**Praying the Psalms**

**Sunday July 15, 2018**

**“Sorry” (Psalm 51)**

**1. Introduction: *Prayers of Confession***

Every week we engage in a prayer of confession in our worship service and it’s easy for us to go into autopilot for this part of the service, but it is an important time of prayer in our morning worship. Christian writer, Brian McLaren writes, “It’s quite an amazing thing for a group of people who have dedicated themselves to becoming better, to say, in public, in unison, that they aren’t” (*Finding Our Way Again,* p. 108).

He goes on to write the following: “The power of communal confession came home to me a few years ago when a man began attending the church where I was pastor. He had held a responsible position in business and has also developed a secret addition that led to criminal behavior. Law enforcement, it turned out, had been following his case for years. They showed up at his house one day and left with bags and boxes of evidence, which precipitated a complete meltdown of his life. He resigned from his job in disgrace, awaiting trial and imprisonment, and became acutely suicidal, which is what it sometimes takes to bring people to church, asking for help. I had met with him in prison for counseling and prayer, and one Sunday, I happened to be seated near him when we came to this communal practice of confession in our service. The particular confession we used this day went like this:

*Gracious God,*

*our sins are too heavy to carry,*

*too real to hide,*

*and too deep to undo.*

*Forgive what our lips tremble to name, what our hearts can*

*no longer bear,*

*and what has become for us a consuming fire of judgment.*

*Set us free from a past that we cannot change;*

*open to us a future in which we can be changed;*

*and grant us grace to grow more and more in your likeness*

*and image,*

*through Jesus Christ,*

*the light of the world. Amen.*

Nobody else knew the drama of what it meant for this man to say these words. But I felt a shudder literally move through him, and I could hear the emotion in his voice, and I intuitively knew that he was experiencing a truth that I, too, have experienced. To frankly, directly speak the painful truth about our own darkness in the presence of God and in the presence of my peers in a powerful thing, a transforming thing. Without this kind of confession, speaking too freely and glibly of forgiveness can turn free grace into cheap grace. With it, the assurance of pardon completes a profound cycle of grace that is to the soul, and to the faith community, what the water cycle is to the biosphere. *What could be more wonderful than to listen and receive the assurance of God’s mercy, falling on the dried-out soul like life-giving rain?*” (*Finding Our Way Again,* p. 109-10).

**2. Our Sin and God’s Grace**

That profound cycle of grace that moves from confession of sin to the assurance of pardon is utterly life-giving to our souls and to our faith community. One of the essential prayers that we can pray to God is “*sorry*.” But saying sorry to God is not an easy prayer because it means that we must admit that we’re not the kind of people that we wish we were. It begins with an honest appraisal of our lives before God. Instead of trying to hide, explain away or excuse our sins, we must genuinely acknowledge those thoughts, attitudes, and actions that are an affront to God. This entails being open to God and praying, as the Psalmist prayed:  
“Search me, God, and know my heart;  
    test me and know my anxious thoughts.  
See if there is any offensive way in me,  
    and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23-24).

God confronted David in his sin. The superscription of Psalm 51 lets us know that this Psalm emerged from one of the darkest moments in David’s life. The well-known story of David’s affair with Bathsheba can be found in 2 Samuel 11 and 12. These chapters tell the sordid tale of David’s desire for Bathsheba and his attempts to cover-up his affair with her, which eventually led to her husband’s death. Thinking that he had successfully covered his tracks, David took Bathsheba in to his house. But the Lord was displeased with David’s actions and he sent the prophet Nathan to confront him (2 Sam. 11:27; 12:1). The words of the prophet spoke to David’s heart and he turned to God with this prayer of repentance.

When we read this powerful psalm, two realities become immediately evident, *human sinfulness* and *the grace of God.* In David’s prayer of confession, he openly acknowledges his sin, but his prayer is grounded in the certainty of divine forgiveness. When David realized that he couldn’t hide from God any longer, he called out to him, asking for forgiveness. He didn’t hide his sin or explain it away; instead he named it by using the full Hebrew vocabulary that characterizes humanity’s rebellion against God.

• Blot out *my* *transgressions* (פשע) (Ps 51:1)

• Wash me thoroughly from *my* *iniquity* (עון) (Ps 51:2)

• Purify me from *my* *sin* (חטאת) (Ps 51:2)

Standing before God, he freely admitted his wayward condition: “For I *know* *my transgressions*, and *my* *sin* is ever before me” (Ps 51:3). At the same time, he declared that his actions were ultimately an offense to God: “*Against you*, *you alone*, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight” (Ps 51:4). David’s admission gets to the heart of the matter when it comes to sin. Even though our sinful acts can hurt other people or ourselves, at the end of the day God is the one who we are sinning against. So, David didn’t minimize his actions, nor did he argue that God was being too harsh. He accepted God’s judgment upon his evil deeds (Ps 51:4) and he recognized the profound and deep-seated impact of sin upon his entire being when he declared, “For I was born a sinner —yes, from the moment my mother conceived me” (Ps 51:5). David was admitting that this whole affair was not just some momentary moral lapse, but it was part of a much larger pattern of resisting God’s ways throughout his life.

