

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for June 14, 2009 – Graduate Recognition Sunday  
Lessons: Genesis 8:20-22, Lamentations 3:15-25, and Matthew 5:1-14a

## GOD'S RE-CREATION OF THE NEW DAY

Toward the end of my first year of seminary, I asked a student about to receive his PhD in New Testament studies what he was going to do next. He replied that he was going to go back to driving trucks for his father's business. Surprised, I asked him why. In a very matter-of-fact tone, he told me there were twenty-seven positions available in New Testament studies and more than a hundred experienced professors seeking them.

*Praise with elation, Praise every morning,  
God's re-creation of the new day!*<sup>1</sup>

The idea that with the dawn comes new hope is probably as old as the human race. Fears and worries close in on us at night. Daybreak renews our spirits and shrinks our problems back down to size, but the coming of dawn is not always enough. Sometimes our fears and frustrations loom just as large in the daylight, which is when people are tempted to stay in bed. Then, we need realistic hope that confronts life's outward realities and our own inward realities, making light of neither, so we can deal with both and find that new day.

These are hard times. It's not so bad to be finishing high school right now because college offers four or five more years for economic recovery. Finishing college or grad school in such a time can be frightening, but that's not all. There's something at work in this situation that goes beyond fear. We know how to face fears and overcome them. Unless it paralyzes us, fear is a stimulant that gets us moving, but there's something in these times that acts upon us as a depressant. We need to understand what's going on inside us so we can deal with it in faith and take charge of it rather than letting it keep control of us.

It's our biology.<sup>2</sup> We are wired from birth so that events in our lives and circumstances in the world around us trigger physical responses that form the basis for the development of our emotions. We are wondrously made, but sometimes our natural defenses can get us down, especially one of them, and it's not fear. When you want a good outcome in your life, prepare for it, envision yourself achieving it so you can feel proud and enjoy your success, but suddenly your progress is interrupted and your way blocked, a certain event called an *affect* is triggered in your physical system, and you can't stop it. This particular affect is *shame*. Even a baby who does not yet know how or why to feel embarrassed about

anything shows the telltale signs of the shame affect. The infant's head droops slightly to one side, eyes down and shoulders sagging. Why? The baby is not feeling ashamed at all, but the physical thing, the affect, has been triggered because something the baby was attempting has been interrupted. It sounds so simple, but from that affect we build the entire shame family of emotions, which feel awful and are difficult to manage.

It is very important to realize that this shame reaction does not come only when we have done something to deserve it.<sup>3</sup> Deserving has nothing to do with it. If you lose your job, through no fault of your own, it comes. If someone breaks up with you, it comes. If you finish school and can't find a job in your field, it comes. When it hits in a big way, you are thrown into a sudden confusion and for a while cannot even think straight. You hear and see what's going on around you but as though your mind were in a fog.<sup>4</sup> You recover your senses, of course, but when people or circumstances remind you of the stalled out situation you are still in, that shame affect is triggered again – not so strongly but triggered nonetheless. That's why people often stop coming to church when something bad has happened in their lives, even something over which they had no control and for which they bear no rightful blame. They don't want to be reminded, because each reminder triggers the shame affect again, and when we feel shame, we want to hide our faces.

It's not fair, but it is real. And when it happens, we tend to play a dirty trick on ourselves. We are trained to believe, whatever we may say, that if we feel something bad, we must have done something to deserve it, especially if it's shame. It's a lie we inflict upon ourselves, a hurtful and depressing lie we find it very hard to stop telling ourselves even when we know intellectually it is not true. Our feelings overpower our reason.

Even as I am speaking, I am aware that what I'm saying is triggering the shame affect. The very word "shame" can trigger it a little. So, I'm taking the risk of having you leave at the end of the service thinking, "What a depressing sermon," because these are hard times. We need to know we can feel this shame-thing without deserving it. Then we can stand up, lift our heads again, and fight back. Have you never felt a physical pain that worried you until you found out what it was? Then, you could deal with it, and it may even have eased. Athletes do it all the time: they play through the pain as long as they're not causing further injury. That's the challenge: we need to find in our faith (our trust in God) the strength and courage to play through this shame-thing. As with the physical pain, we can learn to say, "I know what I'm feeling, and I'm not going to let it stop me." Name it, learn from it what is helpful, then beat it. Don't let it make you hate yourself, and don't let it make you angry at the world, either, or choose some group of people to hate.

