

May 17, 2020 • 6th Sunday in Easter • Online Worship

“See What Love Can Do: Cringe”

Sermon by Nathan Oney



Psalm 66

Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth; sing the glory of his name; give to him glorious praise. Say to God, “How awesome are your deeds! Because of your great power, your enemies cringe before you. All the earth worships you; they sing praises to you, sing praises to your name.” Selah Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds among mortals. He turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot. There we rejoiced in him, who rules by his might forever, whose eyes keep watch on the nations— let the rebellious not exalt themselves. Selah Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard, who has kept us among the living, and has not let our feet slip. For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried. You brought us into the net; you laid burdens on our backs; you let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a spacious place. I will come into your house with burnt offerings; I will pay you my vows, those that my lips uttered and my mouth promised when I was in trouble. I will offer to you burnt offerings of fatlings, with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams; I will make an offering of bulls and goats. Selah Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for me. I cried aloud to him, and he was extolled with my tongue. If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer. Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me.

Acts 17:22-31

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’ Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

It is an incredibly strange experience to preach to a camera. A clergy friend on Facebook joked that Covid-19 has made us all televangelists, but you know, I don’t think he’s right; televangelists have better hair. As for me, it’s now been four months since I last had a haircut, and in my most vain moments it is a little disquieting to know that this sermon will live forever on the internet, preserving this horribly messy do for the posterity of all future generations.

I say this now because I know that on Monday, when I go to watch myself preach so that I can learn to do this part of my ministry better, I’m going to see my hair, I’m going to hear the sound of my own voice, and I’m going to cringe.

There will be a tightness in my chest and stomach, a wince of pain on my face, and I’ll be tempted to slam my laptop closed to avoid an encounter with my own awkwardness. Oof.

This feeling has come to be called by the physical response that it commonly produces: cringe. It is also the subject of the book “Cringeworthy: A Theory of Awkwardness” by Melissa Dahl, in which she describes “cringe” as “the intense visceral reaction produced by an awkward moment, an unpleasant kind of self-recognition where you suddenly see yourself through someone else’s eyes. It’s a forced moment of self-awareness, and it usually makes you cognizant of the disappointing fact that you aren’t measuring up to your own self-concept.”

Oof. Even that definition is brutal. Cringe can be felt in the middle of embarrassment, and it can even be felt years—or even decades later—when our minds force us—without permission, mind you—to relive embarrassing moments from our pasts. My mom tells this story about when she was in junior high, getting ready to go to a junior high basketball game with her friend and her friend’s cool older siblings. She got ready, and put on far too much perfume. When her friend arrived, she got into the car, and in the enclosed space, the perfume was overpowering, and in order to try to preserve her coolness, she lied about whether she was wearing perfume, which was patently obvious to everyone else. She still to this day, over forty years later, has flashbacks to that moment that cause her to wince in pain.

Oof. Cringe.

There are many things that cause us to cringe. You might cringe in empathy with another person who is experiencing an embarrassing moment in much the same way that you might wince in pain if you saw someone smash their hand with a hammer. We also often cringe at others who we think should be embarrassed, but actually display extreme confidence. The best example of that is the singer who tries out for the American Idol competition because they think they have a good voice, but in reality... they don’t.

We cringe at them because we are embarrassed for them.

The psalm for this Sunday, which Michael Lamb read so well for us, is a Psalm of praise to God because of God's goodness to God's people. It speaks of God's faithfulness to the generations by recalling God's saving deeds throughout history. This is a God worthy of praise, the psalmist is saying, because our God is a mighty deliverer. God has delivered us from slavery and exile, and has given us a place of our own, where we can be free.

But this God is also a God of uncomfortable encounters. "For you, O God, have tested us," says the psalmist; "you have tried us as silver is tried. You brought us into the net; you laid burdens on our backs; you let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water..." And more than this, the psalmist expresses some trepidation about coming before God saying, "If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened."

The psalmist knows what so many mystics and contemplatives have said throughout the centuries and that perhaps we too have experienced; an encounter with the transcendent eternal humbles us. It immediately puts into perspective just how small and broken we are. To come before God is to risk a moment of self-illumination—to see ourselves in light of the ways that even our self-conception doesn't measure up.

It's the very definition of cringe. Melissa Dahl says that "The moments that make us cringe are when we're yanked out of our own perspective, and we can suddenly see ourselves from somebody else's point of view." I think that feeling is best encapsulated in a line from early in the psalm: "Say to God, 'How awesome are your deeds! Because of your great power, your enemies cringe before you.'" The Hebrew word here for 'cringe' is an interesting one. It can mean to submit or to wince, but it can also mean to be caught in a lie. And I think that this is where cringe becomes part of God's plan for redemption. It belies the prideful delusions that we hold about ourselves. Philosopher and video essayist Natalie Wynn puts it this way in her video about cringe: "Cringe is the electric shock—the emotional punishment—for being awkward. It enforces the limits of socially acceptable behavior by wounding the ego." What Natalie Wynn is saying is that cringe helps us to know how we ought to behave by humbling us.

