

## THE CONFESSION OF A LIFETIME

### Psalm 51

The Twelve Step program of Alcoholics Anonymous and other organizations like it have a superb plan that brings a person who has harmed—or sinned against—another, back into a reconciled relationship. Sometimes people stumble and struggle in the process, but the “Big Book,” as it is called, gives persons paths to restored relationships. This congregation provides space for several Twelve Step groups. The Steps include these:

#4: Make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

#5: Admit to God, ourselves and to other human beings the exact nature of the wrong we have done.

Those steps are addressed in Psalm 51. If you were here last week, you may recall the words of the anthem: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me... Restore unto me the joy of my salvation.” For Jews certainly, for Roman Catholics as well, and truly for Protestants too, the biblical reminder to handle our sin business before we breathe our last brings peace to the soul. If we want salvation and peace, our lives must include confession of sins. Not just a perfunctory “sorry” to someone we accidentally bump into at the store. That’s just an accident. Dealing with sins takes carefully considered, honest, visceral cries to God accompanied by heartfelt confession to the one you have hurt. The holiest site for such confessions for Roman Catholics might be in a confessional with a priest. For Jews, the holiest site for such guttural confessions is the one wall in the Jerusalem Temple that is still standing; the Western Wall; often called the “Wailing Wall” because people come to wail to God, confessing sins, crying over losses, angry over injustices. It is quite a sight to see people in anguish at that holy wall. For us, you may come to a church building to confess; in fact, in our Rose Chapel are two

kneeling benches so a person can kneel before the railing or before the cross of Christ. Or find a quiet place at home. Confession is a key for forgiveness.

Last week I told the sordid story from 2 Samuel 11 & 12 of a fallen King David, who committed adultery and also had a man killed. He was stained with sin. Tradition has suggested that the words in Psalm 51 were the words of David when he offered his heartfelt confession to God. Even though the church ages ago decided to use the line and response Psalm that I sang today, that is the sanitized version of confession; it makes it fit for church. But true confession in David's day included a blood offering, the sweat of the confessor, and the tears of the confessor. It can be an anguishing process. James Luther Mays who was Professor Emeritus of Hebrew and Old Testament Interpretation at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia has written these words:

The sentence that is basic to all penitential prayer in the Old Testament is the simple confession, "I have sinned." Psalm 51 is the fullest exposition of that sentence in the Bible. Luther observed that whoever first called it a penitential Psalm "knew what he was doing.... Here the doctrine of true repentance is set forth before us." *Interpretation Psalms*, Louisville: John Knox Press 1994, p. 194.

In my Bible, and perhaps in yours, we find this introduction to Psalm 51:

"To the leader: a Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba." Goodness. That's hardly church talk! But it is in my Bible. Then we imagine David not just saying this, but proclaiming it from his toes: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love." David has always known that the Lord is someone who offers steadfast love. The Hebrew word is *hesed*. David leans on God's everlasting mercy as he continues: "According to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions." To blot ink or blood out of a cloth usually takes what was called in biblical times a "fuller;" a cleaner. We used to have

church members who cleaned clothes for a living. One time I accidentally spilled something on one of Mary Ann's beautiful needlepoint pictures. I knew to call the cleaners. "Bring it to us" they said. "Don't try to do it yourself." I brought it to them and it came back perfectly; in one day! David wanted God to "blot out" his transgressions like that! If that happened, he would have been at least as happy as I was getting the picture back in new condition! David asks God practically to send him to the cleaners, saying: "wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from sin." Sins are like germs that infect our souls. For a cut, many people use water to clean it, or an antiseptic, or antibiotic. For sins, it takes God's powerful cleansing Spirit, almost like baptism, to wash us whiter than snow. Here is David's admission, maybe one you'll need to say sometime too: "For I know my transgression, and my sin is always before me."

Like Jacob Marley wearing a heavy chain of sins in Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," the sinner is burdened the same way. Carrying sins is distracting and it saps your energy and focus. Now, I have a problem with verse 4. There it reads, "Against you, you alone, have I sinned." My father had a problem with the modern version of The Lord's Prayer that declared, "And forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." He said, "We can't sin against others; we can only sin against God." And he cited this verse. It's in the Bible but I struggle with that sentence. I think a person can sin against a person *and* against God by breaking a commandment such as bearing false witness, stealing, or killing. So that line troubles me. To me, David certainly sinned against Bathsheba and against Uriah. But Psalm 51 continues: "I have done evil in your sight." Now we are back to business, and David throws himself on the mercy of the court: "You are justified in your sentence" he declares to God, "and I will hold you blameless when you pass judgment." Finally, here's a source of the Doctrine of Original Sin as David declares "I was a sinner when my mother conceived me." That is difficult to digest.

As we move farther in the passage, David asks to have his sins “purged with hyssop” which is an herbal antiseptic. He wants God to wash him clean (meaning his soul) so it will be whiter than snow. Finally, as we heard last week, he asks God to create in him a clean heart. David desires a new heart, not a refurbished one or a remanufactured one. Those would be “good as new” hearts, but not actually new hearts. Sometimes a parent is given a bicycle that a child has banged up trying to learn how to ride it. It is scraped and a little bent. They think you as a parent can fix anything. The parent tries, gives it back to the child and says, “There! It’s good as new!” But the child’s discerning eyes do *not* think it is good as new. New is new! And that’s what David wants. He’s afraid that his old heart might one day be up to its old tricks. He can’t take a chance on that. “One new heart, please Lord” he pleads. Then his mouth, like ours in the same circumstance, is filled with praise and thanksgiving!

A real confession can set us on the road again: a road with a new bridge where an old relationship bridge lays in waste; with a heart that needs to be clean; not just good enough, but brand new! We need to leave old habits behind and become new creations! As we come to this holy meal, let’s remember the words of the Apostle’s Creed: we believe in the communion of saints and the forgiveness of sins. May we be comforted by both.

Let us pray:

O Great Captain of our lives on land, and on the sea, and in the air: teach us the power of repentance so that relationships with you and with others can be restored. Then wash our hearts clean too, so that we can begin anew, through the power of your Holy Spirit and in the name of Jesus. Amen.

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