

“Put a New and Right Spirit within Me”

Sermon for First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ),
Decatur, Georgia

Season of Eastertide, Sunday, May 5, 2013

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Worship Theme: Confession and Repentance

Holy Scriptures: Psalm 51

Prayer for Cleansing and Pardon

To the leader. A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;

according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

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

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

4 Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil

in your sight,

so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.

5 Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

6 You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

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

8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

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

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

11 Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

14 Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation,

and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

15 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.

17 The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;

a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

18 Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,

19 then you will delight in right sacrifices,

in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;

then bulls will be offered on your altar.

Let us pray:

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

11 Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

Strive for God's heart

One of my mentors in the ministry

was asked by a former congregation that he had served a while back

to fill out a questionnaire that reflected on his years as a church pastor.

He was asked to list his mentors,

such as those who had influenced and shaped his servant leadership.

He thought, *"Hmmm. Whom should I list? Seminary faculty? Regional ministers?*

Colleagues? Scholars or authors, priests or prophets?"

The more he reflected the more he came to the realization

that the folks who molded him

more than anyone or anything else

were the members and friends in his churches.

While reflecting on this passage of Holy Scripture after 53 years on this side of birth,

what has bubbled up repeatedly to the surface of my
mind

is that the folks who have modeled for this soul

what it means to forgive sins and
mistakes,

to reconcile and restore broken
relationships,

to be open to receiving a
new and right spirit of God

are everyday folks
in churches and
communities

in which I've
been blessed to
participate.

You, my friends and fellow members, you, my church
compadres, are my role models,

especially when it comes to seeing Psalm 51 in action.

As I read and reflect, pray and ponder on the depth and
breadth

of the love of God as expressed in the song of Psalm
51,

the images and memories of the living out of
this passage

are the folks and friends in churches and
communities

from the scenes of my life.

You've shared your spirits, your wisdom, and your love,

and you have taught this transgressor your ways.

My heart and mind and body and soul return again and
again to your presence,

grateful and renewed.

You are the Gospel I experience;

you're the Body of Christ in which my soul resonates.

You are the gift of grace which sustains my faith,

the mercy which bolsters my daily walk with Christ in
the community.

*You "restore to me the joy of my salvation, and sustain in
me a willing spirit."*

Thank you.

This psalm was written by King David

right after he committed a sinful act in the sight of
God

and the whole people of God (we'll get back to
this in a moment).

David begs for forgiveness;

he seeks a new spirit and a new way;

and he celebrates the restoration of his life and
relationships.

You, my friends and family, church and city,

have repeatedly received this faulty and sinful soul
just as I am,

and you have repeatedly and unconditionally
extended

forgiveness, fresh chances, and the
freedom of a new life in Christ.

Thank you for empowering one soul in your midst to strive
for God's heart.

Your faithful striving to live into and live out and live
through the heart of God

has softened my edges,

smoothed out rough spots and times,

and honed my corners.

Mine is a story of a journey, not of arrival;

a story of movement, not motion;

a story of new beginnings and renewed life.

How about you?

Where do you find yourself in this Psalm, in this story, in this
process of renewal?

Are you open to experiencing being a renewed soul

as a direct result of God's mercy being lived out in
community?

God will and does put a new and right spirit within you and

me.

This is what happens when you allow a loving people to love you,

when you allow a forgiving people to forgive you,

a healing and hospitable people to aid and welcome you

into the Great Banquet of God on earth as it is in heaven.

Strive for God's heart

Let's dive into the heart of God as witnessed in the song of Psalm 51.

The one who voices Psalm 51 is on the floor before God,

utterly ashamed and as dust before glory:

"My sin is ever before me."

The symptoms of sin are gradually displaced by the greater reality of God:

"Against you, you alone, have I sinned."

The speaker does not look outside for an oppressor to blame,

but inside, to the *"inward being,"*

for a heart to be renewed.

The speaker gradually receives the commission of the

penitent:

“I will teach transgressors your ways.”

There is a deep awareness of the consequences of wrongdoing:

“Deliver me from bloodshed”

[There is anticipation]of the rewards of reconciliation:

“Restore to me the joy of your salvation.”

And finally there is hope, in a shared plan of regeneration:

“Rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.”

Psalm 51 ends with the community gathered in worship.

The welfare of the people is assured by their peace with God.

Discovering one’s ability to sin is a necessary prelude to liberation.

One needs a little power before one can recognize one’s true identity:

a sinner who can be forgiven,

rather than a victim who can protest.

