

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, May 02, 2021

Hymns: Come O Fount of Every Blessing; Create in me a clean heart;

670 - Amazing Grace

Scriptures: Psalm 51; 1 John 1:8-10

Sermon Title: A Heart Ready for Forgiveness

*Psalm 51:1-17 (New Century Version)*

*God, be merciful to me because you are loving.*

*Because you are always ready to be merciful, wipe out all my wrongs.*

*Wash away all my guilt and make me clean again.*

*I know about my wrongs, and I can't forget my sin.*

*You are the only one I have sinned against; I have done what you say is wrong.*

*You are right when you speak and fair when you judge.*

*I was brought into this world in sin. In sin my mother gave birth to me.*

*You want me to be completely truthful, so teach me wisdom.*

*Take away my sin, and I will be clean. Wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.*

*Make me hear sounds of joy and gladness; let me be happy again.*

*Turn your face from my sins and wipe out all my guilt.*

*Create in me a pure heart, God, and make my spirit right again.*

*Do not send me away from you or take your Holy Spirit away from me.*

*Give me back the joy of your salvation.*

*Keep me strong by giving me a willing spirit.*

*Then I will teach your ways to those who do wrong, and sinners will turn back to you.*

*God, save me from the guilt of sin, God of my salvation,*

*and I will sing about your goodness.*

*Lord, let me speak so I may praise you.*

*You are not pleased by sacrifices, or I would give them.*

*You don't want burnt offerings.*

*The sacrifice God wants is a broken spirit.*

*God, you will not reject a heart that is broken and sorry for sin.*

*1 John 1:8-10*

*If we claim that we're free of sin, we're only fooling ourselves. A claim like that is errant nonsense. On the other hand, if we admit our sins, make a clean break of them, he won't let us down; God will be true to himself. He'll forgive our sins and purge us of all wrongdoing. If we claim that we've never sinned, we out and out contradict God, make a liar out of him. A claim like that only shows off our ignorance of God.*

Last week, we heard an astonishing story of forgiveness – about how the Apostle Paul and the Deacon Philip were reconciled, Philip even inviting Paul to stay with he and his family, despite Paul’s supervision and approval of the murder of Philip’s friend Stephen, in those years before Paul had met Jesus. Forgiveness changes lives. It certainly changed Paul. And it can change us as well.

And it seemed to me after last Sunday that we had only scraped the surface of forgiveness. So central is forgiveness to our lives as Christians – the forgiveness we receive from God, and the forgiveness we extend to others – I feel the need to go back to the Scriptures, for another look at forgiveness. This time, however, the focus will be on another facet of forgiveness – the condition of the heart which is necessary to receive it.

What do I mean by that? When my son Jacob was just a little guy, he often found himself in a situation where he was required to say sorry – most often to his sister Hannah. The scene was replayed so frequently, I can hear it like it was yesterday. “Tell you sister you’re sorry.” “FINE. SORRY.” “Not like that! Say it like you mean it!” “SORRREEEEE!” Not surprisingly, this resulted in someone being sent to their room, until they were ready to say it, and mean it. That is to say, forgiveness was offered, but required the condition of the heart necessary to receive it. Or, in other words, forgiveness is both offered and available to us. But we do have to be ready to receive it. And there’s no better example than King David.

We just read a prayer of David’s – Psalm 51, a heart-rending prayer of confession, forgiveness and restoration. You might wonder out of what context the prayer comes - and here is the background.

The background’s name is Bathsheba, and you might remember her as the one who took a long bath, outside on her roof, in the gentle breeze of a warm Jerusalem night, the light of the moon playing upon her as she fell under the amorous gaze of the King. David, after a long, hot day kinging, or whatever it is Kings do, had gone up to the palace penthouse and a stroll through the roof garden, when looking down over the city, he caught sight of her, bathing on her rooftop, her oiled skin glistening in the moonlight like a peeled pear. He had to have her, and have her he did, and when the possibility of a jealous husband arose, he arranged to have the fellow killed, for after all, who is King here anyway?

