



“Create in Me a Clean Heart”
Scripture – Psalm 51:1-12
Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, February 18, 2018

Listen to what a columnist for the *New York Times* said. Mind you, not a theologian, but a columnist. He was being interviewed by a magazine and he said, “I was raised in the 1970s and the 1980s, when you were told to follow your passion, and that you are good inside and most of the corruptions are outside of you. Most of us go through life thinking we are reasonably good: ‘I’m nice to my family, I treat my kids well, and people seem to like me.’ It’s very easy to glide through life with that sense of one’s own goodness. But to do that you have to ignore your sins of omission and settle for a sort of moral mediocrity that ultimately does not give you peace.”¹

He speaks for many in our society when he says “It’s very easy to glide through life with that sense of one’s own goodness.” Indeed, most of us think of ourselves as good people, and why not? We can immediately conjure up those who have done odious things and, by comparison, we are angels. But, is he onto something when he says that to think of ourselves as good, we must ignore our sins of omission – and I would add our sins of commission – and settle for a sort of moral mediocrity that does not give us peace?

Many would say that we simply set ourselves up for heavy guilt by naming ourselves sinful. But, could we actually be holding ourselves back from a richer, fuller life, by ignoring or denying our sin?

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, a 40 day period designated by the Church as a time of spiritual preparation for the celebration of Easter. Lent is the most challenging season of the year because it prods us to do what we would rather not. It pushes us to focus on our failings.

Today’s Scripture reading from the Book of Psalms captures the sentiment of Lent. The psalm is attributed to King David after the prophet Nathan revealed how David’s lust for Bathsheba led David to devise a plan that would assure the death of her husband in battle. The words certainly fit the circumstance. Listen again to the opening words of the psalm: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.”

Well, if we had arranged another person’s death, such a prayer would be on target. But we are relatively good people. Is it necessary for us to confess our sins – sins that look puny next to David’s sin?

In fact, why talk about sin at all? Does it not simply puncture our self-esteem?

Despite having a prayer of confession most Sundays, the word “sin” has been demoted in most mainline churches. Sin no longer takes center stage as the chief reason for our faith and that is a step forward.

Some still cling to the notion that the reason for becoming a Christian is because we are sinners and need God's forgiveness in order to make it into heaven. However, many no longer find this idea compelling. Far more people are attracted to following Jesus because they are looking for meaning in their lives, not because they feel guilty and fear hell.

I am in favor of sin's demotion because it was given far too dominant a position in the past. **SINNER** – all caps, bold, underlined and large font – was the chief title hung around our necks. But this is not all that the Bible says about the human condition.

Marcus Borg reminded us that while the Church made sin the central issue of the Christian faith, it was only one of the Bible's major metaphors about the human condition. Other metaphors declare that we are captives who need to be liberated, blind who need our sight restored, ill who need healing, and exiles who need to return home.

The other reason sin needs to be repositioned is because it was so preeminent that it totally overshadowed our other principal identification: Image of God. To strike a better balance, these two ought to be held together, in tension with one another. We are created in God's image, but we have a propensity to sin. Sin is not our chief label. But neither is it something to take lightly.

Wisdom comes from recognizing that we are not perfect. We are not Putin of Russia or Duterte of the Philippines. But we are not perfect. Given the right set of circumstances, we have a remarkable ability to rationalize behavior we know is wrong. That is why it is essential to remind ourselves that we are not as much in control of our emotions and actions as we would like to think. Our temper can flare beyond reasonable proportion and harm people we adore. If we give in to lust, trust is destroyed. Envy makes us petty. Gluttony leads to self-destruction. Idolatry can lure us into a meaningless existence. Greed can trigger an economic crisis or pollute the environment or turn a deaf ear to people who are hungry.

The Apostle Paul recognizes that on his own, he cannot always do the right thing. Sometimes another power seems to scoot us over to the passenger seat and take control of the wheel. Paul says, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. (Romans 7:15-19).

Denying or ignoring sin does not make it vanish nor does it help us move beyond it. Denial keeps us trapped in our predicament. Facing our failures, forgiving ourselves and asking God's forgiveness, all open the door to healing and a new path.

The season of Lent reminds us that, periodically, we need to reexamine our lives. As one writer puts it, you need "to tell the truth of who you have been so that you have a guide for where you should go."²

In a Ted Talk, sociologist Brene Brown says that "what gives life meaning is connection. Connection is why we are here." I do not know if she has an active spiritual life, but of course, that is what Jesus taught. When Jesus was asked, "What is the first commandment?" In other words, what is most important, he said, "Love God with your heart, mind, strength, and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself." What is most important? Connection. Connect with God and connect with other. That is why we are here and it is what gives life meaning.

