

“The Locust Years” / Joel 2:23-29 / 20 October 2013

“I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten.” This is the promise in the Book of the Prophet Joel. “And my people will never be put to shame again. And my people will never be put to shame again.” Well, shame is a hard thing to understand. We don't always know what will cause another person shame. But I do like that promise that the years the locust ate—“the locust years”—are never fully lost.

I recently read an article about the sense of shame that really bad sports teams can bring on a city. There's a deep, psychological sense of collective self-doubt that hovers over a town whose teams have played badly for decades. Now, it can sound a little silly to people who don't follow sports, but the writer of the article claimed that your teams become your city's public face, and when that face constantly has egg on it, well, it starts to weigh on the the shared emotional health of a place. We've been fortunate here in Pittsburgh because even back in the 1970s when we were losing some of our renown as an industrial center, we still had the Steelers to keep us proud. Whole towns in the Mon Valley were emptying out, as people moved to Houston looking for work, but we had the Terrible Towel and Terry Bradshaw. The Pirates shined brightly enough; even as the lights of the steel mills blinked out forever, Willy Stargell and Three Rivers Stadium still gave the region a sort of national acclaim. Between hockey, baseball, and football, we've usually had at least one decent horse in the race—to mix a metaphor. And that helped to keep regional morale from tanking along with the economy. That sense of pride carried Pittsburgh through dark days until brighter days when the economy started to recover.

But even in places where the economy has been strong for a long time, there's a sense of collective shame over bad sports teams. I mean, Denver and San Diego have a lot going for them, but they feel the shame. It's a perfect double-whammy if your city is both struggling economically and bad at sports. Cleveland! Buffalo! It's like being the kid in sixth grade who can't do algebra or catch a ball. (That would have been me.)

But the deepest public humiliation of all, the sorest shared shame for a city is to lose a team to another city. If you don't believe that, then slip into an old fashioned barber shop in Brooklyn and strike up a conversation about the Dodgers.

At our “fall festival potluck” a few weeks ago, I was proud of those many folks who came to the church for the event, but immediately pulled their chairs around the radio and hovered there to listen to the Pirates game. I wasn't sure why, but at one point the game lost their interest, and they all drifted back to their tables. I don't have the patience to watch baseball in the stadium, much less listen to it on the radio. And I get annoyed every time I try to watch football because I want a minute to last exactly sixty seconds, no exceptions. But even though I don't much care how they do it, I still want my local teams to win. There's a sense of pride in it, a sense of affirmation that my place in the world—my geographical place—is a good one and competent.

The other side of that coin is shame. But public shame is nothing compared to the private shame that most people feel. There is shame so crippling and unspeakable that we don't even admit it to ourselves, but deep down, we feel it. There's shame over our failures, shame over the wrongs that we've done to others, and there's even shame over things have been done to us, things that weren't our fault. History is littered with badges of shame that it has pinned on the chests of various people, the scarlet letters, the dunce caps, the derisive names, the marks of Cain. At one time in England, a church would give you money, but then you had to wear a blue badge of shame: beggar, for shame!

Nothing is known about the Prophet Joel. He doesn't make reference to any famous historical figures; he doesn't date his book by talking about any kings, so we don't know when he lived or what was happening at the time when he wrote. All the scholars can do is to compare his language to that of other writers to see if it sounds more or less old fashioned. Does it sound like Tom Clancy or William Shakespeare? All we know is that the Jewish nation is struggling with a deep sense of national shame. It hasn't rained in a long time, and they take that to mean that God is angry with them. Hordes of

locusts have come and ruined their crops; they might not starve from it, but they sure won't eat well. They're reduced to mere survival. They were supposed to be a great nation. They were supposed to be God's chosen people, an empire, feared and honored by all. But all these years in, and they were still just the size of New Jersey, and here they were living hand to mouth, eating the very locusts that destroyed their crops. No rain means no water for washing their bodies or their clothes. And they're ashamed. What went wrong? How had their dream of greatness died so early on the vine? What happened to all that they had hoped to be and do? They feel shame for their unmet potential. Shame for their current conditions—dirty and hungry. Shame for the way they live. I imagine that some of us could identify with that. And into these cycles of debilitating shame, the Spirit speaks a promise: “I will restore to you the years the locusts ate. And my people shall never again be put to shame. My people shall never again be put to shame.” Oh, those locust years, those lost, unfruitful years, the years of shame and sorrow. The promise is that even they are never finally lost, that even they will be redeemed and made right, somehow, in the end.

It's sometimes very difficult to understand the deep shame of another person, especially when the thing they're ashamed of isn't even their own fault. Maude was a woman in her eighties, and she lived with the deep shame of having divorced and remarried back in the 1940s when such things were nearly unheard of. On top of that, Maude belonged to a fundamentalist sect that was forever reminding her, “Well, you're welcome here with us. You need to try as hard as you can to make it into heaven, and belonging to our church is your best bet. But we're not going to give you any guarantees because you've broken one of the cardinal rules, the one about divorce and remarriage.” I talked to Maude about her shame, not long before her death, and I came to understand that it went so deep that she half expected to die and wake up on fire, in hell. I tried to walk her through it. “So, your first husband was an alcoholic?” “Yes.” “And he used to physically abuse both you and your children?” “Yes.” “You divorced him in order to protect yourself and your kids?” “Yes.” “Then along came another fellow—also an alcoholic—but affectionate, and gentle, and kind to your children?” “Yes.” “And so, in your loneliness, and wanting to give your kids a father figure, you fell for this guy and married him?” “Yes.” “And you think that both society and God condemn you for this?” “Yes.” Her shame, her sense of her own guilt, made no sense to me whatsoever. She didn't seem to carry much of the blame, as far as I could see. It wasn't her fault.

