Got Guilt?

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Isaiah 6:1-8

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Guilt is today’s Pressure Point. We have talked about four Pressure Points in this sermon series this summer—fear, anxiety, depression and stress.

Guilt is a universal human experience. Everybody experiences guilt. The only people I know who do not experience guilt are psychopaths.

Guilt gets a bad rap in our day, perhaps a hangover from the Sigmund Freud era. There is a remnant within pop-psychology that regards guilt as something unnecessary, even harmful to people.

I’m not buying it. Guilt, in the right proportion, can be a good thing. Guilt alerts us to bad behavior and motivates us to make needed changes.

There is a world of difference between good guilt and bad guilt. While some guilt is good for us, it does not necessarily follow that more guilt is better for us.

I am reminded of something Jimmy Buffet sings: “Pack your bags. We’re going on a guilt trip.” A guilt trip is an excursion nobody wants to take.

Those of you from a Catholic background often talk about Catholic guilt. Alex Baldwin played the role of an Irish Catholic named Jack Donaghy in the TV sitcom 30 Rock that aired until a few years ago. Jack tells his friend Tracy, “There is this crushing guilt that comes with being a Catholic. Whether things are good or bad, or you’re simply eating tacos in the park, there is always this crushing guilt.” Some of you know firsthand of what he speaks.
The sixth chapter of Isaiah describes an experience with good guilt. We’ll come back to this matter of bad guilt later in this sermon. Isaiah begins, “In the year King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple” (6:1). While Isaiah speaks about seeing God, he provides no details of God’s physical appearance. His focus is entirely on God’s throne, the train of his robe and the attendants that encircle his throne.

These attendants to God’s throne are six-winged celestial beings called seraphim. Isaiah describes them: “With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet and with two they flew” (6:2). Presumably, they cover their eyes to shield themselves from the radiant brilliance of God’s presence. They cover their feet to keep them from going their own way.

They sing in antiphonal response to each other: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory” (6:3). Holy is a word meaning different or distinct, one of a kind, you might say. No one else is like God. God is in a class all by Himself. This three times repetition of God as holy amounts to a super superlative. God is not only holy, God is holy to the third degree. At the sound of these seraphim, the temple of the Lord shook on its foundation, filled with smoke.
In the presence of this holiness, Isaiah recognizes himself as unholy. “Woe is me. I am undone. I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips and my eyes have seen the king, the Lord Almighty” (6:5). Earlier, Isaiah identified his encounter with God “in the year King Uzziah died,” but now he comes face-to-face with the eternal King. While earthly kings such as Uzziah come and go, this King endures forever.

One seraph takes a burning coal with tongs from the altar to sear Isaiah’s lips. The seraph declares, “See, this coal has touched your lips. Your guilt is taken away and your sin is atoned for.” He touches Isaiah’s lips because earlier Isaiah confessed to being a man with unclean lips.

Our reading closes with the voice of the Lord from heaven asking, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” Isaiah’s response is classic: “Here I am. Send me” (6:8).

Isaiah’s call into ministry follows four distinct movements in this passage. First, Isaiah encounters the holiness or otherness of God. This leads him, second, to new awareness of his own sinfulness. Third, he receives the assurance of God’s pardon. Fourth, he expresses unshakable resolve to do the Lord’s bidding.

Guilt leads Isaiah to make needed changes. Earlier, I said there is good guilt and there is bad guilt. Bad guilt equates to something we call shame. While guilt and shame are often lumped
together, there are important distinctions. While guilt concerns itself with outward behavior, shame turns us inward with incessant personal criticism. Guilt expresses remorse for the bad things we do. Shame feels remorse for who we are. Guilt is the awareness that I did something bad. Shame is thinking I am bad. While guilt leads to change, shame leads nowhere. The task of parents is to teach their children to recognize appropriate guilt for bad behavior but not communicate shame for who they are.

We can illustrate the difference between guilt and shame with a verse from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians. Paul writes, “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death” (2 Corinthians 7:10). Godly sorrow equates to good guilt. Godly sorrow leads to repentance that leads to positive change. Change brings about salvation, the biblical equivalent of wholeness or well-being. Worldly sorrow amounts to shame and shame leads to death in every sense of the word.

