

Ash Wednesday
14 February, Anno Domini 2018
Psalm 51/32
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

The Psalms are an immeasurably rich prayer book which I commend to your daily prayers. And particularly during this Lententide I would urge you to pray what are known as the seven penitential psalms. These prayers, uttered by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, make a full and faithful confession of our sins that, most importantly, is rooted in the mercy and loving kindness of God Almighty which He has poured out through His Son, Jesus Christ. This evening we will meditate on two of those psalms, Psalm 51 and Psalm 32.

As we heard from the appointed readings, repentance and faith together lie at the heart of the Christian faith. A Christian, very simply, is someone who confesses before the God against whom he has sinned, that he is a lost and condemned creature filled with sin and evil desires AND who believes that Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, has made full atonement for his sin. True repentance is of the heart. It is not a show to be put on for people but an actually sorrowing over sin. Such confession, whether uttered to the Lord in your heart or to the Lord's servant with your lips, is the truth in the inward being of which the psalmist speaks. It is true wisdom to be humbled and acknowledge that there is nothing good in you, that is, in your flesh. We aren't overstating the case or speaking in hyperbole when we say that we are poor, wretched, miserable sinners.

Deceit is to confess otherwise. Deceit is to imagine that there is any good at all in our sinful flesh that God should take note of and reward. St. John writes "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we say we have not sinned, we make him (God) a liar (because He is the one who has shown us our sin), and his word is not in us." (1 John 1:8,10) Such deceit will cost us nothing less than our souls. For if we are not hopelessly lost in our sin, then we have no need of the remedy - God's mercy and forgiveness. It is that deceit that will cause us to despise God's Word and the Means of Grace. To soul that is fat with itself and that isn't terrified by its sin, the Means of Grace become a convenience. To the

one who lies crushed under the truth of his sin, nothing and no one else matters in the world other than the Means of Grace.

Notice that in psalm 32, the one who is declared blessed isn't the one who is good. It is the one whose transgression is forgiven, the one whose sin is covered - covered by the Blood of Jesus in the waters of Holy Baptism so that what is seen by the Father is only the righteousness of our Savior. Hiding from this divinely revealed truth will not help. We may fool those around us but we will not fool God. Failure to confess and acknowledge the truth is of no benefit to us because it is simply denying an undeniable reality. It is as the psalmist says "For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me, my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer." Unconfessed sin wreaks havoc on every level of our being - spiritual, mental, and physical. When the damning sentence of our guilt continues to hammer against our conscience unanswered by the voice of Christ's forgiveness, it is painful. It is unrelentingly painful. Our whole existence is wracked with terror and sorrow because of the hopelessness of our eternal situation.

David knew this truth well. These psalms were written after his adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah. He knew full well what he deserved from God. David knew what he had done even though everyone else thought that he had been a good and merciful king. He couldn't hide from God's Word and he couldn't make any excuse for what he'd done. When the prophet Nathan exposed David to the reality that God knew all that he had done, David was sick with sorrow and grief and guilt. He could do nothing but confess "I have sinned against the Lord." The condemnation of the Law will not leave us with an ounce of peace.

But that is for our good. The Lord lays the heavy hand of the Law upon us day and night so that we wouldn't try to hide from Him or try to cover our sins on our own. We are meant to suffer these things that we would return to the Lord. These troublings of our conscience are the bitter purging hyssop which we must drink for our protection. They are not punishment but the gentle prodding of our heavenly Father who desires our salvation. The true hyssop was placed on Christ's lips who bore the whole burden of our sin. With Him there is forgiveness and plenteous redemption. God has given His Son so that we who have grievously sinned against Him might know that He is a God driven by his steadfast love and mercy. He afflicts

us to draw us to true repentance so that we might hear the holy absolution that silences all our guilt and our terror. Again as the Psalmist writes “I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, (in those familiar words) ‘I will confess my transgression to the Lord,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.”

The Lord forgives! The Lord has mercy and compassion on all those whose bones and soul have been crushed by the oppressive weight of their sin and guilt. The answer is not trying to cover them ourselves or make restitution by keeping the Law. The answer is confession and absolution. The answer is to freely, boldly, confidently acknowledge the depth of your guilt in the absolute certainty that the atoning Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ is an impenetrable shield that protects us from the raging accusations of the Law. Christ has already endured the bitter gall of God’s wrath down to the very last drop so that we might taste the sweet, soothing wine of God’s love and mercy in the Holy Communion. Our sin is great. The forgiveness of Jesus is greater still.

The outward signs of repentance are good. They are wonderful visible reminders of the truth. You don’t wear the ashes to boast but to confess. You may give up things that have become your idols so that you might devote your attention to the true God and His Word. But these things are not repentance. True repentance can only be worked in us by the bright light of God’s Word as it cuts through the facade and the pretensions of our righteousness to expose the consuming, cancerous sin within. But repentance also isn’t the end. For the penitent sinner who claims nothing of himself but a broken and contrite heart, there is a Savior whose heart overflows with compassion and forgiveness who will pour out nothing but rich blessing - peace, joy, and eternal life.

Dearly redeemed of the Lord, let us yet return in repentance every day, drowning the Old Adam through contrition and repentance, along with all our sins and evil desires that a New Man with a clean heart and right spirit, might arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever, filled with the joy of our salvation. Let us for a time wear the ashes of repentance for soon we will be fully robed in the garments of salvation.

In the Name of +Jesus.