Standard commencement speeches tell graduates the future is wide open to them. Go get it! And don't forget to share some of your success with the community and the

disadvantaged. Uh, reality check. *Right now, I'd settle for a job, preferably in what I've trained for, and some hope of keeping it. The possibility of advancement in my field would be nice, but right now just a steady job in it sounds great, if only I could get one.*

A sermon is not a standard commencement speech. What people of faith have learned is that, in good times and bad, God not only keeps loving us and caring about us, but does work with us to bring meaning and purpose from situations that look and feel like futility. Remember, God is more concerned with the kind of person I am becoming than with how much money I'm earning or how proud I'm making myself or my parents by my successes. Jesus declares "blessed" some people whose circumstances in life seem quite depressing.<sup>5</sup> He's not being cruel or cute about it. He knows God will be with those people, and their ways of humble faith will prevail because they are God's ways. "Put your trust in God," he says, "and trust me, too." This is not about retreating into religion or rationalizing frustration with piety; this is about going into the world with a confidence the world cannot give us or take from us. You belong to Christ and with Christ to God, who will not abandon you and who loves you far too much to let a little thing like the economy defeat your life. But we need to stop blaming others, and we need to stop blaming ourselves. Be angry at times, but don't let it consume you or spoil your relationships with other people. Be skeptical of easy answers and wary of slick operators who prey upon the fears and aspirations of the young in times like this. Get savvy but not cynical. Accept help but not blame, and be confident enough in what you have learned to sift people's advice.

Above all other lessons in hard times, we can learn from our disappointments the crucial factor in life as God sees it: empathy. A smooth road from one success to the next does not teach us empathy with other people's fears and failures, but empathy is the key factor in what we call "the mind of Christ." Uninterrupted success can teach us to pity others from a position of pride, but that terrible shame-affect-thing can teach us how it feels, and that's called empathy, and it leads to compassion, which is the way of Christ.

God will not give up on you, which means you do not have permission to give up on yourself. Trust God, and God will see you through to life that is meaningful and truly worth living. Many people have lost their lives by succeeding in their ambitions, lost what the Bible calls their souls, their very selves. God has something much better in mind for you and will work through your efforts at finding it and living it. Each new day, you can lift up your head, take heart, and pursue life with confidence and courage to handle life's successes and disappointments, both, and to strengthen others with that shared understanding, that empathy, which comes from the grace of God. Seniors, graduates, all in transition, we are proud of you, thankful for you, and confident that God will lead you forward in this wonderful adventure of life, working with you in the making of a life worth living and a person worth being. Amen.

## Notes for the Online Manuscript of the Sermon:

1. These lines come from our opening hymn in the service, “Morning Has Broken.”
2. My principal source for the affect-script psychology employed in this sermon is Donald L. Nathanson’s book, *Shame and Pride: Affect, Sex, and the Development of the Self*, W. W. Norton & Company, 1992.
3. There is, of course, such a thing as deserved shame, and we can learn from it – if we can avoid or recover from the readily available but unhelpful “natural” reactions to it. For information on those four reactions to the shame-humiliation affect, see Part IV of Nathanson’s *Shame and Pride*, the section on the “compass of shame.” The four natural reactions are: *withdrawal*, *attack self*, *avoidance*, and *attack other*. But my goal in this section of the sermon was to establish that our experiences of the shame affect are independent of the issue of whether (and how much) we may deserve it, if at all. It’s not that we don’t need a sense of shame in our lives and psyches at all; we do. The shameless person behaves monstrously. But the sense that we deserve any shame we feel is unwarranted psychologically and theologically, and the judgment of deserving/undeserving is neither fair nor helpful. In fact, continuing to lay blame on self or others can set us dangerously at either the attack-self pole on Nathanson’s compass of shame (if I keep blaming myself) or to the attack-other pole (if I keep blaming someone else), and both are destructive.
4. Nathanson describes this state of confusion when the shame-humiliation affect is triggered strongly. Furthermore, continued shame deadens our interest in life and our ability to enjoy life and relate to other people. Nathanson writes, “Shame interrupts affective communication and therefore limits intimacy and empathy. Shame interferes with neocortical cognition. In its basic role as an impediment to interest-excitement and enjoyment-joy, it can interfere with everything on earth that we enjoy, from the thrill of scientific discover to the joy of sex.” (page 143)
5. See the beatitudes in the reading from chapter 5 of the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus declares blessed the poor in spirit, people who mourn, the humble (meek), peacemakers, the merciful, etc.