

“The Prayer of David”

Psalm 51

Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church

January 29, 2023

Several years ago, a new iPhone app was created by two Catholic brothers to help a person make his or her confession and then receive instant absolution. For those of you not acquainted with contemporary computer lingo, an “app” or “application” is a downloaded piece of software which helps the user to perform a particular task. For instance, if I want to hear music, I press the icon (or symbol) to an app on my phone called Pandora and then I’m able to hear whatever kind of music I’d like. If I want to take photos on my phone, I hit another icon to an app and it instantly turns into a camera. Then if I want to see all the photos I’ve taken all together, I touch still ANOTHER icon and ANOTHER app opens which displays all my pictures by date and in the order in which they were taken.

This new app which turns your phone into a Catholic confessional is not a session with a virtual priest. Rather, it is a program that takes you through the Ten Commandments, helps you to examine your conscience and any sins you may have committed, and then after having confessed, it will pronounce you completely forgiven. Users of the program are assured that the site is secure to prevent others from breaking in and hearing your sins. The app’s creators are clear that it’s not meant to be a SUBSTITUTE for church but to encourage persons to RETURN to church and that it has even received the blessing of some high-ranking Catholic officials. If only true confession was that easy to make and forgiveness so simple to obtain.

Our scripture lesson, however, certainly tells us OTHERWISE, that TRUE repentance is hard and that it is a highly intimate process- one that involves humility and self-reflection, the reception of God’s forgiveness and a new beginning which results in praise and gratitude to God. Psalm 51 is known as a “penitential” psalm and, like Job’s prayer from several weeks back, it TOO is a prayer of personal lament. The person suffers, not from physical pain or tragedy in his life but rather from an anguish of the soul due to the presence of sin in his life- sin which threatens to separate him from his God. Although the top of the psalm bears the ascription “*To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him after he had gone in to Bathsheba,*” it is generally acknowledged that David was NOT the author but that it was composed hundreds of years AFTERWARDS with probably the story of David’s sin serving for its inspiration.

Of course, the story of David and Bathsheba is familiar to us all. As king of Israel, he had committed adultery and then murder by taking Bathsheba for himself and having her husband killed in an effort to hide his sin. When he is confronted by Nathan the prophet who tells David a parable which has the effect of acting as a mirror held up to his face, he realizes he has been exposed for what he has done but even MORE disturbingly, for what he has BECOME. Psalm 51 is therefore his cry before God that he is in desperate need of pardon and restoration. What he wants more than anything in the world is a new beginning, the chance to start all over again on a brand new foundation- it is the deepest and most persistent need of any human heart.

The psalmist begins by imploring God for mercy on the basis of his steadfast love. He appeals to God to blot out his transgressions and cleanse him from all iniquity. He recognizes that his terrible sin was far MORE than an offense against Bathsheba and her husband, it was ultimately a sin against GOD: "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned," he declares. He refuses to cast blame on others and assumes full responsibility for his deed. The problem, he says, lies WITH him and IN him- in his "inward being." Therefore, knowing how deceitful his own heart has become, he begs God for a NEW one: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." He makes a vow that if God were to save him from his sin and guilt, he would forever praise God for his faithfulness; he would teach other sinners the ways of God and it would result in THEIR conversions even as his OWN heart had been changed. He confesses that God does not delight in animal sacrifice and burnt offerings but rather the acceptable sacrifice of a broken and contrite heart. They suggest that worship and animal sacrifice will ONLY be pleasing unto God when we have yielded our spirit unto God FIRST.

What a far cry this prayer is from the first prayer most of us learned as children, the one we used to say just before bedtime: "Now I lay me down to sleep..." With Psalm 51, there is no small talk involved, no chit-chatting with God. Rather, it is "deep calling unto deep" as the psalmist writes elsewhere; there is nothing shallow and superficial about them. When we put these same words in our OWN mouths, they become the most personal and perhaps most HONEST prayer you or I shall ever make- a plea for forgiveness and a new start in life.

You see, to pray "Father, forgive me" is to say we are sorry; it is to admit that we KNEW what we should have done but DIDN'T DO it. To say "forgive me" is to confess our wrongdoing, our insensitivity, our lack of love, our gross selfishness. It is to admit that we have hurt someone and don't want to hurt that person ever again. In fact, it is to value a relationship SO MUCH, whether with a parent, a spouse, a child, a friend, or even with God, that we don't want ANYTHING to ever stand between us. To say "forgive me" is to reconcile ourselves with another, to lay aside all arrogance and pride and admit how important that other person is to our life. Forgiveness IS reconciliation. In fact, pure and simple, forgiveness is the GOSPEL!