Let me summarize what I am trying to say this way. I am guilty for the bad things I do but there is no need for me to feel shame for who I am. I say: “yes” to guilt and “no” to shame.

So, what difference does this sermon make in my life? Two applications come to mind. I will talk about them in first person and invite you to do likewise.
First application. I am a sinner. There is no denying it. There is no minimizing it or shifting blame to someone else. I am a sinner, plain as day.

In AA meetings, every member of the community offers the same introduction, “Hi, my name is [fill in the blank] and I am an alcoholic.” Acknowledging oneself as an alcoholic is the first step toward recovery.

We can borrow a page from AA’s Big Book. “Hi, my name is Pastor Pete and I am a sinner.” While you may find it unsettling to hear that you have a sinner for a pastor, how could it be otherwise? Sin is universal. Paul is emphatic on this point in Romans: “There is no one righteous. No, not one” (3:23). “No one” means exactly what it says. No one means everyone!

When I kept silent my bones wasted away… I will confess my transgression to the Lord and you forgave the guilt of my sins.

Ps. 32.3, 5

We encourage you this summer to read the daily readings that accompany these eleven Pressure Points. Last Wednesday, our reading originated from Psalm 32. “When I kept silent, my bones wasted away…Then I acknowledged my sin and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgression to the Lord’” (32:3, 5).

Admitting guilt may require us to take the additional step of seeking restitution with people we have wronged. You may have confessed your sin to God yet still feel remorse for your actions. You may need to take the additional step of acknowledging your guilt to the person most immediately
affected by your wrongdoing. You may need to apologize. James writes, “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other, that you may be healed” (5:16). Some guilt does not disappear until we apologize.

A well-known preacher, Andy Stanley, writes about a painful experience of guilt when he was 16 years old. A man in his father’s church (Andy’s dad is a preacher also) said something critical about his father. Andy was enraged, so he devised a prank to frighten the man and his family. Andy succeeded in terrorizing the man’s family. While Andy later felt bad about his transgression, he managed to keep it hidden.

Years later, Andy was preaching in his father’s church about the importance of admitting guilt and seeking restitution with other people. Suddenly, in the middle of his sermon, the memory of what he had done 16 years ago flashed into view. He had an out-of-body experience of his secret prank while he was preaching. After the sermon, he could not shake his guilt. Years earlier, he even put an anonymous note and cash in the man’s mailbox to atone for his sin, yet it failed to bring him release.

He came to the realization that he needed to apologize. He drove to the man’s house to offer his apology. He describes in his book, Enemies of the Heart, the agonizing experience of driving around the block of the man’s house several times to marshal up the courage to knock at his door. He rang the doorbell and, sure enough, the man opened the door, surprised by Andy’s unannounced visit. No sooner had they sat down to talk when Andy blurted out his apology. The man rocked back in his chair. When Andy finished, the man smiled and said, “You know, I had the sneaking suspicion it was you.” The man ended the conversation with the words, “Andy, this makes me feel good all over.” Clearly, he had
forgiven Andy. They embraced and Andy left a free man. No more shame. His guilt vaporized.

Could God be nudging you to apologize to someone? You may be waiting for the other person to make the first move. Take the initiative and apologize. “I am sorry” has enormous power to restore families and friendships. As Andy experienced, it can set you free.

Second application. I need a Savior. First, I am a sinner. Second, I need a Savior. I cannot save myself. The guilty party is not in a position to remove the guilt. Only the offending party can make it happen. Frederick Buechner writes, “It is about as hard to absolve yourself of your own sin as it is to sit in your own lap.” Precisely!

Jesus does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He loves and forgives us. Psalm 32 opens with the words, “Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them” (32:1).

Jesus offers his life as full sacrifice for our sins. Our guilt is gone. There is no more shame. One more time from Psalm 32, “You forgave the guilt of my sin” (32:1). Jesus did that for us on the cross. Sin and shame no longer have any hold over us. Say “yes” to guilt and “no” to shame.