

“THE FIRST RE-WORD: REPENTANCE”

Psalm 51:1-17

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As I said last week, our 2017-18 theme of “Renewal” is going to lead us to thinking about a bunch of re-words over the next few months ... and we begin this week by diving right in to the most difficult one. This is the place we have to start, no question about that. Repentance is almost always a prerequisite for renewal. Repentance means, essentially, “returning” or “turning around.” There is no possibility of a new direction unless we are willing to turn around and leave behind what needs to be left behind.



“Mercy” © Jan Richardson

“Have mercy on me, O God,” the psalm begins. The whole theme of this psalm is right there in the first sentence. The rest of it is the unfolding of that simple but profound prayer.

Walter Brueggeman says that the first two verses provide us with “the basic themes and vocabulary of confession” and the rest of this psalm explores the implications. I would suggest that the whole psalm, in fact, has bequeathed us a rich vocabulary of repentance. That’s why it has been used by both Jews and Christians for personal confession and in corporate worship for centuries.

This prayer of confession – that’s what this psalm is – has been traditionally attributed to King David in the aftermath of what we would today describe as his sexual misconduct involving Bathsheba and the subsequent attempt at cover-up involving her husband’s murder. The psalm’s acknowledgement of grievous sin certainly fits with that story, but there’s no real evidence for the connection. The prayer itself doesn’t give us any clues, because it doesn’t mention any particular sin or sins.

And because it doesn’t, it is a prayer anyone can pray. It speaks to – and helps us to articulate – a universal experience of human brokenness. Another reason for its place in the prayer life of our tradition.

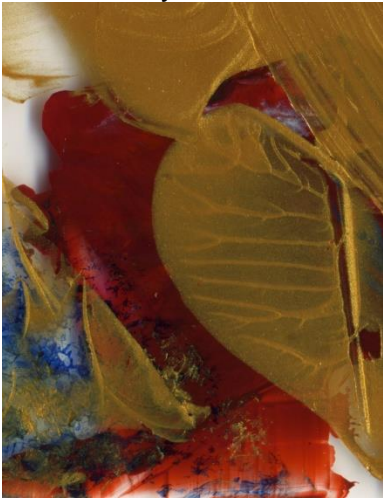
Yet despite its lack of specificity, this is not a casual and general “I’m-sorry-please-forgive-me-thanks-God-let’s-move-on” kind of prayer. It reflects deeply on what it means to repent. It’s full of

spiritual tension. It holds nothing back. It's courageously, painfully honest. It doesn't rush this. It reflects at length on what it means to come before God as a sinful and broken human being.

This prayer is intensely emotional – one reason perhaps that it's a psalm some of us are slow to love. It's also theological in that it has a lot of reflection about the nature of God and how we relate to God. But we should keep in mind that this is experiential theology more than dogma. It comes from a place of personal spiritual struggle, not from intellectual inquiry. I'll say more about that in a bit.

The rest of this morning's message is more of a meditation than a sermon; it uses some of the abstract art of Jan Richardson along with words from the psalm. I invite you to relax and reflect with me on the vocabulary of repentance Psalm 51 gives us – both the words and the emotional vocabulary. It's not an easy text but it is a rich spiritual resource for us.

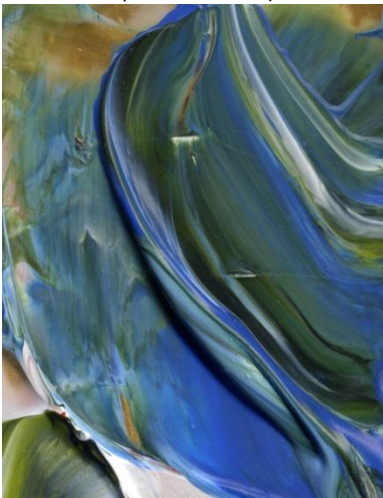
"Your Mercy... and steadfast love"



"Love and Mercy" © Jan Richardson

The pray-er recognizes from the beginning that the prayer, and any hope that is in it, relies on the grace of God. God's mercy and faithful love are the most important facts, the grounding realities of this psalm.

