

Shem's Garment

John L. Odhner, 7/28/2024

In this time when society is so divided, we often hear people criticize others for their beliefs, their politics, their values, their opinions, their relationships, their appearance, their language, or just about anything. Politics, of course, is rife with complaining, criticism, and judgment about opposing parties and their candidates. Yet most of us also find plenty of criticism is present during disagreements between family members, neighbors, and coworkers.

The story of Noah and his sons tells what it means to be compassionate and caring towards people when we become aware of their faults. After surviving the flood Noah planted a vineyard, made wine and became drunk. As he lay in his tent uncovered, one of his sons, Ham, saw him there and went out and told his brothers about it. The other brothers, Shem and Japheth, took a blanket across their shoulders and went backwards into the tent to cover their father. (Genesis 9)

Here Ham's noticing his father's nakedness, that is, his errors and corruption, describes people who have faith separate from goodwill. People like this see nothing but faults and corruption in others. ... Or if they do see anything good they either look at it as nothing or interpret it in a bad way.... On the other hand, people who have goodwill hardly notice what is bad in another person, but instead notice all the person's good intentions and true thoughts, and the bad and wrong ones they interpret in a good way. (Secrets of Heaven §1079)

In this story we have a father, Noah, who was drunk and uncovered. We have his son Ham who went out and told his brothers about their father's failings, and we have Shem and Japheth, who turned their faces away and didn't see their father's mistake as they covered him.

Last week Jeff Smith invited us to consider how we might identify at times with the prodigal son, at times with the father, and at times with the older brother. Each of them represents a different part of us, or a different attitude we might have. Today's parable is similar. I might identify with Ham, if I have a lot of complaints and criticisms of someone else. Or am I like Shem and Japheth, paying no attention to my neighbor's faults and trying my hardest to put a good interpretation on them? Or am I like Noah, feeling judged and criticized by others?

Nakedness and Shame

The story of clothing begins with the parable of Adam and Eve, who at first were naked and not ashamed, but after disobeying the Lord became self-conscious and ashamed, trying to hide and cover their shame with clothing (Genesis 2, 3). Once they lost their innocence they experienced nakedness as shame, and God made them clothes of animal skins (see *Secrets of Heaven* §216, 9960:20). When we realize that we have done something bad or shameful, we want to cover it up, hide and keep up an appearance of being good. We don't want people to see what we have done, and we feel exposed and naked when our faults become known.

Many passages in the Lord's Word connect nakedness with shame.

I counsel you to buy from Me ...white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed. (Revelation 3:18)

Your nakedness shall be uncovered, Yes, your shame will be seen. (Isaiah 47:3)

Sometimes shame is portrayed not by complete nakedness but by dirty rags or being partly clothed. Isaiah writes,

“We are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags.” (64:6)

Loss and Grief

Rags, sackcloth and torn clothes are also a symbol of loss and grief, especially a loss of faith. When David heard about the death of Saul, he tore his clothes (2 Samuel 1:2, 10-12, *Secrets of Heaven* 4763.4) King Hezekiah and his servants tore their clothes and wore sackcloth when the Assyrians were too powerful for them (Isaiah 36:22; 37:1; 2 Kings 18:37; 19:1 *Secrets of Heaven* 4763.1). King Josiah tore his clothes and wore sackcloth after discovering that the book of the Law was “lost for so long and in their hearts and life had been blotted out” (*Secrets of Heaven* 4763.6). Jacob tore own clothes and wore sackcloth to express his grief over losing his son Joseph.

Temptations

We have seen the nakedness is symbolic of feelings of shame, fear of exposure, loss and grief. It may also involve feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness. New Church teachings say that those who are described as "naked" mean people who acknowledge that there is nothing good or true in themselves (*Secrets of Heaven* §4958). Feeling really bad about yourself; feeling worthless; feeling shame; feeling vulnerability: “There is nothing good and nothing true in me.” On a literal level, we can recognize that people who don't even have clothes are in extreme poverty and are lacking just about every good thing. On a deeper level, we may have clothes and other material blessings and still feel worthless, hopeless, or good for nothing.

Sometimes feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness are a result of spiritual trials or challenges that we must go through in order to grow spiritually and become more compassionate. These spiritual struggles are a result of conflict between angels and evil spirits who are with us.