If we were to stop reading Psalm 51 at this point, we’d be filled with a devastating sense of helplessness under the weight of our sins. While confession of sin is essential for the Christian, floundering in self-loathing is not a healthy response. We can easily become overwhelmed by our sin and allow our alienation from God due to sin to fester and grow into a perpetual avoidance of God. When we honestly own up to our sinfulness, we should not allow ourselves to sink into the pit of thinking or feeling that we are unlovable, unforgiveable or unworthy. No, at those times it is vital that we cast ourselves on the mercy of God, just as David did.

For David, the reality of his transgressions, his iniquity and his sin was real and raw, but he was not overwhelmed because he had hope in the mercy, steadfast love and compassion of God. His plea to God began with a clear focus on *God’s* *grace*.

“*Have mercy* on me*, O God*,  
    because of *your unfailing love*.  
Because of *your great compassion*,  
    blot out the stain of my sins” (Ps 51:1).

So, when we are overloaded with the dead weight of our sin, our response should not be one of despair but *prayer* that is grounded in the reality of God’s amazing grace. God’s love for us is generous and unconditional, but we have such a hard time realizing this wonderful truth. The context for David’s confession of sin, and ours, should always be the *mercy,* the *unfailing love* and the *deep compassion* of our loving Father. Like the prodigal son, we need not linger in the mud and the muck of the pigpen, but we can always return home to the Father, whose loving arms are always outstretched to embrace us. Whenever I did something wrong as a child I often tried to hide it or lie about it. I feared that my parent’s reaction would be either anger or disappointment. Perhaps, there is still a tendency within all of us to revert to that child-like behaviour and hide our sins. But we need not fear our heavenly Father’s response to our bad behaviour. Remember the words of assurance from this morning’s New Testament lesson:

“If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth.*But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness*.If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts” (1 John 1:8-10).

**3. God’s Work in Our Lives**

Our reaction to sin can be one of *no grace,* but it can also be one of *cheap grace.* The response of *no grace* avoids praying for forgiveness, doubting God’s ability to be gracious and to forgive. On the other hand, *cheap grace* is when we say *sorry* to God but go on with our lives as if nothing has changed. David’s prayer beckons us to move beyond guilt and alienation and to experience God’s renewing work in our lives.

Our prayers of confession should not leave us wallowing in our sinfulness, caught in a downward spiral of guilt and shame. These prayers should spur us with an earnest desire to be restored and renewed by God. Prayers of confession must always express a longing for change and desire to go forward. Thankfully, it is God who brings this inward change in our lives. So, instead of a life of phoniness and deceit, God puts *honesty* or *truth* in our hearts. Rather than living foolishly in defiance of God’s ways, God teaches us his *wisdom* so that we can discern the correct path to take (Ps 51:6).

The next part of Psalm 51 moves from confession to petition as David expressed his hope for a renewed and restored relationship with God. In a series of requests, David invited God to work within him in order to make this new life possible, asking him to purify, wash, blot out, create, renew, and restore (Ps 51:7-12). Not only did David want his life to get cleaned up, he also desired renewal in his life and a restored relationship with God. He hoped for a fresh start with God. This is our hope as well. So, when we’re stained with sin, we can get cleaned up, soaked and scrubbed in God’s laundry and come out whiter than snow (Ps 51:7). When God forgives us, the record of our sin is erased and God forgets that it ever happened (Ps 51:9). God replaces our joyless experience of guilt, sin, shame and separation from him with the joy of his salvation (Ps 51:8, 12). When sin drives a wedge between God and us, that separation is removed when our loving Father welcomes the prodigals home (Ps 51:11). But the most wonderful part of the prayer is when we ask God to perform a miracle in our lives. When we invite God to do a work of creation within our inner being.

“*Create in me, a clean heart, O God. Renew a right spirit within me*” (Ps 51:10)

This simple, yet profound prayer asks God to re-enact Genesis 1 within us and fashion something completely new from the chaos that is inside of us. The promise of restoration and renewal lifts us from the humble act of confession of sin. All too often we get stuck there, filled with feelings of guilt, self-loathing, despair and unworthiness. Yet God lifts us out of the pit, cleans us up, embraces us, and renews our lives so that we can live, love and serve him. No matter where you are on your faith journey, God is always willing to forgive you and give you a new start. *What could be more wonderful than to listen and receive the assurance of God’s mercy, falling on the dried-out soul like life-giving rain?*

*Create in me, a clean heart, O God. Renew a right spirit within me.*