Dr. Brown conducted hundreds of interviews to discover why some connect better than others. Can you guess what she found? She found that those who connect better have a sense of worthiness. Despite not being perfect, they believe they are worthy.

So, she dug a little deeper and asked, why these people feel worthy. Is it because they are smarter? Guess again. Richer? Nope. Thinner? Not a chance. So, what do they have that others do not have? She uncovered three things.

First they have courage. They have the courage to be imperfect – to be open about their shortcomings. Second, they have compassion. They have the compassion to be kind to themselves and to others. In fact, we will not have compassion for others if we do not treat ourselves kindly. And third, they were authentic. They did not try to appear as someone they are not. They neither delude themselves or others. They let their genuine self – warts and all – shine through.

Our Creator does not say, “I love you IF – IF you keep my commandments, IF you believe the correct doctrines, IF you prove yourself worthy.” God does not say, “I love you IF.” God says, “I love you. Period.”

That’s why the metaphor of God as a loving parent resonates with most people. We know that loving parents do not make their love conditional. They love their children despite all the mess-ups. That is grace. Despite our missing the mark, God is gracious.

A trainer of championship sheep dogs was asked if he had any regrets, he said, “It’s all regrets. The dogs are always smarter than we are, and better ‘people’ too. You lose your temper with a young dog and scold him only to realize later that the dog was right all along. You regret it. You wish you could undo it. Fortunately, the dogs are blessed with the character of God, and they forgive you. They just keep forgiving you, however undeserving you may be.”³

When we are authentic, when we allow our genuine self shine through, ugly blemishes and all, God forgives us. But God does not leave us as we are. God helps us become a new person, a better person, a more Christ-like person.

An early church leader, Athanasius, said, ‘When a portrait...becomes obliterated through external stains...the subject of the portrait has to come and sit for it again, and then the likeness is re-drawn on the same material.’ This is the story of Christianity, that God does not throw us away as flawed but continuously reworks us into something more beautiful.”⁴

NOTES

1. David Brooks responding to an interview by Matt Fitzgerald entitled, “Chasing beauty, finding grace,” in *The Christian Century*, February 1, 2017.
2. Emilie M. Townes, “Washed in Grace,” *How My Mind Has Changed*, (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011), p. 66.
3. Michael Jinkins, “Ash Wednesday,” *Thinking Out Loud*, February 14, 2018.
4. Samuel Wells, “We are God’s artwork,” *The Christian Century*, February 1, 2017, p.31.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of Abundant Mercy, God of Steadfast Love —

From age to age, you are faithful to us. You — who spoke into the depths of chaos to create us in your image; You — who pitched a tent in the wilderness to dwell in our midst; You — who walked among us to show the fullness of your love; You never tire of drawing near to us! With gratitude we draw near to you, and entrust our highest hopes and deepest longings to your care.

Holy God — As we begin our journey to the cross, we pause to look inward ... and to look outward. We examine our lives, and confess the sin that infects our hearts and separates us from you. We examine our common life, and confess the brokenness that plagues our communities and mars your vision of *Shalom*. From the secret recesses

of our hearts, to the tear-drenched schoolyards of our nation, your creation cries out for healing. So — during this season of repentance — we return to you ... seeking forgiveness, seeking transformation, seeking wholeness.

God help us to repent of our destructive habits ... Our tendency to resist your charge to take up the cross, because it is easier to choose what is comfortable over what is faithful. Our tendency to point out the faults of others, because we would rather ignore our part in perpetuating injustice. Our tendency to transfer pain, because we have not done the work needed to transform it.

God, help us to repent of our culture of violence ... Where parents fear sending their children to school, and teachers must prepare emergency routes alongside lesson plans. Where teenagers view violence as the only answer to the anguish raging inside, and find it easier to access firearms than mental health services. Where we view human life as expendable, and pretend we are powerless to effect change.

God, help us to repent of all that shreds your vision of *Shalom*. Cleanse our hearts and renew our spirits, so that we might beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks and contribute to the flourishing of the creation you love so dearly.

God of Abundant Mercy, God of Steadfast Love — You have entered into our brokenness, and transformed our suffering to joy. Draw near to us even now, and to all who yearn for healing. Be with the community of Parkland, Florida, and with every family who has lost a loved one to violence. Embrace them with your love and surround them with your peace, that they might feel the comfort of your presence, even in the midst of tragedy. Be with all people whose hearts break this day. Wipe away their tears, heal their wounded spirits, and renew their hope, so that they might experience the wholeness you intend. Restore to all of us the joy of your salvation, we pray, and sustain generous spirits within us, so that we might be part of your redemptive work.

We lift this prayer in the name of Jesus Christ — the One who weeps with us, the One who turns our mourning into dancing, the One who taught us to pray for another world:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power,
and the glory, forever. Amen.**