Sunday, June 4, 1989
WHAT MAKES YOU BLUSH?
Jeremiah 6:13-15

“They did not know how to blush!” said Jeremiah of the people of his time. They had no sense of shame about anything. Nothing embarrassed them anymore. “They did not know how to blush.” Jeremiah’s indictment is also relevant for us. We too can lose our sense of shame. We can stop blushing. We can become too cool, too detached, insensitive. To put it another way — there can be something good about blushing. In this sermon today, I’m going to be advocating more blushing for all of us and the kind of blushing that will lead to action.

What about you? Have you stopped blushing? Or to ask the question in another way—"What makes you blush?” No doubt there are times when all of us blush. Many people like to think they are unshockable, but most of us still blush at public immodesty. And while young people are said to be remarkable in “keeping their cool,” I doubt that the blushing mechanism has been completely put on ice in most of the younger generations. In fact, most of us still have our blushing response working in personal situations.

Certainly, most of you still blush when you are flattered — perhaps as much in embarrassment about wanting that flattery as in pleasure or surprise over the fact that you got it. And perhaps you blush when you are caught having put something off or because you have forgotten an appointment.

Or maybe you blush when someone mentions something from the past which you had hoped they had forgotten. You might also blush when you arrive late for an occasion, or someone has what you think is the unpardonable bad taste to welcome you loudly.

There’s something good about all these kinds of blushing, something wonderfully human. It shows that you have emotion and feeling and can be touched. Blushing is a physical sign that reveals a sensitiveness, like crying or laughing. Abraham Heschel has said that the loss of embarrassment is a decisive step toward the loss of humanness.

Perhaps you are one of those who find yourself blushing rather easily about matters of taste. These occasions, too, are often highly personal. What makes some people blush might not affect others in the same way. As I visit various cities around the country and buy the local newspaper and read the personal ads, I find myself blushing at times. And there are times when I blush because of the explicit sexual scenes and those with raw violence now frequently a part of the movies, both in theaters and on television.

What makes you blush? Many people blush quite naturally and understandably.

However, there’s another kind of blushing that enough of us, who call ourselves Christians, may not be doing. And that’s what the prophet Jeremiah was concerned about when he said, “They did not know how to blush.” Jeremiah was talking about the flushed, hot humiliation in the face of intolerable facts; the standing accused of one’s complicity in something that is terribly damaging to our brothers and sisters in the human race, the blush that burns the face and the soul. Jeremiah was talking about the blush that leads to confession and a resolution to change things.

It was this level of blushing, or rather the no-blushing issue, which the prophet was talking about again and again. The incredible hypocrisy of some of the most religious people of his time, boasting in their wisdom and lying through their teeth; the greed of the already rich, angling for more by an unconscionable exploiting of the poor, the maintenance of an unusually good deal by the professional religious leaders of his time, healing the wounds of people lightly, crying “Peace, Peace,” where there was no peace. As Jeremiah put it, “Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush.”

I thought of Jeremiah and his statement, “They did not know how to blush,” when I read Mike Royko’s column in last Tuesday’s Lincoln Star. Royko pointed out that opinion polls have shown that an overwhelming majority of Americans have little or no interest in the troubles of House Speaker Jim Wright, who resigned this past week, or in the whole ethics discussion now going on in Congress.

While Wright’s ethics or the lack of them might be the talk of the nation’s capital, the story has little interest in other parts of the country. Royko asks in his column: “Don’t we care about what our leaders are up to?” It’s like asking, “Doesn’t anyone know how to blush anymore?” Are we getting so used to unethical practices that we don’t pay any attention? The people who are being unethical certainly don’t know how to blush anymore.

Mike Royko believes, according to his column, that House Speaker Jim Wright’s story is dull as far as the American public is concerned because it lacks two elements that always capture the public’s imagination and interest: sex and booze. We don’t blush about these much anymore either; we merely like to read about them. Then Royko mentioned several incidents from the past in his column. Remember the Fanne Foxe episode with Wilbur Mills? Miss Foxe even wrote a book later on about her relationship with the congressman from Arkansas, and it sold a lot of copies, although as a literary work, it had much to be desired. And when most people read the book, my hunch is they didn’t blush.

“They did not know how to blush.” We, in our time, blush less and less about violence, especially in the movies and on television. We take it for granted. The new movie, Road House, is a prime example — no plot to speak of — only every kind of violence imaginable. Like Jeremiah, I worry because, as a people, we are losing our sensitivity. We get used to things. Our senses are dulled.

