

Faces Firmly Fixed
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
March 10, 2019 – AM Sermon
Rev. Peter Jonker
Luke 9:51, Hebrews 12:1-3

This morning is the first Sunday in Lent, and during this season, we will start a new sermon series. For the next six weeks, we will walk together through the end of the gospel of Luke. We will walk with Jesus as he heads towards the cross. As some of you may know, Luke has an interesting structure. Right in the middle of the gospel, there is a turning point. Starting at chapter 9:51 Jesus makes a turn from his ministry in Galilee and he begins to journey to Jerusalem. He's not going there for a sightseeing visit; he's going there to die. From 9:51 on, he makes his way to the city where he will be crucified. As you watch Jesus make this journey you see that the tone of his ministry changes: Now there are fewer miracles and more teachings. Now there are fewer spectacular displays of power, and more calling people to repentance, more warnings about the cost of following him.

Today's text is the verse where the turn takes place, *"As the time came for him to be taken up into heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem."* Such an interesting verse. You can sense Jesus' determination. "He *resolutely* set out." Some of you may know that in the Greek this verse literally says, Jesus fixed his face toward Jerusalem. The verb is stayritzo with means 'to firmly fix.' He firmly fixed his face on Jerusalem and the terrible task that faced him there. The title of our sermon series comes from that image. We called our series, 'Faces Firmly Fixed on Jesus'. Jesus fixed his eyes on Jerusalem and the cross; we will fix our eyes on Jesus as he makes the journey.

That's what Hebrews 12 calls us to do. I paired this verse with Hebrews 12:1-3 because the two verses have a lot of the same imagery. *"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."* Jesus firmly fixes his face on the cross. We will firmly fix our eyes on Jesus so that we can see what he faces along the way. We will firmly fix our eyes on Jesus so that we can see the things in ourselves that need to be crucified with him so that his resurrection life can take a deeper root in us.

Hebrews reminds us that one of the things that Jesus faced when he made the journey to Jerusalem was shame. "He endured the cross scorning its shame." Read the New Testament and it's very clear that when we fix our eyes on Jesus and follow him one of the things we will wrestle with is our shame. It's all over the New Testament. Paul refers to it in Romans 1:16, *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes."* You hear a variation on it in Philippians 1:20 *"I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body."* There are the words of Jesus himself in Mark 8:38: *"If anyone is ashamed of me in this wicked and adulterous generation, I will be ashamed of them."* Clearly, the leaders of the early church worried that shame might be one of the things that kept us from following Jesus.

Why? Why do Jesus and Paul and Peter all warn early believers about shame? Read carefully and you see that there was one particular part of the gospel that was a potential source of shame. *That was the cross*. If there was one part of the gospel that might make the early Christians blush and fall silent, it was the cross. The very thing that Jesus fixes his eyes on in Luke 9:51 was a source of shame. Do you know the earliest artistic depiction of Christ's crucifixion? It's called the Alexamenos Graffito. Have you heard of it? It's currently in a museum on the Palatine hill in Rome. They found this artwork in Rome in the second century scratched on to a plaster wall. It's a crude work, like a piece of graffiti, which is why it's called a graffito. At the bottom of the graffito there's a caption: it says: *Ἀλεξάμενος σεβετε θεον*. Alexamenos worships his God. Above the caption there's a crudely drawn man – presumably that's Alexamenos. He's got his hand upraised in a gesture of worship. He's worshipping Jesus who is pictured as hanging on the cross, only instead of a regular head, the artist has given Jesus the head of a donkey. This artist has replaced the sacred head of our Savior with the leering head of a donkey. It's mockery. Somewhere at the end of the first century an anonymous artist scratched this image into a piece of plaster to make Jesus look ridiculous and to make Alexamenos feel ashamed for worshipping him.

For people of those days the cross was a shameful thing. Death on a cross was not simply designed to kill you in a painful way, it was designed to humiliate you, to degrade you, to obliterate your good name. Crucifixion was designed to make people turn their face away from you. There is a reason that the disciples abandoned him and fled because that's what people all did with the crucified. It's often said that Jesus died the death of a common criminal, but I'm not sure that's true. He died the death of a pariah. In her book "The Crucifixion" Fleming Rutledge says, "Crucifixion as a means of execution in the Roman Empire had as its express purpose the elimination of victims from consideration as members of the human race." As Isaiah 53 prophesied, Jesus wasn't just killed, he was despised and rejected, "*as one from whom men turn their faces*." Combine the pain of crucifixion with the modern stigma of being on the sex offender registry and you get something of an idea of what it meant for Jesus to die on a cross. Who would worship someone like that? Think of it that way and you realize what a radical claim it was to call the cross something glorious, to say I am not ashamed of the cross.