Psalm 51 directs us toward true freedom.[1]

We are sinners

who can and are forgiven.

We are a broken and fragmented people

who can and are a source of healing and wholeness.
We are richly blessed again and again and again
by the power of a loving and gracious God
who wants so much to put a new and right
spirit within us,
drawing us ever closer,
encouraging us to strive after the
heart of God.

Strive for God's heart

Joshua Carney said,
“The psalms are poignant.
They bear emotion in a way that grabs our souls.
They are comprehended by the heart in a way the head can't.
[Consider] the preface to Psalm 51.
*‘To the leader. A Psalm of David,
when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had
gone in to Bathsheba.’*

Psalm 51:10 is a bumper sticker verse,” says Joshua Carney.
“I memorized it as a child, and I'm glad I did.
Caught stealing cookies as a child,

caught sneaking out in high school,

confronted by my failures as a husband...

often the Holy Spirit has convicted and
I've prayed,

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

The story behind this song is David's, and it is tragic.

He is guilty of lust, coveting, murder and perhaps rape.

And that's just what we see in a few verses.

David is a *sinner*.

So are we,

and it is with this realization that we pray Psalm
51:10.

Yet even after these events,

David remains a man after God's own heart.

How do we know this?

[We know this] because [David] has an insatiable appetite
for grace.

And so we who strive for God's heart

also have the audacity to pray Psalm 51:11-12:

'Restore to me the joy of your salvation.' [2]

Strive for God's heart

They say that one day three priests met privately to share their innermost confidences

and to pray for one another

with respect to their major weaknesses and personal stumbling blocks.

The first priest frankly confessed to his friends

that he had a serious problem with alcohol.

He shared with them a number of times that he found himself inebriated,

and told how he was frequently stumbling in this area, literally and figuratively.

He asked them for special prayer

to help him recognize that he was powerless of alcohol.

They promised that they would.

The second priest, encouraged by this display of candor,

admitted that he, too, had a problem, only with money and not alcohol.

He found that he just couldn't resist skimming occasionally from the church treasury,

and was guilty of a number of indiscretions regarding this weakness.

He confessed his need to practice faithful stewardship and honesty,

and asked for prayer.

They promised that they would.

The third priest then reluctantly responded,

“I must confess I appreciate the remarkable candor of both of you.

My weakness is gossip, and I can hardly wait to get out of here!”

Strive for God’s heart

If ever there was a soul who believed wholeheartedly in God’s power and will

to put a new and right spirit within you and me,

and who celebrated the joy of a restored soul and restored relationships,

it was Norman Vincent Peale.

In his classic book, The Power of Positive Thinking, Norman Vincent Peale said:

On a roadside billboard I saw an advertisement of a certain brand of motor oil.

The slogan read, “A clean engine always delivers power.”

So will a mind free of negatives.

Therefore flush out your thoughts,

give yourself a clean mental engine,
remembering that a clean mind,
even as a clean engine, always delivers
power.

So to overcome your obstacles and live the “I don’t believe in defeat” philosophy,

cultivate a positive-idea pattern.

What we do with obstacles is directly determined by our mental attitude.

Most of our obstacles are mental in character.

“Ah,” you may object, “mine are not mental, mine are real.”

Perhaps so, but your attitude toward them is mental.

What you think about your obstacles largely determines what you do about them.

Form the mental attitude that you cannot remove an obstacle
and you will not remove it.

But when your mind becomes convinced

that you can do something about difficulties,

astonishing results will begin to happen.

All of a sudden you discover that you have the power you would never acknowledge.

Believe that Almighty God has put in you

the power to lift yourself out of the rough

by keeping your eye firmly fixed on the source

of your power.

Affirm to yourself that through this power

you can do anything you have to do.

Believe that this power is taking the tension out of you,

that this power is flowing through you.

Believe this,

and a sense of victory will come.[3]

Strive for God's heart

The past does not determine the future.

Our past does not determine our future.

A poor decision or words spoken harshly and with haste

or something we have done or said

which we later look back with
embarrassment or regret

does not eternally set you outside
God's good graces.

A call refused can be reconsidered.

A wrong word or bad decision or a sin committed can be
forgiven.

A broken relationship may be healed.

A prodigal son can return home again,

a lost sheep can be found,

a broken heart can be healed.

What is sin?

Sin is anything that separates you from God, your neighbor, or yourself.

God in Christ has conquered sin, has overcome death and separation,

and shows us daily the way to reconciliation and a new and right spirit.

