



Shame-busting with Jesus

Amy Johnson

Minister for Sexuality Education and Justice

“I’m leaving my shame here and taking away healing.” These were the words of a participant in a recent ecumenical and interfaith Our Whole Lives/Sexuality and Our Faith Training.

After decades of this holy work at the intersection of faith and sexuality, I have seen this dozens of times. Once people realize they are in a space without shame and stigma, where we encourage open and informed conversation, seeds of healing are planted. Like a flower stretching toward the sun, parts of our souls that have been hidden reach for the daylight and sacred refreshment of acceptance and growth.

[The National Alliance on Mental Illness \(NAMI\) categorizes different types of stigma](#), including public stigma, private stigma, self-stigma, label avoidance, and structural stigma. All kinds of stigma fertilize shame, which can easily become internalized, and can also result in outwardly shaming others to attempt to counterbalance one’s own shame.

Shame and stigma about sexuality have real health consequences. People avoid seeking care due to embarrassment about body parts and functions. Many experience health inequity by providers and systems due to their gender identity and orientation, as well as racial stereotypes. Too many people attempt to or succeed in taking their own lives because of shame and stigma related to their bodies, identity, or relationships.

Jesus was a shame buster. He hung out with lepers and people who were blind and otherwise disabled. He allowed a so-called shameful woman to wipe his feet with her hair and admonished others who asked what in the world he was thinking. People who were shamed, stigmatized, and marginalized by society were the very people Jesus sought out as companions, and in the Great Commandment, Jesus told us all to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Loving one another as ourselves means that we need to be able to love ourselves. And loving ourselves means dealing with our own shame. Too often this shame has been embedded by well-meaning religious institutions that end up excluding people from access to God's love with messages encouraging them to create themselves in society's image of a Christian, rather than rejoicing in the way the Author of Life created them and called them very good.

Time and again, I witness people come into Our Whole Lives/Sexuality and Our Faith trainings and leave without a big chunk of shame with which they came. Shame about their body, their orientation, their gender, their relationships, their experiences, their faith . . . the list goes on. Over a relatively short time, in community with other people of faith who are not only not shaming or stigmatizing them, but who also delight in the full expression of who they are, people can experience a taste of beloved community and their welcome in it.

I am so grateful the United Church of Christ continues to support the Our Whole Lives and Sexuality and Our Faith ministry in so many ways. Through this ministry, we are walking our talk of justice and inclusion. We are building the kin-dom right here on earth.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Amy Johnson is the Minister for Sexuality Education and Justice for the United Church of Christ.

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