"*As one from whom men turn their faces*." That's the center of shame. To feel shame is to feel utterly unacceptable. When we feel shame, we think, "If people really knew me, they would turn their face away. They would abandon me and flee, like they did with Jesus." Do you remember that powerful story Ruth told in her sermon back in December? A professional athlete struggling with addiction became so ashamed of himself and what he'd done that he started to shave in the shower because he could no longer stand to look at himself in the mirror. When shame has taken its deepest root in you it's not only that other people can't look at you, you turn your face away from yourself. "*Like one from whom people hide their faces, he was despised and we held him in low esteem*."

With that picture of shame in mind, hear the words of Hebrews again. "*Set your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith who, for the joy set before him, endured the cross scorning its shame*." The most amazing thing about Jesus' willingness to go to the cross was not his willingness to endure the physical pain, it was his willingness to endure the shame. And he didn't just endure it, he scorned it. He defeated it.

Why was he willing to go through something that painful and humiliating? The author of Hebrews tells us. He did it "*for the joy that was set before him*." It was because of the joy that was set before him that he was willing to endure the cross and scorn its shame. We understand

that dynamic. People are willing to do that sometimes, endure pain and trouble for the sake of a greater reward. You endure the pain and sweat of exercise for the joy of good health. You endure the pain and fatigue of late nights of studying for the joy of a degree and a chance to work in the job you wanted. We understand that dynamic of enduring a pain for the sake of a greater joy.

But what joy was so great that Jesus would be willing to suffer the pain and humiliation of the cross? What is the joy that makes Jesus firmly fix his face on Jerusalem? What reward would make it worth the spit, the nails, the loneliness and the ridicule? What is this joy that Jesus kept in front of him, that moved him to endure the cross and scorn its shame? It's not the cross itself, that wasn't his joy. He endured that. If you want to know the joy that caused Jesus to endure the cross, if you want to know the joy that made him fix his face on Jerusalem, go home and look in the mirror, and do not turn your face away. It's you. It's me. We are the joy. "For us, and for our salvation he came down from heaven." You are the reason for his journey. You are the joy that Jesus kept before him. Jesus did this because he loves you.

There's such a beautiful irony here. When we are in the grip of shame, we think that if people really knew who we were, they would not want to look at us. They would turn their face away. But the author of Hebrews tells us that not only does Jesus look at us, when he sees us his face lights up. We are the joy set before him! We are the reason for his journey! If shame is the feeling that you are completely unacceptable, the good news of the cross is that you are accepted. You are loved. You are his joy. You may have trouble looking in the mirror, but he will not take his eyes off you. Never forget that when you hear someone quote Hebrews 12 and hear them refer to the joy set before him, never forget that you are that joy. When you hear someone talk about how Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem, you are the object of his resolution. His face is set on you.

There are all sorts of reasons people fall into shame. Sometimes they're ashamed because of something terrible they've done. You've committed a sin that hurt innocent people and you can't clean up the mess you made and you feel awful. It's appropriate to feel some shame in these cases. But sometimes we feel ashamed when people do things to us. Abuse victims often feel worthless. Victims of Larry Nassar's abuse did nothing wrong but they will report feeling worthless and dirty. Sometimes people feel shame about their illness or disability – they're ashamed of their depression, they're ashamed because they have anxiety or OCD. There are so many ways that this feeling of worthlessness can creep up on us. There are so many places where we feel unacceptable. We will probably never get rid of these gnawing voices of shame on this side of heaven. We will always struggle with some level of shame and self-doubt as we run our race. But, along with the author of Hebrews, I proclaim to you the good news. **You are Christ's joy.** He died for you and because of him, there is a place at the center of your life where you are clean, you are pure, you are beloved. So fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith who for the joy set before him, endured the cross, scorning its shame.

© Rev. Peter Jonker