



Roanoke, Virginia
June 24, 2018

“Confession of Spirit”

Psalm 51:1-17
George C. Anderson

Prayer for Illumination and Call to Confession:

Holy God, create within us open and courageous hearts so we can receive your Word as a judgement to convict us, a means by which we can confess our sins, and as preparation for hearing and believing absolution. Amen.

Call to Confession:

In an *Everybody Loves Raymond* episode- or at least, as I remember the episode- Debra, Raymond’s wife, climbs into bed beside him. Raymond says something without thinking and, by Debra’s reaction, he knows he just said something wrong. He doesn’t know what, but he blurts out, “I’m sorry.”

A “word spell” to make another’s anger disappear; Psalm 51 is not that kind of confession.

I was in grade school. My younger sister, Becky, said something mean to me, and then something else mean to me. The third time she said something mean to me, I had enough. I thumped her in the head. Her scream was way out of proportion to the thump. It got mom’s attention and when she came to find out what was wrong, Becky told on me. “He hit me!” (Good grief, it was just a thump!) Mom demanded I apologize. “Sorry,” I said to her.

A required apology; Psalm 51 is not that kind of confession.

A celebrity or politician says something completely insensitive.... so insensitive that even in this age when we seem to celebrate rude and snarky, it is considered beyond the pale. The public figure has to issue a public apology.

A face saving apology; Psalm 51 is not that kind of confession.

Psalm 51 is not a strategy, or an act, or a requirement. It is a self-aware confession that comes of deepest pain and real hope. It is a hardy prayer that is more than capable of pulling double duty this morning as both our corporate *Prayer of Confession* and the *Scripture Lesson* for today’s sermon.

This introduction has been your Call to Confession. We will read Psalm 51 together as our corporate prayer, and conclude with our traditional response to the reading of scripture: “The Word of the Lord”/“Thanks be to God.” After a time of silence in which we will confess our private sins, we will sing our congregational response.

What will have to wait until the end of the sermon is the *Assurance of Pardon* and the *Gloria Patri*.

So, turn your attention to Psalm 51 on the bulletin insert. Let us confess our sins together. Let us pray.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love;
according to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!

³For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.

⁴Against thee, thee only, have I sinned,
and done that which is evil in thy sight,
so that thou art justified in thy sentence
and blameless in thy judgment.

⁵Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin did my mother conceive me.

⁶Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

⁷Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

⁸Fill me with joy and gladness;
let the bones which thou hast broken rejoice.

⁹Hide thy face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.

¹¹Cast me not away from thy presence,
and take not thy holy Spirit from me.

¹²Restore to me the joy of thy salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.

¹³Then I will teach transgressors thy ways,
and sinners will return to thee.

¹⁴Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,
thou God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of thy deliverance.

¹⁵O Lord, open thou my lips,
and my mouth shall show forth thy praise.

¹⁶For thou hast no delight in sacrifice;

were I to give a burnt offering, thou wouldst not be pleased.
17The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.

“The Word of the Lord” (“Thanks be to God”)

We grow silent to consider how honestly we have prayed this prayer.

Congregational Response (Hymn #466):

*Come and fill our hearts with your peace. You alone, O Lord, are holy.
Come and fill our hearts with your peace. Alleluia!*

Sermon:

In the pew bibles, an inscription to this psalm reads, “A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.” The inscription suggests that this psalm can be read as David’s confession of the sins of adultery and murder. I am going to argue that the wonderful healing power of this psalm is in its universality, that it is immediately available for any person or community humble, brave, honest, and hopeful enough to pray it. Still, David’s story is a good way to begin exploring this psalm.

You might know the story. Powerful King David betrays one of his most loyal soldiers. While Uriah is putting his life on the line fighting David’s enemy, the Philistines, David beds Bathsheba, Uriah’s wife. Some say David seduces Bathsheba and others say she seduces him; but do kings really have to go through the trouble of a real seduction? Some speak of a sense of entitlement among the poor. Power and privilege have their own sense of entitlement. David saw what he wanted. It wasn’t his to have, but he took it.