"Blot out, wash me, cleanse me"



"Streams of Mercy" © Jan Richardson

These are words that hint at rituals of renewal: Think baptism. Think the words of assurance in a worship service. Think passing of the peace. Think of the way we sometimes write down and burn

our sins on Ash Wednesday. Think of a record expunged, the slate wiped clean. Think of getting up from your knees.

The pray-er is not just asking to be marked down as forgiven in some divine record book, but for a sense of renewal that he can experience in his life.

“Transgression, iniquity, sin”



“Where Love Meets Us and Makes Us New” © Jan Richardson

Transgression suggests a willful and deliberate crossing of a boundary. Iniquity means something like bending or twisting of what is good to a wrong purpose. Sin is the more general word for refusing God and God’s will.

This isn’t anyone’s favorite topic, I know, but you can’t talk about repentance (or for that matter renewal or many of the other re-words) without talking about sin. The gift of this psalm is that it helps us to talk about sin. And when it can be talked about, it can be addressed.

“You desire truth”



“Seeking Clarity” © Jan Richardson

God knows all the truth, of course. It's we who have a hard time with the truth. Another gift of this psalm is that in it we may find the courage to face the truth that repentance and renewal depend upon.

"I know"



"We Enter the Way by Opening our Heart" © Jan Richardson

I acknowledge. I admit. No self-deception. No excuses are offered. No recall of previous integrity or good deeds that might "offset" the present sin. No attempt to shift the blame to God or to someone else. The pray-er finds the courage to deal impartially with the self, and that is remarkable.

"I have sinned"



"A Blessing in the Dust" © Jan Richardson

These are the words most basic to every penitential prayer. They are words every single one of us can say.

I almost feel like there is a place in Psalm 51, probably after verse 3, where there comes a natural pause for each person who prays it to lay his or her own sins before God.

Maybe they involve a huge burden of guilt over hurt inflicted on others or deception. Maybe it's just an awareness of having turned away from the suffering of others or of having judged unkindly or of failing to make the best use of your gifts. Maybe it's the carrying around of anger and resentment.

Maybe it's a matter of having bought too heavily into the lies and prejudices and false promises of our culture.

Maybe it's many things. Maybe it's just one or two. Maybe it's one regretted choice; maybe it's a destructive habit.

Psalm 51 provides us with the context, the vocabulary, and perhaps that extra push we need to lay it before God. If we remember that we are not alone in praying this prayer, maybe it also provides us with a sense of community in our brokenness and sinfulness, however personal our prayer may be.

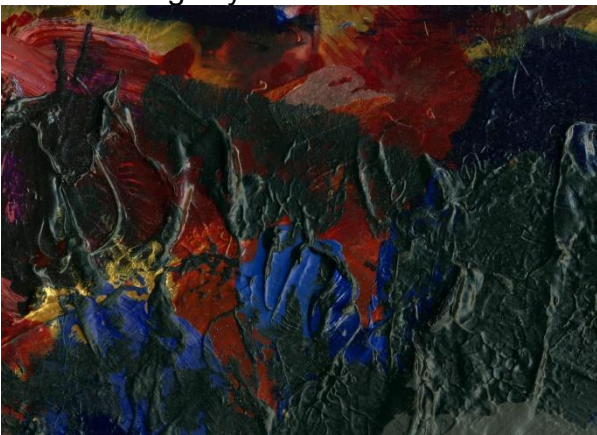
“Against you, you alone”



“Holy Absence” © Jan Richardson

We should not take this as downplaying actions that cause hurt to others. The notion that you *could* sin without hurting others is inconceivable in the Old Testament. Even the worship of false gods was understood to damage the community. But this is an acknowledgement that sin is most fundamentally a theological problem. Certainly it's social, ethical, and psychological, too, but most basically it has to do with our relationship with God, with imagining that we don't need God or can ignore God's will for us.