The days and weeks and months pass, and we assume that the King’s conscience is rendered mute by the timpani of lust which rushes to his head whenever he sees, smells, or even thinks of Bathsheba in the bath, or the bed. His conscience undisturbed, David happily welcomes his religious advisor, Nathan the prophet, into the throne

room. Nathan has a story. The King lends an ear. “There were two men in a certain town,” Nathan begins, “one rich and the other poor.”

*“The rich man owned a lot of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had only one little lamb that he had bought and raised. The lamb became a pet for him and his children. He even let it eat from his plate and drink from his cup and sleep on his lap. The lamb was like one of his own children.*

*“One day someone came to visit the rich man, but the rich man didn’t want to kill any of his own sheep or cattle and serve it to the visitor. So he stole the poor man’s little lamb and served it instead.”*

*David was furious with the rich man and said to Nathan, “I swear by the living Lord that the man who did this deserves to die! And because he didn’t have any pity on the poor man, he will have to pay four times what the lamb was worth.”*

*Then Nathan told David: “You are that rich man!” (2 Samuel 12:1-7)*

And David gets the point. He had everything. Power. Palaces. Wives. Uriah had one thing – Bathsheba. And not only did David steal her, he sent Uriah to his death to cover his tracks. He has fallen, has David. Not only has he fallen, but, worse yet, he got caught, which is generally what we’re afraid of. Falling into sin is like jumping off a cliff – for a while, everything is a rush. Getting caught is like what happens when, like Wile E. Coyote, you hit the bottom. He’s fallen, he got caught, he’s hit bottom, and now what, now what?

Which brings us to the moment of truth. At this moment, David has several options open before him. Number one, he can deny. “Never heard of her. Never laid eyes, or anything else, on her. Never stood on the balcony of my palace as she bathed in the altogether and out-of-doors, never had her hubby bumped off, and never, ever, did I take a poor man’s sheep.” Being a politician, denial is what comes naturally to David, and to be fair, denial is most often our first instinct as well; but King David, confronted by Nathan, doesn’t. Denial, option one, is off the table.

Option two is, he can laugh it off. “Everybody’s doing it, Nathan,” David might say, “get with the program. Don’t you watch any TV? It’s the way of the world. Maybe YOU should get out a little more, put a smile on your face. You got one life to live, Nathan, don’t let it pass you by. You’re not getting younger (etc, etc).” We try similar excuses all the time; but, in this case, David doesn’t. Minimizing the seriousness of our sin, option two, is off the table.

Thirdly, he could try to ignore it, or brush it aside. “Too late now, Nathan,” he might say, “no use crying over spilled milk. What’s past is past. The deed is done.

Uriah's dead. Bathsheba's in my bed. It happened, that's all. Better just get on with life." Ignore it, move on, and it will simply go away. Except it doesn't. So David didn't do that, either. Harder, I guess, with murder on your hands.

What's he going to do? He's fallen, but will he get back up? Or will he let this eat away at him till he joins Uriah in the ground? What's his answer?

Psalm 51 is the prayer David prays when, blood draining from his face, jaw falling to the floor, eyes filling with tears, he realizes the enormity of what he has done. "Forgive me, please," he prays to God, (Psalms 51:10-11 NRSV): *Create in me a clean heart, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your Holy Spirit from me.*

He faced up to it. He admits his sin. He admits his responsibility. He repents. And he prays. He prays the prayer we read today, prayed today, sang today, still powerful, still moving, three thousand years later. And David prayed that prayer because the condition of his heart was ready – finally – to both seek and receive forgiveness.

And we pray that prayer because we, too, have fallen. Are fallen. Continue to fall. Continue to sin. Maybe not as dramatically as David; but still. Big cliff or little cliff, we all jump at sometime or another, and no matter how high or how low, it hurts to hit bottom. It damages us, in ways big and in ways small. It damages others, too. We're sinners. And it isn't just me with such a low opinion of us; listen to the Apostle John (1 John 1:8-10):

*If we claim that we're **free** of sin, we're only fooling ourselves. A claim like that is errant nonsense. On the other hand, if we admit our sins, make a clean break of them, he won't let us down; he'll be true to himself. He'll forgive our sins and purge us of all wrongdoing. If we claim that we've never sinned, we out and out contradict God, make a liar out of him. A claim like that only shows off our ignorance of God.*

There's old John, removing our options, in one fell swoop. No denying, no minimizing, no shrugging it off. We, like David, are far from perfect. We, like David, need to confess. Because we know that we need to start fresh. We need to clear the air. We need to tear down the walls which separate us from God and from one another. We need to confess. We need to be forgiven. And to do that, to receive forgiveness, our hearts need to be in the condition necessary to receive forgiveness.