I wonder too if we are blushing enough over the increased reports of violence within families — spouse abuse, child abuse. Or have our senses become dulled here too because we hear so much about it that we no longer pay any attention?

What makes YOU blush? I hope YOU will blush about some of these statistics. In 1986, one out of five American children lived in poverty, and the number of children living in poor families increased by 2.5 million or 26% between 1979 and 1986, totaling nearly 13 million children in 1986.

In 1986, the income gap between the rich and the poor hit its widest point in 40 years. The wealthiest 20% of American families received 43.7% of the national family income, the highest percentage ever recorded. The poorest 40% of American families received only 15.4% of the national income, the lowest percentage ever recorded.

The United States has a higher percentage of children in poverty than those in seven other Western countries: 80% higher than the rate in Canada, nearly 60% higher than the rate in Great Britain, and more than double the rate in Germany, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland. We also have a higher infant mortality rate than most of the western European countries.

I don't know about you, but such facts as these make me blush. I don't have any easy or simple answers for such problems. That's because there are no easy and simple solutions to problems of poverty and homelessness. But I do know that sensitivity, being embarrassed so much that we blush, is the first step toward any solution. I also believe that when enough people who call themselves Christians begin to blush, change will occur for the better.

This kind of blushing means that the moral alarm has gone off inside of you somewhere; that the blood has gone charging through your system, making your body squirm and your face red.

Non-violent protests, such as we have seen taking place in China during the past weeks, are a kind of public blushing. The non-violent demonstrations in this country, especially during the 1960s around the issue of civil rights, were also a kind of public blushing. There is a moral power in this kind of blushing which, in its own way, begins to bring about change.

What makes you blush? There's a lot to blush about.

Not very long ago, I read in the Wall Street Journal about one of the higher-ups in the Defense Department who told about visiting an industrial plant that was a year behind in its defense project schedule. After a couple of hours, it was apparent the company knew it would be at least a year off schedule on the day the contract was signed. He said, "I asked the manager why he offered to do the job in one year less than was possible." The essence of his reply was, "Yes, we knew we could not meet the terms of the contract, but there was no way to get the contract if we told the truth." And the manager didn't blush a bit.

Jeremiah's words come back to us, "Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed. They did not know how to blush."

What makes you blush? Perhaps each one of us needs to make a list of what makes us blush, from personal matters to societal issues.

I think it's a blushing matter that more often than not, less than half of the registered voters in this country exercise their right to vote. The continuing slaughter on our nation's highways is a blushing matter for all of us, especially those injuries and deaths caused by drunk drivers. I blush because I know that our federal government still subsidizes tobacco while at the same time we know that smoking is the cause of more health problems than we can even imagine. I blush because of the way we have been treating the environment in which we live, the way in which we pollute the air and the shorelines.

What makes YOU blush?

John Hersey, the writer, has been a frequent visitor in the 6th Circuit Court of Connecticut, sitting in New Haven. What he saw there caused him to blush. Here's how he described the scene:

“The 6th Circuit Courtroom, which some New Haven lawyers call ‘the pit,’ is a great dingy box of passions. Two stories high, its flaking ceiling supported by metal stanchions, with tall dusty windows and creaking floors — what faces one sees there, ravaged, jaunty, dazed, disenchanted, raging, resigned. A man in his forties found intoxicated, clutching in his arms a stuffed tiger nearly as tall as he, his constant companion and only comfort; a natty type accused of gambling, in a whipcord bush jacket and knickers and smartly polished leather boots; three red-eyed minors in blue jeans, accused of armed robbery; a woman booked as a prostitute; an empty-faced teenager held for possession — this place and many others like it are society’s open sores. A hundred cases a morning. Breaking and entering, assault, gambling, pimping, prostitution, found drunk, armed robbery, non-support, welfare fraud, disturbing the peace.” Who blushes anymore?

And what about your personal religious faith? I intend this as an indictment that begins with me and that some of you may feel extends to you; that somewhere, somehow in the past we suspended the whole matter of deepening and growing in our Christian faith. Is that something you might want to blush about?

Maybe we need to come to worship blushing, not in a mood of self-condemnation, but in the full blush of knowing that we stand accused by our dealing lightly with our own lives, as well as dealing lightly with the lives of others, and dealing lightly with our relationship to God.

Blushing is a kind of public exposure. Our very nerve ends stand exposed. But is this not our calling as Christians — to be, in the most raw sense, aware of the pains and torments of our brothers and sisters of the human race and of the pains and torments of mother earth? I believe that when we blush, God blushes with us. The Good News is that God is aware of the pains and torments of all of us, and God wants to work through us to bring healing. Amen.