Throughout the years of simply examining my OWN heart as well as listening to the complaint of OTHERS, I've learned there is a condition, a spiritual malady that is common to each and every one of us- we all experience sensations of nagging guilt and deep shame and often, we don't know WHY. After all, had we stolen something that didn't belong to us or maliciously destroyed someone else's property, then we could understand it. We could even have done something to RECTIFY the wrong such as made amends and thus cleared our conscience, but NO, the guilt we sense actually goes MUCH DEEPER than that. It is a profound feeling of remorse that results from the accumulation of a lifetime of small petty lies, sneaky acts which we knew we wouldn't get caught, and repeated violations of trust. Our guilt is the product of all those nameless acts--conscious and unconscious--that one commits throughout a lifetime: the need to feel superior; the need to constantly have our own way; the thoughtless, selfish acts that disregards the rights of others. The guilt we feel is the product of sin in our heart, and what we need is nothing less than to have that sin erased, to have our consciences cleared, to receive the promise of a new beginning- in other words, to know that we are TRULY FORGIVEN.

I was a huge fan of the great English rocker Joe Cocker who lost his life several years ago to cancer. He had one of the most distinctive voices in all of music as anyone who's ever heard his version of "With a Little Help from My Friends" or "Feelin' Alright" can attest. Rolling Stone Magazine listed him #97 on the list of the 100 greatest singers of all time. However, with all the success that came his way, there also came some hard times. He struggled with drugs, alcohol, and financial debt, all of which he would openly discuss. By his own admission, "It was a long road back. A lot of times when you're young and carefree, you don't realize, when you tip over the edge, how difficult it is to climb back in."

One of his final albums was entitled "Hard Knocks" and it was a personal testimony to the possibility of redemption in every person's life. One of the most unforgettable tracks on it is a song entitled "Unforgiven" and it begins like this:

*I don't wanna be here—I don't wanna be here at all  
Stuck in my head- trapped inside these walls  
So much regret—so much pain  
I'm drowning slowly- in the mess that I made  
I don't wanna be here--I don't wanna be here at all.*

Between each subsequent verse, the refrain goes:

*Can I let it go—or will it haunt my soul  
How did I get this way—god I feel so afraid  
Will I be a better man—will I learn to understand  
I can't keep on living--unforgiven*

Here, Cocker was singing about HIMSELF- it was the earnest cry of one wanting so desperately to be forgiven, to receive absolution for all the hurt he has caused, for all the abuses and excuses which broke the hearts and violated the trust of those who loved and cared for him most. He confesses that with so much regret and so much pain, he finds himself slowly drowning in the mess he made. He knows he just can't keep on living- unforgiven.

Before he died in December of 2014, Cocker was interviewed on National Public Radio and asked when he finds himself alone, if there was one song of his in particular which he favors over every other, which he ends up singing to himself. Cocker didn't hesitate to name it- "You Are So Beautiful," probably his most FAMOUS song. It was written by Billy Preston, a wonderful singer and musician in his own right, who grew up playing the organ in church and ORIGINALLY wrote the lyrics about JESUS CHRIST- the song was in fact an ode to him, a point Cocker himself shared with the interviewer. The lyrics to that song are simple and yet packed with pure emotion:

*You are so beautiful to me  
You are so beautiful to me  
Can't you see  
You're everything I hoped for  
You're everything I need  
You are so beautiful to me*

*Such joy and happiness you bring  
Such joy and happiness you bring  
Like a dream  
A guiding light that shines in the night  
Heavens gift to me  
You are so beautiful to me*

After all those years of performances and hard living, Joe Cocker had finally found the pardon and peace he so desperately sought. You see, the forgiveness that his heart and soul yearned so deeply for was found at last in the person of a carpenter from Nazareth who cried out from his cross, “FATHER, FORGIVE THEM for they know not what they do!” Jesus opened the door that made it now possible for even the WORST of sinners to receive forgiveness. He made it possible for each of us to become recipients of God’s “grace”- a word I define as “the opportunity for a new beginning, the chance to start all over again with a fresh clean slate.” Grace allows us to live again after having been FORGIVEN our sins, FORGIVEN our past failures and indiscretions, FORGIVEN for all those slights and hurts that injured others over the years. ABOVE ALL, grace means FREEDOM for it is to find oneself delivered from the ball and chain of guilt and self-recrimination that never stops accusing us, that never stops reminding us just what a terrible human being we are and how worthless we have become due to all the mistakes and failures of our past. It thus frees us from all that so that we can once again face the future with new hope and rediscover a new sense of joy that may have left us many years before.

