

East Hartford
Lent 2 2014

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Psalm 51, John 3:1-21

Another "P" Word

Last Sunday - can we even remember last Sunday?? - when I spoke with our young folks during worship, I talked about Lent being a "P"season. P for purple, pennies, and prayer. There is at least one other "P" word that is foundational to the season of Lent, and more importantly to our overall spiritual health.

When, in an email, I asked you all to guess what that other "P" word for lent might be - several of you wrote back to say "penance" which was close, very close, to the "P" word that I had in mind, "penitence."

Why am I looking for penitence rather than penance? I was looking more for our attitude, the state of our hearts and souls, rather than the doing something to alleviate the discomfort that sincere remorse or regret creates within us.

I want to come to this idea and practice of penitence through the psalm that I appointed for our prayer this morning, psalm 51, one of the seven penitential psalms that are part of this ancient prayerbook. [The seven penitential psalms are Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143] This paraphrase of Psalm 51 is from my favorite book, *Psalms for Praying* by Nan Merrill which I use frequently in our worship.

Here is the place where the psalmist describes the attitude, the soul-state, that is penitence.

*O Gracious One, open my lips and
my mouth shall sing forth
your praise.*

*A sacrifice most appropriate is a
humble spirit;
a repentant and contrite heart,
O Merciful One,
is the gift You most desire.*

A more scholarly translation [NRSV] puts it this way:

*O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
16 For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.
The sacrifice acceptable to God[d] is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

Yet another contemporary translation [NCV] says:

*Lord, let me speak
so I may praise you.
16 You are not pleased by sacrifices, or I would give them.
You don't want burnt offerings.
17 The sacrifice God wants is a broken spirit.
God, you will not reject a heart that is broken and sorry for sin.*

A broken spirit, a humble spirit; a repentant, contrite, broken, sorry heart, O Merciful One is the gift you most desire. As you listen to these words, which of them can you receive most deeply, which of those descriptors most softens your heart, which do you hear as the most tender and loving invitation to repentance? xxxxxxxxxxx

I find my self responding, my defenses receding, my heart softening, my trust in God deepening when I hear Nan Merrill's language.

*For You do not want sacrifice;
You delight in our friendship
with You.
O Gracious One, open my lips and
my mouth shall sing forth
your praise.
A humble spirit;
a repentant and contrite heart,
O Merciful One,
is the gift You most desire.*

Friends, listen and hear the things what we ask of God as we pray this psalm.

*Have mercy on me,
forgive me
Lead me
guide my steps
Teach me,
teach me
Forgive
cleanse*

***Fill me with gladness;
help me to transform weakness into strength.**
Look not on my past mistakes*

***Create in me a clean heart,
put a new and right spirit within me.**
**Enfold me in the arms of love,
fill me with your Holy Spirit.**
Restore me to the place of joy in your saving grace,*

*Deliver me from the addictions of society,
O keep me from temptation
open my lips*

*melt our hearts of stone,
break through the fears
Guide our steps into the way of peace.*

Friends I want to ask: “What might it do for our spiritual health, if we were simply to pray those requests once a day - every day?” At the very least - it would be an excellent Lenten practice - in fact it would be an excellent lifetime practice.

I want to place one other truth in front of us for our meditation and heart’s appreciation.

The psalm begins:

*Have mercy on me, O Gracious one,
according to your steadfast love;
According to your abundant kindness
forgive me where my thoughts and
deeds have hurt others.*

When we receive the morning offering, you have heard me say, “give in accordance with your thanksgiving for the blessings you have received.” Or some times we say, let us give according to our ability.

The psalmist implores God to have mercy, to forgive - in accordance with God’s very being, according to God’s ability- “have mercy according to your love,” “forgive according to your kindness.”

Never does the psalmist even hint that we should be forgiven because we have followed all the rules in asking forgiveness, never does the psalmist suggest that we merit God’s forgiveness. Rather, the psalmist asks God to forgive and have mercy according to God’s being, that is according to God’s infinite love and boundless kindness.

Why does the church create and practice this whole season of Lent as a season of penitence? Why should we practice penitence?

Some quick, smart __ answers come immediately to mind - and each sounds hauntingly familiar, like me - as a mother, like my parents, like the church when I give church the power to direct me.

Because I said so!! - remember that one - hearing it? saying it? Grrr

Because it is good for us. True. Grrrrrrrrrrrrrr

Because it is right, just and helpful for salvation. Remember that one from the formal communion liturgy? It’s also true. Grrrrrrrrrrrr.

Let me give another answer - the psalmist’s answer drawn from his experience found in a different psalm of penitence, the one appointed for last week, Psalm 32.

When I kept things to myself,

*I felt weak deep inside me.
I moaned all day long.
Day and night you punished me.
My strength was gone as in the summer heat.*

*Then, the psalmist testifies,
Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.*

When we practice penitence, we discover new life. Much healing of a wounded spirit, restoration of a weary soul happens through the practice of penitence. How does that old line go? "Confession is good for the soul." It's true. The practice of penitence is the practice of sweet freedom in God's love.

Friends, it will come as absolutely no surprise that on this second Sunday of the season of Lent, I am going to invite us to ruminate on, to immerse, to sink, to settle ourselves into this penitential psalm. Let us so settle ourselves into this psalm that we allow the psalm to call us, or lead us, or push us into that spirit place of penitence where we speak the truth of the ways we limit love so that the One who loves without limits can heal our wounded souls, strengthen our weak knees, and free us from our self made prisons.

Amen