

“Deep in Our Hearts”  
Psalm 51:1-12

In her book, *Joy Unspeakable*, Barbara Holmes tells a story about public repentance that I found to be quite interesting, “A preacher one Sunday suddenly stopped the order of worship to call the person who had cocaine in the pocket to come up to the front of the church and throw it on the altar. In charismatic circles this is called ‘word of knowledge,’ because it is presumed that the Spirit informs the speaker of information that they have no way of knowing. While I do not discount this possibility, it is also possible that some mother had spoken to the preacher of the day about her child’s drug habit...However the result of her call to repentance was shocking. Within moments, the altar was filled with people throwing drugs on the altar. The pastor expected perhaps one addicted person to respond instead hundreds began to file down the aisles.”

Imagine this kind of response in a church to repentance. If we were to be called to repent from the ways we harm ourselves and others, how would we respond? What would we be bringing to the table to set aside? What would it be for our whole nation?

Today’s Psalm is about renewal and repentance. Unfortunately repentance has a bad reputation in many contexts. It has often been reduced to sense of deep guilt that we lug around all the time with us so that we may never forget how “awful” we are as human beings. As a pastor, I often hear this sense of guilt expressed in so many different ways: “I don’t read the Bible enough.” “I don’t pray enough.” “I can’t seem to quit thinking bad thoughts about others.” “I can’t quit gossiping about the people I don’t like.” “I can’t stop being mean to my husband.” “I really care about peace in the world, but I get so overwhelmed that I don’t do enough.” And the list goes on and on. Guilt is often associated with repentance. Even Psalm 51 itself gets misused to induce guilt in Christian hearts. Even our prayer of confession on Sunday mornings in worship gets misinterpreted to be a personal confession of guilt. The interesting thing about guilt is that it does not always translate into changed behavior. In fact, sometimes the more guilty we feel, the worse we are trapped in our situation that it is hard to get out of it.

The call of Psalm 51 is not a personal call to feel guilty and ashamed of ourselves for our failings. We have to always remember that the Psalms were not individual prayers. They were the prayers of the people of God as they worshipped together. Psalm 51 most likely was used by the people of Israel after their return from the exile. After they were taken over by the Babylonians and had to leave their homes, when they returned in 536 BCE, they were still carrying a lot of the pain of their experience in exile. This psalm speaks of rebuilding Jerusalem (v. 18), so we know that it was written during, or shortly after, the Exile. The people knew that they had a second chance at life, but needed to let go of the pain and brokenness they were carrying. They could not come before God to worship and experience renewal until they were able to release whatever was holding them back. So the focal point of this psalm is not the sin of the psalm writer, but the goodness of God. It is not about all the guilt they were carrying. It is about the new opportunities for renewal that God was offering them. They knew that their chance for success as a country was not going to come only from fixing the wall of their city. It had to come from deep within them. A new heart and a new commitment to God’s love were at the center of their transformation.

The image of hyssop is invoked here to emphasize the importance of God’s commitment to the people of Israel and God’s love for them. Hyssop is a small bushy plant, probably the *Origanum maru*, the Syrian marjoram (called in Arabic *zatar*). This plant is mentioned several times in the Bible in association with God’s covenant with the people of Israel. The use of a bunch of hyssop

as a brush daubing the lintels of the Hebrew homes with blood from the sacrificed lamb at the first Passover (Exodus 12:22) seems to have established the tradition for most other references. Hyssop was plant used in purification sprinkling rites by the ancient Hebrews associated with the covenant. Here are some Bible references for you, “This shall be the law of the leper on the day of his cleansing... The priest shall command for him...cedar wood...and...hyssop.” (Lev. 14:2-4) “For when every commandment had been told to all the people by Moses in accordance with the law, he took the blood of the calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the scroll itself and the people.” Heb. 9:19 “A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth.” John 19:29 Hyssop is a grayish shrub with thin woody branches; neither its leaves nor its flowers are outstanding in any way. It makes do with very little, sometimes even growing out of the smallest cracks in stone (“in the rock”), yet it is highly valued for its fragrance and flavor. Hyssop is a reminder that the focus is on the covenant. It is not on our actions. The covenant is something that God established with the people out of love. A *covenant*, in contrast to a contract, is a one-way agreement whereby the covenanter is the only party bound by the promise. Israel broke many covenants with God but God never broke any covenants with them.