There are evil spirits who at that time activate our false ideas and bad intentions.... In fact, they draw out of our memory whatever we have thought and done since early childhood. Evil spirits can do this so cleverly and wickedly as to defy description. But the angels who are with us draw out our good intentions and true ideas, and in this way defend us. (*Secrets of Heaven* §751)

We should also know about this fight that angels continually protect us and turn aside the bad things that evil spirits try to do to us. **Angels even protect what is wrong and bad in us**, for they know very well where our wrong ideas and bad intentions come from, namely from evil spirits and demons. We do not produce anything bad and wrong in ourselves, but it's the evil spirits with us who produce it. At the same time they make us believe that we do it on our own. They are so malignant! And what's more, at the moment when they are infusing and compelling this belief, they accuse us and condemn us, as I can confirm from many experiences. If we do not have faith in the Lord, we cannot be enlightened, but instead we believe that evil is from ourselves. Therefore we also blame ourselves for our evil, and we become like those bad spirits who are with us. This is the human condition. Angels know this, so they also defend our false ideas and bad intentions during the challenges of regeneration. (*Secrets of Heaven* §761, see also §6097)

Responding to evil

Some passages in the Word seem to say that we should never criticize judge or confront people about their faults.

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. Matthew 7:1-2

Are we even supposed to be happy when people insult and exclude us?

Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile *you*, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of Man's sake. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward *is* great in heaven, for in like manner their fathers did to the prophets. Luke 6:22-23

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have *your* cloak also. (Matthew 5:38-40)

Yet the Writings caution us against taking this too literally.

Who cannot see that these words are not to be understood according to the sense of the letter? For who will turn the left cheek to him who deals a blow on the right cheek? And who will give his cloak to him who would take away his coat? And who will give his property to all who ask? And who will not resist evil? (Secrets of Heaven 9049:5)

In fact, the idea that we should not judge or confront evil is qualified by the Lord's own words:

Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment. (John 7:24)

If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. (Luke 17:3)

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. (Matthew 18:15)

So, is it right that we stand up to evildoers, accusing them and confronting their evil?

If we see someone being attacked or abused we aren't meant to keep quiet about it or pretend that it isn't happening. We need to stand up for the victim or else report the abuse to people who are in a position to stop it. Simply letting the abuse continue doesn't help anyone.

If we ourselves are under attack, our lives, property, or name in danger, we have a right to defend ourselves, because protecting ourselves is protecting our usefulness to society and to the Lord.

Now, Shem and Japheth used a garment to cover their father. This represents not noticing his faults, yet also if we do notice them making an effort to correct them.

People who have faith coming from goodwill...notice good qualities, and if they do see bad qualities and wrong ideas they excuse them, and if possible try to correct the person's faults. (Secrets of Heaven 1079)

'The garment' that Shem and Japheth used to cover Noah's nakedness is the truth of faith, by means of which those evils were covered and corrected. An implanting of the truth and good of faith in the understanding part of the mind is described by their putting a garment on a shoulder, going backwards, and turning their faces away backwards. (Secrets of Heaven 9960:16)

So it is part of our duty when we see faults to try and correct them, and that involves offering people truth, which can bring about amendment of life. Does instructing them mean that we should tell them what they are doing wrong and give them advice about how to get back on track? Is that what is meant by amending their lives? I have a natural tendency to think that criticism and advice are the best ways to set someone on the right path. Yet there are many kinds of truth and many ways to share them.

When someone is under attack, we might bring truth like a sword to defend that person who is being attacked and to drive away the evildoers. On the other hand, truth can be like a stone, and stones can be helpful if you are building a shelter to protect someone from the wind and storms, or they can be misused in the story of the woman caught in the act of adultery, when they thought she should be stoned. This is a symbol of using truths for a false purpose. Some people really thirst for a deeper understanding. Water is like truth and when we want the kind of truth that can enter into us and become a part of our life. And in some cases when a person is very thirsty the water may be the best comfort that we can give. But is it not especially helpful if a person's problem is that they are naked.

But what kind of truth did Noah need? Noah was not hurting anyone. He was drunk and uncovered, yet he was in his own tent, and he was asleep. The fact that he soon woke up from his drunken stupor is evidence that the misdeeds of the people Noah represented were not from malice but from simplemindedness (see Secrets of Heaven 1088).

What kind of truth do we offer to someone who feels exposed, vulnerable, sad, worthless, and ashamed?

Woman who was caught in the act of adultery needed to know that the Lord has no desire to condemn anyone for whatever evils they have done. His only desire is to help people change with so that they can be happier.

Someone who already feels bad about themselves doesn't need to be told everything they're doing wrong. Someone who is grieving over a loss of their ideals and dreams doesn't need to be reminded of their failure. They need the kind of truths that offer comfort and protection, that give hope for a better life. Certain kinds of coverings we call "comforters" because they offer comfort. That's a kind of truth that the Lord offers us. The garment that Shem and Japheth put over their shoulders so that they would not see the nakedness of their father represents similar truths that offer protections, safety, comfort, and privacy. So these people need to know that the Lord loves them, something that may come across better by showing than by telling, by a listening ear and a gentle touch more than a lecture or confrontation.

The Lord came "To comfort all who mourn, To console those who mourn in Zion, To give them beauty for ashes, The oil of joy for mourning, The garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness" (Isaiah 61:2-3). By offering these kinds of truths to those who are spiritually naked, we may make it possible for them to say to the Lord, "You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; You have put off my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness" (Psalm 30:11).