But whether it's one's fault or not, the shame of others is often a mystery. We only fully understand our own shame. And personal shame runs so deep. The failures. The lapses of judgment. The guilt. The bad decisions. Oh, the poor parenting, and the broken wedding vows, and the little self-indulgences with the bottle, or at the computer screen. Oh, the shame of having been victimized by another, of having been bullied or worse. All the years the locusts eat! The promise is that they can be redeemed.

I once led a Bible study in the Book of Revelation. We were reading the book not as a literal prediction of future events, but as a poetic description of the things that were happening in the times when the book was written. Somehow the conversation in our group turned to a thing called “generational poverty.” It's the long cycle of economic impoverishment that beats people down generation after generation, leaving them with a sense of futility, and desperation, and general anger at the world. One woman in the group said, “I don't mind helping the poor, but I don't want my money going to people who just don't want to work.” Another woman said, “Yes, there are some who just don't want to work. It's true. But it's not that simple. There are people who've been on the outside for so long that even trying to get a job looks impossible to them. Every time they open their mouths to speak, they can hear people thinking 'white trash'. They feel inferior and hopeless. They're ashamed even to step outside their house because they know they're being judged by their clothes, and their speech, and their employment status. Even just to get out of bed in the morning is a challenge when the whole world is judging you by your shirt. How can they go out into the world and hold down a job when everything and everyone reminds them that they don't matter?” I was touched because I knew

that this woman was speaking from experience. She had married well, but she had also lived through the hopelessness and shame of being desperately poor in America.

Is it any wonder that crime rates tend to be higher in places where the poor can afford to live? It's not that they're morally destitute, but the shame of extreme poverty can break a person, take away all hope. All the laws that our politicians call "hard on crime" are usually just hard on criminals. If we wanted to be truly hard on crime, wouldn't it be best to improve the morale and self-respect of people who are at risk of falling into the traps laid for them by shame? I don't know the political solution to the problem, but the only way I know to lift people out of shame is to help them respect themselves...by treating them with respect.

I recently read a list that was entitled "The Criminals' Hall of Shame." First on the list was a pair of would-be bank robbers in Kentucky who chained the front of an ATM to the bumper of their pickup; they put the truck into gear, and tried to pull the face off the ATM. Instead, the bumper came off their truck, and they sped away in fear, their bumper attached to the ATM, and their license plate attached to the bumper. Then there was a woman in Arizona who found a company called "Guns for Hire" in the telephone book. She called and tried to hire them to kill her husband, only to learn that they were in the business of staging gun fights for TV commercials and movies. She got four and a half years in prison. A Texas man successfully entered a bank by breaking a street-level window. He didn't even set off the alarm. But once inside the bank, we realized that he'd cut himself up pretty badly on the glass, so he called 911 for an ambulance. How will they tell their stories to their new neighbors in the orange jumpsuits? The shame!

There are unseen depths of shame hidden in the inner hearts of the homeless, the addicted, the jobless, the prisoners, the physically and intellectually disabled. Society makes people feel shame for being single, for being ugly, for being overweight. Some people will even try to shame you for not having children. Unless we're experiencing these shames ourselves, then we probably don't even notice when others are struggling against them. Then, to make matters worse, every once in a while, some crackpot preacher will come along and try to make you feel ashamed of not being sensitive to the shame of all these others! But, it's the private, inner shames that cripple us most. They can haunt us for many years, slipping up to us in the night, whispering in our ears, "You! I know what you did...or failed to do. I know your secret. I know all about the inadequate person who hides behind your smile." The Prophet Joel is saying that there is a way to make peace with the locust years, the waste and destruction in your life. It's the path of self-acceptance and forgiveness.

What have the locusts eaten in your life? What bounty has been stolen from you, what freedom, what joy has been devoured by the swarming locusts of shame? Embarrassment can help you to improve yourself. Feelings of guilt can help you to change the things that aren't right. But shame teaches you the best and the hardest truth of all: that grace and healing come from outside of you. Life and its wonders, its loves, can never be your doing. They're a gift. Like the sunrise, they come unbidden when the time is right. You cannot have been anyone but who you have been. You cannot have done anything other than what you've done. You are powerless to change the past; you are powerless to change most things, but the deepest change, the best change, the most freeing, the kind that reaches into your life, brushes past all the wreckage of the locust years, and touches you with new visions, new dreams, it comes from the outside. And come it does...in time. This is the promise, that your old will dream dreams and your young will have visions. It's called grace. It makes the world go round. It's called grace, and everything is lost without it. This is the promise: "Nothing is lost. I will repay to you the years the locust ate. I will pour out my spirit on all flesh. And my people will never again be put to shame." Amen.