

I've been ruminating all week on one sentence from this morning's gospel,
on a hard truth that Jesus is naming.

For all who do evil hate the light,
and do not come to the light,
so that their deeds may be exposed.

As we move through Lent I've been understanding more and more
why God chose crucifixion as the means of our salvation.

It's because God was bringing our most shameful secret
out of the darkness and into the light.

Our most shameful secret - that we are willing to humiliate
and murder anybody, even the Prince of Peace,
if that's what it takes to hold onto our own power -
God took that shameful truth out of the darkness and into the light
by walking Himself the way of the Cross.

And then God used the light of truth not to show us how bad we are,
not to condemn our wickedness...

but God brought our evil into the light so that we could
watch him use it as the means of our salvation.

"You're addicted to humiliation and murder?" God asks,
"then humiliation and murder will be what I use to save you."

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Jesus said we fear the light because we're scared our deeds will be exposed.
I've been thinking, though, that it's not just the DOERS of evil
who hide in the darkness.

Sometimes the victims of evil are scared of the light, too.

Too often, victims of evil want to keep hidden
the truth of what they've suffered, because they feel ashamed.

That's why the "Me Too" movement was so powerful
when it swept across the country a few years ago.

We got to see this powerful wave of women finding the strength
to bring their stories of abuse out of the darkness and into the light.

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Today, I want to focus on something that's a lot smaller than "Me, Too,"
but something that's been happening all over the country
and right here at Holy Trinity.

Like churches all over the country,
folks at Holy Trinity have been hit with the plague of cyber fraud.

Evil people reach out online to church members
pretending to be their pastor - at Holy Trinity, pretending to be me.

They ask for help with a confidential matter,
for money for a member who is in trouble with a private matter.

The people who fall prey to this -
both at Holy Trinity and around the country - are saints.
They are faithful and generous people who want to help
their church help somebody in need, no questions asked.

We've only had a handful of these thefts at Holy Trinity that I know of,
but it has totaled thousands of dollars.

I can only imagine how much has been stolen nationwide.

What bothers me the most is not the money. It's the betrayal.

Being victimized can leave you feeling diminished, and not just financially.
It can leave you feeling ashamed.

“If only I had been smart enough or quick enough or...
something enough to have kept this from happening.”

Being victimized can make you want to hide in the darkness.

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I was the victim of a fraud once.

Nothing earth-shattering, but I've never forgotten it.

In 2020 we were a few days from Xmas and my family was coming over
and my yard looked as neglected as it always does.

Some young men came by with a truck full of pine straw looking for work.
We agreed on a price per bale and they went to work.

I was feeling proud of myself for giving the yard a little dress-up
before my family arrived,
and for giving some work to young men who needed it.

When they got done they told me the number of bales they'd used
and it was 5x more than you could ever fit in my yard.
They showed me a pile of orange baling string that was “evidence”
of all those imaginary bales of pine straw.

The fraud was on.

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In a perfect world this would be where I tell you how I got out of the fraud,
how I called the police or outsmarted them or something.
But they were good at their deceit.

They talked fast. They got in my personal space.

They never threatened me but got just close enough
to make me think they might, just close enough to disorient me.
They had a game plan, and they won. And I lost.

Knowing exactly what was happening,
I gave in and was the victim of their fraud.

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Now, it wasn't the end of the world, of course. Nobody was hurt.
We could afford to lose the money, and the yard did look a lot better.
But I felt like a fool and it stuck with me. It sticks with me still.
Why wasn't I smarter, quicker, braver, stronger?

I told Emily and a few people what happened and I laughed about it,
but the shame stayed with me. It still does.
I kept the shame in the dark and because I did
the memory still pops up nearly every month.

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I tell that story because maybe we need to remember
that if God can take the very worst of our shame out of the darkness
and make it the means of our salvation,
then maybe God's people could build a place
where these lesser shames
could be brought out of the darkness and into the light.

In other words, church should be the place where bring to the light
the stuff our fear wants to hide in the darkness.

And that when we do that, our church could say,

“Thank you for trusting us enough to tell us what’s going on.
We love you. We’ve been struggling with stuff, too.
Maybe together, God can turn our shame into peace.”

Now, I know there’s a difference between sharing and oversharing,
I’ve seen that, too.

I know there’s a difference between privacy and secrets.

But real Christian community - real church -

is just a bunch of sinners trying to help one another,
not with judgment or scorn, but with love and support.

We have these groups here - the Men’s Room, Life in Christ,

Youngish Adults, Youth Group, Choir, the DOK,
the Brotherhood, and on and on.

If you carry around in your darkness a sense of shame -

because you were the victim of abuse or the victim of a fraud
or for any other reason -

I wonder if you could find in one of those groups
a place to name and bring into the light
the pain that hides in the dark?

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Jesus suffered the very worst of humanity’s darkness
and dragged it into the light to save us.

In his name, let’s be the place where we can

bring our shame out of the darkness,
and be told, “Welcome home. We love you.”

Amen.