

## The Cross and Shame<sup>1</sup>

A good long time ago—thankfully—I was sitting in my office thinking lofty minister thoughts, when my secretary stuck her head in the door and said, “Doug, I think you need to talk with this police officer.” With that, a Miami Township uniformed officer stepped in my office and said gravely, “Mr. DeCelle, I realize this is quite awkward, but I need to place you under arrest.” I was stunned. “What for?” I asked. “The warrant says,” he replied, “that you’re being charged with assault.” He went on, “I’m required to place you in handcuffs.”

Of course, I’m shaking as he puts handcuffs on. Now, here’s what I was really thinking, no kidding. “I’m pretty forgetful, but surely I would have remembered assaulting someone. You don’t forget that kind of thing.”

Well, as the officer leads me out, a small crowd of parishioners and staff has gathered in the outer office and they’re in a jovial mood. Then a couple of cameras flash. The officer continues his charge. “You’re being arrested for assault with long sermons and boring meetings.”

It’s all a joke. I was being arrested for one of those fund-raisers where you go and eat pizza and phone your friends to get them to contribute to the Cancer society to raise your bail.

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on March 21, 2010 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, Georgia.

I suppose it's a good thing that that was all pretend. It was for a good cause. But I'll not forget the awful feeling of embarrassment and helplessness that pretty much continued for several hours.

I want to talk today about that feeling. I'm not talking about just my embarrassment. I'm talking about what it's like to be shamed and rejected. I can think of nothing quite as painful. I think of the lady in my church who was relatively new in the congregation. She decided to throw a Super Bowl party for her new friends. She got the big screen TV positioned. She put out little bowls of snacks. And not one of the 12 people whom she invited showed up. I'll never forget her sobbing as she told me what happened. She even thought that maybe her family needed to move away.

Rejection. Everybody experiences it sometimes. And it hurts. Some of us feel the pain of being cast aside (that's what rejection means literally) as a permanent part of our lives.

I had a chance to talk with some of you last week about bullying in schools. Bullying, I'm told, is when someone is being picked on either by an individual or worse, by a lot of people. Even little kids in elementary school do it. And, again, to be picked on hurts. I've conducted the funeral of a

13 year old who was teased incessantly at his middle school. He found a gun and turned it on himself. The kids at school realized that teasing wasn't funny nor did it help someone change and be cool. It hurt to the point where life didn't seem worth the pain.

Rejection is a form of human cruelty that is amazingly commonplace. It happens in schools. And it happens in churches. It happens in the workplace. It happens. A youngster with developmental delays, or appearance differences, or sexual or bodily function problems, can be singled out by peers for punishing mockery.

The shame of rejection is so uncomfortable that most of us do things to fit in or avoid being rejected. I knew three sisters in a previous church. All were married with grown children and comfortable lives. They had been born in a small town in Kentucky and had all moved to Dayton. One of the three was embarrassed by her small town, Appalachian heritage. She tried to keep it a secret. I conducted a funeral for a family member. She forbade me to mention where her relative was born. Keeping her girlhood in Kentucky a secret was quite a trick since her sisters were proud of their Kentucky childhood and talked about it readily. How many of us, I wonder, shield

certain information about ourselves or our experiences because we are concerned that others will think less of us if they knew.

Have you ever been talked to by someone who seems to be assuming that you aren't too bright? I phoned one of LaGrange's social service agencies to inquire about emergency assistance for a lady who was having trouble paying her electric bill. The case worker attempted to come down to what she deemed my level to answer my apparently stupid questions. She spoke with slightly raised voice so I'd understand better. Used single syllable words and short sentences so that people—I guess like me—could understand. After the phone call, I went over to the agency—uninvited—just to have the conversation face-to-face. I met the lady who talked to me. I liked her right away. I didn't expect that to happen. And—face-to-face—she was exceedingly gracious and hospitable to me, even giving me a tour of the agency.

Here's the point. I experienced what it was like to be talked down to. There are many, many people who listen to that attitude in most every conversation they have every day of their lives.

Being diminished, embarrassed, being brushed off or classed as defective is a hard blow. I'm guessing that someone or more than one of us sitting here knows what the shame of rejection is

like. We may not be good looking enough, rich enough, cool enough, grown up enough, sophisticated enough, successful enough, connected enough, healthy enough, moral enough or immoral enough or "like us" enough. And what that's like is painful.

Did you ever ponder that Jesus walked the path of rejection his whole life? He started out as an out-of-wedlock pregnancy—a classic shameful circumstance. Then, Jesus' entire story is one of a person who never was in with the cool kids. By that I mean he ate with the rejects. Jesus came from a nowhere town. He didn't have any of those status symbols that we scratch and claw to obtain—social class, a leadership position, money, religious or political status.

These factors were just the beginning. When Jesus reaches the last part of his public ministry, he not only suffers great pain being whipped and nailed to a cross. More importantly, Jesus suffers amazing shame and exclusion. It begins when Jesus' followers abandon him. We then see the religion leaders rejecting him. There's a tremendous power when the official representative from God think you're worthless or worse. Even the biggest losers on the scene of the crucifixion—the other criminals—pause in their dying process to put Jesus down.

The worst embarrassment of your life, your moment of humiliation that you can scarcely bear to bring up in your thoughts, is close to what Jesus experiences on the cross. He's naked. His bodily functions uncontrolled. He dies in public. Dying is deeply personal. Jesus slips out of consciousness hearing the laughter of mockers and the buzzing of flies.

Do you catch where I'm going here. I was once "arrested" and embarrassed. Jesus was also falsely arrested. My little embarrassment—even that he shares. Someone talked down to me. Many of us experience worse. And Jesus was mocked by everybody from the ministers to the loser on the next cross. Rough soldiers bullied Jesus. A crowd laughed at him as Pilate stood him in front of them in purple robe and crown of thorns. Ha, ha, ha ha!

I've told the story before of Dr. Paul Brand giving a talk in a leprosarium, which is a hospital for victims of Hansen's Disease, true leprosy. Leprosy is a disfiguring disease that gnarles and numbs skin and limbs. Leprosy, like AIDS today, has powerful social consequences. Back in Jesus' time, lepers were the ultimate social rejects. Anyway, Paul Brand was talking to the patients about the damage a nail driven through the palm of a human hand would do. A pierced hand would never be right again. As the sun went down in the auditorium the patients

noticed again their own disfigured and clinched hands. One by one Dr. Brand noticed his listeners lifting their hands. Suddenly, their clinched hands were not a point of grief, but a point of connection with the Savior of the world.

If you know anything of the shame I'm trying to describe, if you know embarrassment, if you know what it's like to be snubbed or left out or pushed out, if you haven't made the cut or joined the club, if you are alone, Jesus Christ stands with you! Of all the ways that the Son of God could have lived, he chose the path of rejection and aloneness. Somehow God's idea of true humanity isn't up and in but down and out. Jesus walks that path with you. What can you do about that? Know that God loves you. Know that rejection is rejected. Talk with Jesus—obviously he wants to be with you. Know that the rejected one was raised up. Follow him.