When David learns Bathsheba is pregnant, and after failed attempts to convince Uriah to come home from the front on leave so it will appear as if he conceived the child, David arranges to have Uriah killed in battle. He then takes Bathsheba as his wife.

He thinks the problem is solved until the prophet, Nathan, pays him a visit.

Nathan holds a “parable mirror” in front of David. He brings to David’s attention a travesty of justice. He tells of a rich man stealing a poor man’s only lamb. David, in a rage, says the man ought to be killed, and demands restitution... to which Nathan responds, “You are the man.”

Remarkably, King David’s response is immediate: “I have sinned against God.” I say it is remarkable because kings are not known for immediate apologies.

Now, let’s say that David wrote Psalm 51. This is a matter of debate among interpreters of the Bible, but let’s say he did. If he did, I don’t think he wrote it the day of Nathan’s visit. I don’t think that the moment Nathan walked from the room, David picked up a pen and parchment and wrote this poem.

No, what we have in Psalm 51 is a thoughtful and mature prayer of confession that can come only after aging in the womb of self-examination. Only after a long stretch of honesty, agony, and self-assessment can you have a prayer

- that so utterly lacks rationalization,
- that so clearly sees who is the most offended party,
- and so wisely knows from whom healing comes.

To explain what I mean, I offer a series of contrasts.

First contrast: This is not a “What I did” prayer but a “What I have become” prayer. This is not the prayer of someone saying, “I am sorry I called your cat ugly and I promise never to do it again.”

OK, that’s frivolous. It is not even the prayer of an abusive spouse or parent uttering an apology in tears, insisting, “It will never happen again,” and then saying the same thing to God and meaning it...., and then blacking an eye a few months later because the focus is on the act, not the internal cause.

It is not even David *in the moment* confessing sins of adultery and murder. Let’s all celebrate those who, if they make a mistake, admit it without covering up or blaming others. It is a wonderful thing to say, “I am sorry” for a specific wrong. But this is not that kind of prayer because Psalm 51 is not about an action but about a condition. It is not about a specific thing said or done but about the spirit behind what is said and done.

Jesus speaks to this in the Sermon on the Mount which I talked about last week.

- Behind the act of murder is the spirit of hatred.
- Behind the act of adultery is the spirit of objectifying lust.
- Behind the act of stealing is the spirit of greed.

These are examples Jesus gives. Can we add that behind the racist act, the sexist remark and the elitist dismissal are the sins of racism, sexism and elitism? (Beware of every ‘ism’... especially the ones you claim as your own.)

I wonder if those who have been attending this church a long time remember Ramiro Ros preaching from this pulpit. Ramiro was our wonderful missionary in Florida serving migrant workers and their families. He gave enormous energy to serving the poor families of his church and community, many of them undocumented, and he did so with love, compassion, humor and joy. “Humble” would be a word many of us who knew him well would use to describe him. Do any of you remember the *Prayer for Illumination* he prayed before preaching? It went something like this: “Forgive me Lord, for I am a miserable sinner, and if you leave me to myself, I will lead these, your children, astray. So speak through me so they will not be harmed.”

“A miserable sinner?” Really, Ramiro?

He would answer, “Yes, really. It is when we forget our sin and remember only our righteousness that we do our greatest harm.”

Psalm 51 is the confession of one who has looked hard at sins and discovered the sinner. She doesn't promise, "I won't do that again," but begs for help not to do that again because she knows of what she is capable.

"Wash me." "Purge me." "Put a new and right spirit within me."

Second Contrast: It is often necessary and understandable to speak of extenuating circumstances. Within a relationship, within counseling, within prayer, there is a place for conversation that allows one to explain what one was thinking, what one was going through, what the other did first....

Don't get enough sleep? It can impair your judgment. So can chronic pain. Something like an addiction can have its own logic. The way one has been raised can shape how you see the world. Family strife, local tragedy, world news; all can sour your mood. This is the "stuff" that we sometimes have to get out in the open and work out through conversation, counseling, and yes, prayer.

