

Shame Distorts the Truth About Our Worth

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Jaime quit school. He didn't tell me directly, but it seems that one of the other students said something about his clothes—how he had worn the same thing for three days. And because he felt embarrassed, he quit. It was a GED class at a community college. It was a shame, too, because he really seemed excited to get back into school. He really wanted to do something with his life. That's all he talked about. He was starting fresh.

In his embarrassment, in his shame, he did what he does whenever he is confronted by something that touches too deeply the scars and wounds that he carries—he ran. He is constantly trying to escape by running, quitting, deflecting or just being disruptive. That is why, I am convinced, he can be such a pain in the butt. That is why he so often is in trouble. He is so afraid that someone will take notice of what he feels deep down. He is afraid that he will be exposed for who he is (or at least what he feels he is)—not good enough.

Shame is, according to James Fowler, different from guilt. In guilt, the things I do can be separated from who I am. It can be separated from my worth as a person. I can do something wrong and still think of myself as a good or

worthy person. Shame, however, is about who I am. It is about others seeing me as who I am. Shame is about being exposed to others, or to myself, as being defective, lacking or inadequate. In shame we feel our deficiencies are out there for all to see. So when the other student said something about Jaime's clothing, Jaime felt as though he was less than the rest of the students. He felt shame and, because of it, he quit.

A father sits in the healing circle and weeps. He can't get it out of his head that if he had taken better care of his family his son would not be dead. His son was killed by a gang that mistook him for a rival gang member. In the father's heart, if he would have never moved into that neighborhood, his son would be alive. The guilt that he carries is immense. But there is the shame, too, of not being man enough to take care of his family. He carries that distorted shame of not being a father who could protect his own.

Much of what we do in the Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation is to allow those stories to be told. And when they are shared, especially with others who know the struggle—whether it be parents who suffer from the loss of their children due to violence or young people struggling to make it from one day

to the next—then there is the sense of not being so alone. It is isolation that is so toxic. We try to

create that space where Jaime can speak to the lie that somehow he is less worthy. I can tell him that he is worthy, but in telling his story, a story that is mixed with the stories of others, he begins to discover his worth himself. And so in the telling of our stories, we begin to experience healing. It may take time, it may take a lifetime, but it begins.

It is that distorted shame, that I am unworthy or not good enough, that needs to be embraced. When we embrace it, then we are on that road toward recognition that we truly are worthy, not because of us, but because we are of God.

On the road to Emmaus, the disciples of Jesus found meaning in who they were and what they felt in the person of Jesus. Jesus, who recounted the story of his own suffering, death and resurrection, gave meaning to the suffering and the brokenness of the disciples. And so in the telling of our stories—sometimes retold countless times—our human dignity begins to find its place again in our lives. Our suffering takes on new meaning. We begin to see ourselves as being the sons and daughters of God.

As ministers of reconciliation, our role is to be willing to wade into the suffering, the conflict and the confusion, into those uncomfortable places and give witness to the story of Jesus. It is to expose our own stories for what they are—part of the larger story of God's people—a sinful people who find hope in a God who is very much present.



The New Creation

*Reflections from the
Precious Blood
Ministry of Reconciliation*

Discussion Questions

1. Fr. David writes, "Much of what we do in the Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation is allow those stories (of pain and shame) to be told." Where do you find a safe place where you are allowed to tell your story?

2. Companion gatherings should be places where we can share our stories of both triumphs and troubles. Are we doing enough to encourage our fellow Companions to feel free to share what is in their hearts?

3. Fr. David writes, "as ministers of reconciliation, our role is to be willing to wade into the suffering, the conflict and the confusion, into those uncomfortable places and give witness to the story of Jesus." How have we given witness to the story of Jesus today?