“I was born guilty”



“Even When We Were Dead” © Jan Richardson

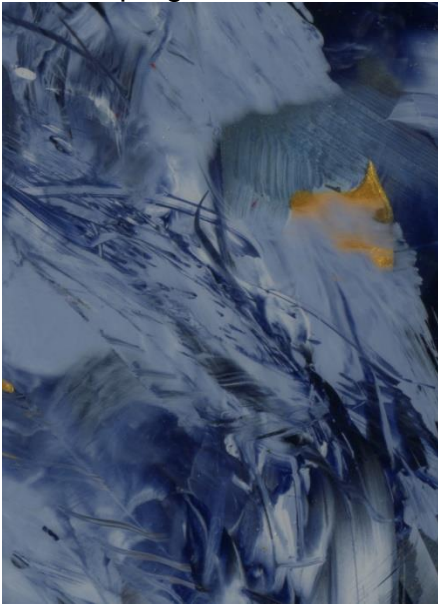
People often recoil from these words, because it sounds like the psalmist sees nothing good in human beings, even in a baby, or thinks sexuality is sinful, or is arguing for something like genetic

transmission of original sin. But that's too much to conclude from this. Remember that this is experiential theology. He's just trying to say that he has never known a time when he was not surrounded by and conditioned by and enmeshed in sin, so much so that he can't separate himself from it.

This prayer confesses "sinfulness," not just one or several "sins." It concerns a condition of the self. Not merely "I have sinned," but "I am a sinner." It's not this wrong thing or that wrong thing I've done that makes me a sinner. It's the fact that I am a sinful and broken human being that leads me to do those things that hurt others and that come between me and God.

So the prayer asks not simply for forgiveness for a list of misdeeds but for a change of heart and life.

"Teach, purge, wash, let, hide, blot, create, put, restore, sustain, deliver, open"



"Only Speak the Word" © Jan Richardson

Note that all these words in verses 6 to 15 are asking God to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. They ask, essentially, for God to make a new life possible.

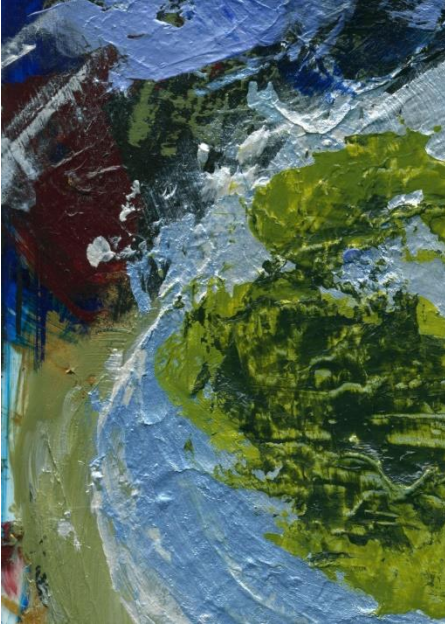
"Create in me a clean heart"



"Cleanse Me" © Jan Richardson

The psalmist knows that no self improvement program or willpower or human effort can do this. Changing hearts is God's work.

“Put a new and right spirit within me.”



“Teach Me Your Paths” © Jan Richardson

Repentance is not asking forgiveness so we can go on as we have been (and perhaps come back for some more forgiveness later). It is readiness to be changed.

“Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.”



“Restore the Joy of Salvation” © Jan Richardson

Repentance opens the possibility of renewal.

At the end, we hear the prayer coming back 'round to where it began:



“Rend Your Hearts” © Jan Richardson

“A contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

It’s not sacrifice or atoning good deeds or donations. It’s not punishing ourselves or saying the right words or earning our way back into God’s good graces. It’s just an open and repentant heart that brings our prayer to God’s ears – or perhaps it would be better to say “to God’s loving heart.”

The whole prayer rests on, is wrapped up in, confidence in God’s mercy and grace. Remember it began with an appeal to God’s steadfast love and mercy?



“Mercy” © Jan Richardson

Although we have in this psalm a pretty thorough exploration of the sinfulness of the human heart, it is a mistake to hear – or use – this prayer as just a wallowing in guilt and remorse and negativity. As much as it has to say about sin, it is even more about God’s grace. Repentance itself is a response to grace; it’s already a step on the path to forgiveness and healing. It’s honesty clearing the way for new growth. It’s a cry for help. It’s the turning toward God. It’s opening the door to let God’s mercy and steadfast love into our lives. It’s accepting a new vision of the future that isn’t determined by the mistakes of the past. Repentance returns us to where we are supposed to be, to who we are supposed to be. Repentance is the beginning of the renewal we long for and need.

Resources :

The Message of the Psalms, Walter Brueggemann

Psalms (Interpretation Commentary), James Mays

The Psalms, Artur Weiser

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