

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
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Psalm 51
“A Healing Journey: Right Spirits Within Us”

A few days ago, the season of Lent began—on Ash Wednesday, with a smudge of soot placed on many of our foreheads. Heather and I compared notes on what we should say as we made the sign of the cross on people’s foreheads. In the end we settled on the words that have been said for centuries: *Remember that you are of dust and to dust you shall return*. Those are neither commonly heard nor comfortable words. But there’s an honesty to them that hits us right between the eyes and on that day, at least, leaves a mark behind. Yet even more important than the words or the ashes is what comes next. You hear the words, you receive the ashes, and then you turn and walk away, back into the church, into the community, into the world. Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of a journey toward Easter; that’s true. But for the next several weeks, I want to explore how this same journey is one towards healing: a healing of hearts and minds and spirits.

Psalm 51 offers powerful words as we start this healing journey. It begins with a series of four verbs addressed to God: Have mercy on me; blot out my transgressions; wash me from my iniquity; cleanse me from sin. The psalm doesn’t name what sort of problems are troubling the person praying, nor does it try to pass the blame onto someone else. It doesn’t say “Lord, change my situation and I’ll praise you;” rather it says, “Begin with me, Lord. Change me. Wash me.” Now, let’s be clear: What are these words *not*? They are not words of self-loathing, of beating yourself down with unrelenting feelings of guilt. They are not words of self-abuse, of allowing violence to be inflicted on you because some part of you believes you are unworthy of being treated better. No, we pray this prayer as beloved children of God, kneeling honestly before God who is steadfast in mercy and quick to forgive.

The Psalm 51 prayer is spoken knowing that we are loved by God, while also knowing that we often live life indifferent to and unmoved by God’s love. The first step in a healing journey of faith is to recognize this fact. Roland Bainton, a famous biographer of Martin Luther, commented that far too many of our sins and misdemeanors are not even recognized, let alone remembered, after they’ve been committed. As he put it, “Sinners often sin without compunction. Adam and Eve, after tasting of the fruit of the forbidden tree, went blithely for a walk in the cool of the day; and Jonah, after fleeing from the Lord’s commission, slept soundly in the hold of the ship. Only when each was confronted by an accuser was there any consciousness of guilt.” The novelist Shusaku Endo has written this: “Sin is not what it is usually thought to be; it is not to steal and tell lies. Sin is for one [person] to walk brutally over the life of another and to be quite oblivious of the wounds he [or she] has left behind.”



Jesus told a dramatic parable on this very topic in which he described two men, an influential Pharisee and a despised tax collector, who went up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee prayed, "God I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." He named off his virtues and left. But the tax collector stood off to the side and with downcast eyes said, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner." Jesus was quite clear that the second man went home justified and made clean. In this day and age of relentless positive affirmation, there is a need to remember and recognize that our ways are not God's ways, and that this fact is true on a deep, persistent, and personal level. When this recognition of sin sinks in, there follows a desire to make things right, through the promise of God's grace that heals, washes, and cleanses.

The second step on this journey is that of repentance. Repentance is a word that means "to turn," to reorient yourself away from that which diminishes and destroys toward that which is holy, healing, and life-giving. I was recently reminded how the early Christian believers would prepare for baptism with a long period of teaching and prayer. Then just before they received the baptism waters, they would renounce evil and turn to face the east and the sunrise. And while facing that direction, they made their affirmations that Jesus is Lord and Savior.

One of the marks of a healthy Islamic faith is to pray five times a day, facing east. Orthodox Judaism also has its followers repeat the Shema, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God; the Lord is one" and face east as they say it. And for Christians, one of the names for the Messiah was the sun (s-u-n) of righteousness (Malachi 4:2). In Luke's gospel, Zechariah's prayer about the coming Savior speaks about how "the dawn from on high will break upon us, giving light to those who sit in darkness and ... to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:78-9). I mention these things, not as a brief study in comparative religion, but to highlight a common characteristic related to prayers of confession and repentance. Recognizing our sin and repenting of sin involves some sort of movement, a reorientation. Symbolically that reorientation looks to the east: the place of the rising of the sun with its promise of a new day, even an Easter day of resurrection. But something as simple as knowing where the sun rises and directing a prayer toward that direction can be a spiritual practice leading to healing. Picture yourself standing with a group of newly-baptized Christians, standing with the water of baptism still glistening on your heads, intentionally facing east, toward the sun and saying "I believe in Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, my Lord and my Savior. In him will I put my hope and my trust."



Which leads to a third and final step I'll mention today on the journey toward healing: Recognizing that we are in need of cleansing and reorienting ourselves in the direction of Christ and his resurrection light serve as preparation for when we pray to God to create a clean heart and a right spirit within us. It is God who creates anew in us, just as God created in the beginning and is still at work in our world. It is God who places a right spirit in us; it is not for us to try and do it ourselves. We do not say, "Lord, please forgive this and that, and once these blemishes are removed, everything else will be just perfect." This isn't about symptoms and superficial changes; this is about surgery. This is about souls. This is about true newness of life made possible by God's grace and redemption.

I don't want this to sound abstract. Having a new and right spirit within us is a gift from God. That's crucial. It involves many things: humility, peacefulness, patience, compassion, trust. It also involves being spiritually connected to others, which automatically opens our eyes to the world in new ways. Here's one little example. Back in the 1920s, two Polish boys named Lolek and Jerzy met when they were five years old. Over the years they played soccer and worked on homework together and were constantly in one another's homes. In World War II, Jerzy Kluger, who was Jewish, lost most of his family in Nazi death camps and lost touch with his childhood friend. Lolek Wojtyla, who was Catholic, went on to become a priest. The two happened to meet again in 1965 when Jerzy read an article about the Second Vatican Council and saw Lolek mentioned by name. They reconnected and were good friends for the next 40 years. This friendship bore lots of fruit, because Lolek's real name was Karol Wojtyla, better known to us as Pope John Paul II. With Jerzy Kluger's help, John Paul re-established diplomatic relations between the Vatican and Israel, became the first pontiff to visit a synagogue, the first to visit Auschwitz, and the first to condemn anti-Semitism as a sin.

Here's another way to think about this: Do you know how many people are now registered on Facebook? Over 800 million. If that were a country, it would be the world's third largest, after India and China. A right spirit cannot pretend we quietly exist in isolation from God or from the rest of God's creation. We are ancient Israel and modern America. We are ourselves and each person we encounter this day. That is how the God of eternity sees us; wouldn't a right spirit necessarily see things with the eyes and this vision of the Lord?

Based on what it says in Psalm 51, a right spirit is joyful and open to others. It desires what is true for all, and is guided by a wisdom and humility grounded in the person's heart and soul. And a right spirit is one that knows, really knows, that every sin against another person diminishes all people, starting with us. There is no such thing as a private sin. Our acts ripple out from us until they touch many others, even extending to the throne of God. Psalm 51:4 says: *Against you have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, O God.*



So here we are, in church early in the season of Lent. A smudge of ashes and hearing the reminder that of dust we are made and to dust we will return. All is not as it should be, either within us or around us. We bow heads in prayer and repentance, turning so we can orient ourselves to the east, to the light of a new day. We lift our heads and see the world around us with fresh eyes as we ask for a right spirit to reside within us. Then we breathe, in and out, as one spirit is replaced by a new spirit. The journey of healing has begun in earnest. How do we respond? Psalm 51:15: *O Lord, open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise.* It shall indeed. Thanks be to God!