My friends, God’s forgiveness is the most powerful therapeutic in the world. Karl Menninger, the famed psychiatrist, once said that if he could convince the patients in psychiatric hospitals that their sins were forgiven, 75% of them could walk out the very next day! If someone REALLY, TRULY believes that God has forgiven him or her, then the burden of shame and guilt and the fear that lies at the heart of it starts to disappear. FORGIVENESS ALONE has the power to remove lingering hurts, to destroy devastating secrets, and to reconcile old enemies. Forgiveness is at bottom “a new beginning,” an act that makes everything fresh again. It does not always take away the hurt nor does it deny the past injury- it merely refuses to let them stand in the way of a brand new start.

However, forgiveness as an act of grace is MORE than some feeling, some sensation that we’ve been washed clean and our troubled conscience is now calmed. Forgiveness is ABOVE ALL an ACTIVITY, a willful event we participate in. It means once we’ve experienced the forgiveness which God has assured us of, we are THEN to actively reconcile ourselves with OTHERS whom WE have either hurt or who may have injured US. It means taking the steps in re-establishing a broken relationship in the same way that God has taken those SAME steps in reconciling US to HIMSELF. It’s easy to pray the Prayer of Confession as we do each Sunday and then after receiving the Assurance of Pardon, sing the Gloria Patri in which we thank God for God’s forgiveness. However, if we leave this sanctuary with an unforgiving heart towards ANYONE, then all our confessing and glorias will have been in vain. After all, isn’t that what the Church is SUPPOSED TO BE- a community of healing, a fellowship of the forgiven who GO ON forgiving even as WE have been forgiven. We can only be a haven of help—to others as well as to ourselves--to the extent we practice receiving God’s forgiveness and then extending that SAME love and forgiveness TO OTHERS again and again and STILL again.

This past week, the Academy Award nominations were announced and next month, they will be handed out. At the 83rd Academy Awards back in 2010, one of my favorite movies--*The King's Speech*--received 12 Oscar nominations, more than any other film that year. It would go on to win for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, and Best Original Screenplay. It concerns King George VI of England--the father of the late Queen Elizabeth--and his attempts to overcome his terrible fear of public speaking due to a severe stutter he had developed as a child. The King (brilliantly portrayed by Colin Firth) has an impediment SO bad that while he was yet the Duke of York, he was terrified at the thought of ever becoming king himself where he would then have to speak publicly on a regular basis. In an attempt to overcome his handicap, he hires a most unconventional speech therapist named Lionel Logue (played by the superb Australian actor Geoffrey Rush) out of which is born a most endearing and enduring friendship.

At the end of the movie, Germany has attacked Poland and the King, in what will be the MOST IMPORTANT speech of his life, has to alert his nation that England is now at war. His therapist ushers him into a specially designed set to lower his anxiety level where just the two of them will be while he addresses his countrymen. Once George is seated before the microphones, Logue looks him straight in the eyes and gives him a simple word of instruction that is really the key to ALL successful speechmaking. He says to him, "Forget everything else and speak only to me- as to a friend." "Forget everything else and speak only to me- as to a friend"- that simple word of advice is not only the key to success in every public speech, it is also the essence of all TRUE PRAYER: to forget EVERYTHING ELSE and address ONLY GOD as though speaking to a friend. After all, what MORE is prayer than THAT!

If Psalm 51 is to become our OWN personal confession, then THAT'S where it has to begin- by forgetting everything else--all our pride, all our fears, all our anger and hurts and regrets--and just opening up our heart to God as though speaking to a close personal friend for that is what God desires of us MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE! The reason David could speak so openly and honestly and on the most intimate of terms with God in the FIRST place was because he knew that Jehovah was above ALL ELSE- a FRIEND, someone who loved him with an everlasting love and promised REGARDLESS OF HOW GREAT OR HOW MANY sins he had committed in his past would NEVER LEAVE OR FORSAKE HIM- EVER!

This means we always have before us the opportunity for a new beginning, the chance to start all over again with a fresh clean slate all due to the love and the grace of God. But it ALSO means we have to be willing to FORGIVE OTHERS, REGARDLESS of how TERRIBLE the sin or SHAMEFUL the deed and to do so FREELY even as God has done FOR US. That implies forgiving WITHOUT PRE-CONDITIONS, even if their personality or philosophy or political views or lifestyle is different from our own. We have to learn to ACCEPT persons TOTALLY AND WITHOUT CRITICISM or PREJUDICE or JUDGMENT. For unless we DO, we can NEVER become a healing community and the chances of our fellowship growing and becoming all that God would have us to be will only remain a distant dream. Let us pray...

*Create in us a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within us. Do not cast us from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from us. Restore to us the joy of your salvation and grant us a willing spirit, to sustain us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*