Humility. Don't you think that is something that our world could use more of?

The English silent-film era actor George Arliss once remarked that "Humility is the only true wisdom by which we prepare our minds for all the possible changes of life."

Isn't life throwing a lot of changes our way right now?

When we look back at past pandemics, we see that many of them result in extreme social changes, but we can also see that this kind of change isn't always guaranteed.

In our text from the book of Acts, the apostle Paul goes to Athens, the center of arts and philosophy for the ancient world. I imagine that he walked the steps to the Parthenon and marveled at the construction of its marble pillars. He might have thought about the great teachers of philosophy and ethics that had made the city the marvel of many. Might he have remembered Socrates, the chief philosopher of Athens? During the life of Socrates, the city-state of Athens experienced both a terrible plague and an invading Trojan army. It is estimated that up to one hundred thousand people in Athens were killed by the plague alone. The plague caused the Athenians to enter a time of great doubt about the gods. The plague spared not the pious, and the worship of the Gods began to wane. In response, strict laws of religious observance were passed because the leaders of Athens began to believe that the plague was surely a punishment from the gods, and only by ensuring that the gods received sacrifices would Athens win back their favor.

Paul would have known that in the midst of all of this, Socrates began to teach publicly that the sacrifices to the gods weren't important, that the gods weren't vengeful or hungry. Paul would have known that Socrates was then tried, found guilty, and sentenced to death for the charges of corrupting the minds of the youth of Athens through his impiety. Change was stifled, and an innocent man became the scapegoat, himself a sacrifice to appease the need for law and order, to appease the desire to go back to normal after the pandemic.

And as Paul traveled the city he saw that the many Greek gods were still worshipped in Athens. The altars to them were strewn about the city, places to offer sacrifices to hungry gods. Did Paul think of Socrates when he stood up in front of the Areopagus and proclaimed that indeed the God that created heaven and earth is not an angry God. The God in whom we live and move and have our being is not served by human hands. This God, the only God, is a God that gives. This is the unknown God that you have been searching for. And this God gives new life, now and always through Jesus Christ.

It is a moment of revelation. And according to the scriptures, the spirit showed up in that moment and "some of them joined him and became believers" upon hearing this good news—the good news of a God that gives.

This is a fundamental shift, a new way of thinking, a new way of relating to God, and I have to wonder, did these Athenians ever look back on their lives before they learned of Christ on this day? Did they ever, completely unprompted, think back to the times that they had offered sacrifices to objects made by hands only to wince in pain at how wrong they were? You know, this is where I start to question the value of cringe, because cringe just happens to look an awful lot like shame.

Shame.

Friends, I know that many of us feel the weight of shame. Our society seems to encourage it. In order to extract every last dollar and bit of life from us, our world constantly tells us that we aren't good enough. If only we were smarter, thinner, more productive, then we could be free of shame—then we could move into the future. But shame cannot lead us forward. Shame does not lead us into a harmonious life with others, with God, with creation, or even with self. Shame leads us headfirst into hiding. It leads us running into the garden trying desperately to hide from God behind some plants.

Yes, life is throwing many changes our way right now. And not just changes to our daily routines or livelihoods, but changes to the very way that we view the fabric of our common life. Covid-19 is making known to us many realities that have been covered up. It is for many a new experience, a paradigm shift, that belies the idea that our society is fair and just. For many, the inequities that exist in our country are finally coming to light in ways that can no longer be ignored. And we are all faced with a choice: Will we move into a harmonious future, or will we find a scapegoat to appease our desire to go back to normal?

Normal. Poet and activist Sonia Renee Taylor says this about “normal”:

“We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona existence was never normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack. We should not long to return, my friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature.”

My friends, we are being invited into a new future of harmonious and abundant living, and we can get there together if we can turn away from shame and toward God. We can get there together if we learn to cringe at the greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack that we find in ourselves. We can get there together if we learn how to give.

In speaking about the relationship between cringe and shame, Natalie Wynn points out that the solution that she has found to overcoming shame isn't self-criticism, it isn't even self-love, which can be fickle. For her, the solution is “self-indifference.” It is self-indifference as a kind of radical humility, which is found not by thinking less of yourself, but by thinking of yourself less. It acknowledges what American author David Foster Wallace found to be true, that “There's a lot of narcissism in self-hatred.” Pride and shame both center the self, and so self-indifference, as strange as it sounds, can go a long way in helping us move forward.

But I think we can do better than self-indifference. We have Christ to guide us. As Paul says in the letter to the Philippians, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”

He emptied himself. Self-emptying, as a way of becoming one with the self-giving love of God that empties us of pride, shame, embarrassment, and disgust as it opens us to new understandings, new perspectives, new life—this is what love can do. Christ is risen; he is risen indeed. All glory be to God. Amen.

Notes:

Melissa Dahl. “Cringeworthy: A Theory of Awkwardness.”

Natalie Wynn, “Cringe.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vRBsaJPkt2Q>

David Foster Wallace. 2003. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGLzWdT7vGc>