Strive for God's heart

Lois Snow was a saint at East Dallas Christian Church.

She is no longer with us yet.

She rests in peace, having joined the great cloud of witnesses.

I remember her well, and think of her often.

We served together as pastor and parish leader

on many, many committees and service projects.

We shared a special fondness for community outreach ministries,

especially alongside inner-city children.

I treasure an 8 X 10 glossy photo of Lois Snow and Virginia Garver

riding on an elephant during one of our day camps for inner-city kids.

We were a mighty team, Lois Snow and I,
until the day a minor disagreement grew and grew
and suddenly it had a life all its own.

We said hurtful words to each other
and when we parted we complained to neighbors
about one another.

Our friendship went sour and healing seemed like it was
nowhere in sight.

On Sunday morning I prepared to go to church,
and all I could think about was that worship would be
an experience of lip service.

What I needed was a change of heart.

I prayed to Jesus for a new and right spirit to be put in my
soul,

for a re-connection with Lois Snow,
and to grow closer to the God of forgiveness.

What I feared was that my faith would be merely religious
platitudes,

rather than humble piety.

That morning I debated in my soul
whether I should go to church at all,
whether I should go through the ritual of

saying the right words,
saying what people expected to hear,
knowing full well that my heart was not in them,
that my heart was not in the words and
meaning,
because deep down I was separated
from my neighbor.

Since I was one of four clergy on staff,

this particular Sunday I was not in the pulpit.

As we sang our communion hymn in anticipation of the
Lord's Supper,

I left my seat and stood with the deacons in the back
of the sanctuary.

My intent was to avoid partaking of communion.

Suddenly the chairman of the diaconate informed me that a
deacon was sick,

and asked if I would serve in her place.

What would you say?

On shaky knees I marched down the aisle with the deacons
to receive the trays of bread and wine.

My head was down and my heart was all torn up.

Finally I looked up at the Elder who was handing me the trays,

and discovered that the Elder was Lois Snow.

If my taking communion that morning was to have any integrity,

I believed that there was only one possible thing for me to do

I whispered to Lois, "I am so sorry."

She whispered back, "I am sorry, too. I forgive you. Can you forgive me?"

Through bleary eyes and with a choked voice I said, "I forgive you, too."

As I passed the trays filled with the Bread of Life and the Cup of the New Covenant,

the sacrament, the ritual, the religious experience

took on a newer, deeper, more spiritual meaning.

Holy Communion was more personal than ever before.

Christ put a new and right spirit within me, and I took great joy in my salvation.

Holy Communion was more communal than ever before.

Christ put a new and right spirit within our relationship,

renewing Lois and I,

re-bonding us,
re-membering us one to another,
and from that morning forward
we took great joy in our
reconciliation.

To this day I continue to be filled with heartfelt appreciation
and gratitude

for the power of Jesus Christ to move in our lives,
to create positive change, to transform us and
our relationships,
to bond us to one another through his
love,
and to empower us to experience
his grace.

Jesus Christ sacrificed his life for us

that we might experience and receive

God's gracious gift of forgiveness and eternal
salvation.

Thank you, Jesus.

Thank you, Lois.

Thank you, members and friends, family and community,
for restoring to us the joy of our salvation!

All power to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

EXTRA MATERIAL

Psalm 51: 7-15 from The Message

Soak me in your laundry and I'll come out clean, scrub me and I'll have a snow-white life. Tune me in to foot-tapping songs, set these once-broken bones to dancing.

Don't look too close for blemishes, give me a clean bill of health. God, make a fresh start in me, shape a Genesis week from the chaos of my life.

Don't throw me out with the trash, or fail to breathe holiness in me. Bring me back from gray exile, put a fresh wind in my sails!

Give me a job teaching rebels your ways so the lost can find their way home.

Commute my death sentence, God, my salvation God, and I'll sing anthems to your life-giving ways. Unbutton my lips, dear God; I'll let loose with your praise.

[1] "Regeneration (Psalm 51)", by David F. Wells, [The Christian Century](#). David F. Wells is professor of historical and systematic theology at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, South Hamilton, Massachusetts. An ordained Congregational minister, he received his Ph. D. from the University of Manchester.

[2] "Blogging Toward Sunday: The story behind the song", Joshua Carney, [The Christian Century](#), Jul 30, 2012.

[3] Norman Vincent Peale "The Power of Positive Thinking"

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"How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives." --Annie Dillard