret the last half rest of that phrase.

The Good News Bible reads: "in his love he will give you new life." The New Revised Standard Version and the New Jerusalem Bible both translate the phrase: "in his love he will renew you." And the Contemporary English Version reads: "in his love he will refresh your life."

"Give you new life." "Renew you." "Refresh your life." All good things, but in the original Hebrew the phrase with which translators have struggled because it didn't seem to make sense is this: "in his love he will be silent." The Lord will take delight in you, and in his love he will be silent.

When was the other time God was silent? On the seventh day, resting and taking delight in all he had made.

Love is the cure. God's love is the cure for shame, for your shame. Securely held in the embrace of God's love, basking in the light of the Lord's delight, you may uncover your face, and let it shine!

And you must, because others carry shame, too, covering their true faces so no one will see. And no one will see them ... unless you let them see you.