But notice how utterly void of explanation, rationalization, excuses or blame-sharing is Psalm 51. It is not that explanations and excuses don't matter, but this prayer has dealt with it already and moved on. After time has broken through hard layers of denial and rationalization, and even understandable explanation, this prayer is prayed.

I hear Psalm 51 echoed in Percy reflecting on a terrible divorce he had gone through years before (No surprise; Percy is not his real name, and this story is not a Roanoke story). The divorce was bitter and acrimonious. Both were to blame for their marriage failing. He said and did some terrible things in battles over custody and finances..., but, then again, so did she.

But time passed. Both re-married and both marriages were working. Their children had been hurt, but they had grown, worked through things, graduated, and two of the three were married themselves. I was to be the officiant at the marriage of the third child and at the rehearsal dinner, Percy told me why he and his ex-wife were comfortable around each other. He told me, "I don't care anymore what she had said and done. I forgave her. What I had a hard time doing was forgiving myself because of what I said and did. That's what I still confess in church. And I'm not trying to make God understand anymore. I just want God's forgiveness."

"Wash me." "Purge me." "Put a new and right spirit within me."

Third contrast: To state what is obvious but profound nonetheless is that this psalm is a prayer. This is not an apology to the people wronged, but a confession to God as the one who ultimately is wronged.

It is exceedingly sad to say it, but prayer is sometimes the only place confessions can go. David promised his people that, as king, he would be a shepherd and not a predator. What does he say to those who can no longer trust him? Uriah is dead. What can he now say to him?

But even if reconciliation is possible with others, or restitution made, this prayer is profoundly mature because it realizes that all sins are sins against God.

Isn't that what Jesus is trying to explain to us when he tells the parable that is known as the "Judgement of the Nations." To the righteous he says, "When you fed the hungry, welcomed the stranger, gave clothing to the naked, and visited the sick and the imprisoned, you did so to me." Then he says to the condemned, "When you did not do these things to others, you failed me."

To pray Psalm 51 is to understand the devastating truth of that parable. "Against you, God, and you only, have I sinned." It takes great courage to think about that.

- Every demeaning and belittling thing said of another person is said of God?
- Every violent act against another is an act of violence against God?
- Every mean spirited piece gossip is slander against God? Every betrayal of trust, every violation of another's rights or dignity?
- Every act of abuse against God's creation- everything we do to despoil the climate for those who will come after us?
- Every act of abuse of one's own body and spirit? God is wronged in all of it?

Yet, as devastating as it is to realize that harm of others, of our earth, and of ourselves are ways we harm God, let's remember that this is a prayer infused with hope. The greatest miracle of this prayer is that the one who is honest enough to confess, "Against you, and you only have I sinned," is also

- wise enough ask God to "Create in me," "Restore to me" "Deliver me from..."
- wise enough to ask of God, "Wash me," "Purge me," "Put a new and right spirit within me."
- wise enough to know that the one whose harsh judgment is justified is the one who has the power to save.

The God whose joy and gladness has been robbed through the abuse of what God loves is the one from whom joy and gladness can be found again.

Does that sound strange?

- How strange was it that the family of the shooter of Amish children received pastoral care from the families of those children?
- How strange is it that many marriages and friendships are strong because someone who was wronged became the agent of grace and healing for the other?
- How strange is it that many found an anchor in life from parents that they hurt and disappointed over and over again?

And so we have within this *Prayer of Confession* our *Assurance of Pardon* as well. It is right there in the confession of sin that is Psalm 51. Within the heart of the God we harm when we harm our world, others, and ourselves- within the healing heart of God- our broken and contrite spirits can find healing, joy, and gladness. The God whose judgement is justified, is the God whose mercy is sufficient. The assurance is embedded within the psalm just as forgiveness is embedded in the cross. This assurance gives us the courage to be honest enough and brave enough to pray the prayer at all.

I'll give the Assurance our Christian read: "Friends, believe the good news of the Gospel. In Jesus Christ whom we have wronged, we are forgiven. Thanks be to God."