That condition used to be called “remorse,” which is a word not often heard in our world anymore. It means to be genuinely sorrowful and regretful for what you have done. It is the necessary first step in seeking the forgiveness God so freely offers. And seeking forgiveness from God is the first step toward seeking forgiveness from others. Getting right with God is the first step toward getting right with ourselves, and with others. That’s why we start each service with prayers of confession. Sin’s sin, and we need to pray.

Being a Christian doesn’t mean you are perfect. Coming to church doesn’t mean you are without sin. But it does mean you are engaged in the process of forgiveness: seeking forgiveness from God, forgiving others, and seeking to restore the relationships our decisions and actions – or lack of action – have damaged.

Here’s another way of looking at it: The Pharisees were a very strict sect of Judaism, dedicating their lives to living in extremely careful obedience to the hundreds of commandments of their religious law. They stayed well away from people who were not as fastidious, and they particularly looked down their noses at those who made a living in cooperating with the pagan Roman government. So when Jesus called Matthew, also known as Levi, to be one of his disciples, the Pharisees were outraged. Listen to this story (Luke 5:27-32):

*As Jesus left the town, he saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at his tax collector’s booth. “Follow me and be my disciple,” Jesus said to him. So Levi got up, left everything, and followed him.*

*Later, Levi held a banquet in his home with Jesus as the guest of honor. Many of Levi’s fellow tax collectors and other guests also ate with them. But the Pharisees and their teachers of religious law complained bitterly to Jesus, “Why do you eat and drink with such scum?”*

*Jesus answered them, “Healthy people don’t need a doctor—sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are perfect, but those who know they are sinners and need to change their ways and turn to God.”*

Jesus, you see, didn’t come for the perfect. He couldn’t; they were convinced they had no need of him. Their hearts were closed to forgiveness, for they believed that all they did was right – which is where the phrase “self-righteous” comes from. Which is why Jesus said that he came for the imperfect, for those who know they need help, for those who know they need to change – in short, those whose hearts were in the necessary condition to receive forgiveness. Jesus came for us. He came for the murderer David. He came for the adulteress Bathsheba. He came for shifty Matthew and his friends. He came for me. He came for you. Why?

Because, for reasons far beyond our understanding, God loves us. God loves the world. God wants nothing more than the wounded relationships between us and God, between us and one another, between us and creation itself, to be healed. Be restored. Be made new. And when those relationships are made new, then we become new as well; the very nature of our lives changes. Suddenly, we live for life, and not for death; we live in peace, and not in egotistical isolation; we live as we were created to live, and as we shall live forevermore. We live as the Children of God. Imperfect. But forgiven. And forgiving.

We're not perfect yet; God knows, we're far from it. But, as David teaches us, to pray for forgiveness is to begin the journey of becoming the people Jesus would have us be. Imperfect. But forgiven. And forgiving.

And so we pray:

*God, be merciful to me because you are loving.*

*Because you are always ready to be merciful, wipe out all my wrongs.*

*Wash away all my guilt and make me clean again.*

*I know about my wrongs, and I can't forget my sin.*

*Take away my sin, and I will be clean. Wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.*

*Make me hear sounds of joy and gladness; let me be happy again.*

*Turn your face from my sins and wipe out all my guilt.*

*Create in me a pure heart, God, and make my spirit right again.*

*Do not send me away from you or take your Holy Spirit away from me.*

*Give me back the joy of your salvation.*

*Keep me strong by giving me a willing spirit.*

*The sacrifice God wants is a broken spirit.*

*God, you will not reject a heart that is broken and sorry for sin.*

A heart that is ready to be forgiven.

Thanks be to God for the healing of forgiveness. May it permeate our lives, our relationships, our world. May it be our prayer; may it be our beginning; may it be our end; may our hearts be in the necessary condition to receive forgiveness; may it be our response to the astonishing love and forgiveness of God. Amen.