This is not a Psalm about guilt! It is about opening to God’s renewing presence. Do we live as forgiven people? Renewal takes letting go of whatever holds us back. We have our loyalties and securities but often times, they keep us from growing. How many times do we hear this: We’ve tried this before and it did not work. Do we know how to love like God does? Is God’s covenant changing and transforming us, or are we just living life the same old way we’ve always lived. When was the last time you were surprised by grace?

There’s a story about a new pastor in a church who preached the same story the first, second and third Sunday. Finally the leaders came up to him and said, “Pastor, you’ve preached the exact same sermon three Sundays in a row. What’s the deal?” “Well,” the pastor answered, “You haven’t yet done what I asked you to do the first time.” We do not change just because we are told to change. Change has to come through God touching our hearts. Episcopal theologian and writer, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “I know how to be obedient but I do not know how to be in love.” Our love for God is what brings change to our lives.

Changing people through laws, rules and guilt can only get us so far. Real and lasting transformation comes from an ever growing relationship with God, who is the source of transformation and love. That is why Psalm 51’s plea is for a new heart and a new spirit within. Inward transformation is what brings outward fruits and changes.

When we face challenges or difficulties in life, our primitive brain goes into the mode of fight or flight responses. We either get on the defensive or we hide. But the real lesson of faith and of loving God is to hold the tension between our fears and hopes at the same time. In a recent article Quaker writer and teacher, Parker Palmer gives three ideas to help us with a life that is open to transformation when life is hard, “First, in a culture where the answer to the question ‘How are you?’ is supposed to be ‘Just fine’ even when we are not, we must learn to acknowledge and name our suffering honestly and openly to ourselves and to others. This is called “becoming vulnerable”— a hard thing to do in a culture that does not respect the shadow, where even among friends we are at constant risk of someone trying to “fix us up,” an act that drives the suffering soul back into hiding no matter how well-intended... Second, once we have named and claimed our suffering, we must move directly to the heart of it, allowing ourselves to feel the pain fully, rather than doing what our culture teaches— numbing it with anesthetics, fleeing from it with distractions, or fighting it off by blaming and attacking the external source. The only way to transform suffering into something life-giving is to enter into it so deeply that we

learn what it has to teach us and come out on the other side. Third, if we are to learn from our suffering, we must create a micro-climate of quietude around ourselves, allowing the turmoil to settle and an inner quietude to emerge, so 'that of God within us' can help us find our way through. Nurtured by silence, we can stop taking our leads from the voices of ego and world and start listening instead to the still, small voice of all that is Holy. None of this can be done on the cheap. It requires what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called 'costly grace.' But if we are willing to pay the cost, that grace will be given and we will purchase the pearl of great price—a chance to participate in God's continuing creation of the beloved community."

This is the invitation of Psalm 51 for us for renewal and change. It is a prayer for all of us for a new heart and a new and right spirit within us. It is not a prayer for us to be filled with guilt, rules or regulations. It is a much deeper call for a change of heart where we are invited to unload all of our baggage of pain in order to be totally open to the healing and love of God. A few years ago, I was a part of a small centering prayer group. In one of our discussions, one of the leaders shared with us the importance of having two times a day for centering prayer because often times, the first one ends up being a time of unloading and the second time had enough space for God to fill our hearts. Our whole Lenten journey to the cross is about emptying ourselves of our worries, fears, false self pretenses, misgivings, judgments, mistakes or at least holing the tension between our hopes and fears so that we are able to receive and share God's gift of love.

Today I am not going to invite you to put the cocaine that is in your pocket on the communion table as the pastor did in the charismatic church that I mentioned earlier. However, I would like to invite you to let Psalm 51 be your prayer for renewal, releasing whatever is holding you back from love and opening to a new spirit to be deep within you. The paraphrase that is on your bulletin by Nan Merrill expresses the spirit of this Psalm beautifully that helps hear it in the language of our day.

You have placed your truth in the inner being;  
 therefore, teach me the wisdom of the heart.  
 Forgive all that binds me in fear,  
 that I might radiate love;  
 cleanse me that your light  
 might shine in me.  
 Fill me with gladness;  
 help me to transform weakness into strength.  
 Look not on my past mistakes  
 but on the aspirations of my heart.

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

*Psalm 51 from Psalms for Praying: An Invitation to Wholeness by Nan C. Merrill.*