

“God of Mercy”

Fourth Presbyterian Church

One of my favorite episodes of The Andy Griffith Show includes a scene in which everyone in town goes to church on Sunday morning to hear a guest preacher. Dr. Green has come down from New York City to the little town of Mayberry to preach a sermon. His sermon is all about slowing down and not getting pulled into the frantic, hustle and bustle rush of modern life (quite ironic to be preaching this message in the sleepy little town of Mayberry). For all his acclaim as a learned scholar, it turns out that Dr. Green is a very boring preacher. Throughout the sermon we keep seeing shots of people in the congregation who aren't paying attention. Opie's eyes dart back and forth following a fly that is buzzing around his pew. Barney Fife nods off a couple of times and is awoken by Andy elbowing him in the ribs. Gomer Pile even starts snoring, right in the middle of the sermon. Well, after the service is over, everyone shakes hands with the preacher and feeds him false compliments about his message. “Lovely sermon.” “The service was magnificent.” Aunt Bee says, “Oh Dr. Green, your sermon had such a wonderful message for us.” Andy follows, “Yes sir, you really hit the nail right on the head there.” Then Barney (who slept through most of the sermon) chimes in, “Yes sir, that's one subject you just cain't talk enough about: Sin.” After some awkward looks and laughter from the TV audience, Andy whispers “Barney, he didn't talk about sin.”

Well, in case anyone feels the need to nod off today, let me give you a heads up, this morning, we will be discussing sin, for as Barney would say, “you just cain't talk enough about: Sin.” This morning's psalm, Psalm 51, is all about sin. In fact, it is a prayer offered to God, for the purpose of confessing sin. The psalmist cries out to God, saying “I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight...I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.” The psalmist's prayer doesn't pull any punches. He comes clean to God and confesses his sin, using every word he can think of to describe his fallen condition: sin, transgression, iniquity, evil, bloodshed, guilt, feeling as if his bones are crushed. The psalmist bears his sole to God and cries out with words that are so hard to say. He admits that he has done wrong, not just to others, but that he has sinned against God. He has broken the Covenant with his Lord. He has ignored the relationship with his creator, sustainer, and redeemer. The psalmist falls on his knees, and asks for God's forgiveness.

Psalm 51 is attributed to King David, and it is suggested that this prayer, or something like it was what he prayed when confronted with his sin in his affair with Bathsheba. Remember the story? David lusted over the beautiful woman, Bathsheba. He couldn't stand being without her, so he used his political power as king to have her husband Uriah murdered and then he took her as his own. According to tradition, Psalm 51, this plea for mercy, was the prayer David prayed when he finally realized all that he had done. It is at his lowest moment of guilt that he makes this plea.

I have heard a prayer like this once before. I have heard a person crying for forgiveness in their lowest of lows. One summer during seminary I spent 11 weeks doing a internship through the Chaplains Office of the Metro State Women's Prison in Atlanta. Throughout that summer I had some amazing experiences. The women in the prison, at least the ones who wanted to speak with chaplains, were very open about their faith. Some of the women I met that

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summer still stand out in my mind as the most faithful Christians I’ve ever encountered. Thrown into the vortex of pain and struggle that the prison system perpetuates, these women had to work hard, very hard, to give praise to God and to love their neighbors as themselves. There was one woman though, one in particular, who wasn’t able to love anyone around her, and even more, she wasn’t able to love herself. One of the other chaplains had been working with this woman all summer, and he kept us updated on how their conversations were going. This woman was in prison for something most of us couldn’t even imagine in our wildest nightmares. She had been addicted to crack cocaine for years, and one night, while she was out of her mind on drugs, she killed her two children at home. When she awoke some hours later she was horrified to discover what she had done, murdering the two most important people in her life, and she didn’t even remember doing so because she was so doped up. She immediately called the police, turned herself in, and received two life sentences for her punishment. Spending the rest of her life in prison, however, was nothing compared to her true punishment of living with the reality of what she had done. For years, she cried herself to sleep every night. A woman who loved her children more than anything else in world was daily reminded of the horror that her sin had wrought. Occasionally she would end up in one of the 24-hour surveillance cells for a week because she had tried to take her own life, unable to bear the weight of her sin.

It was on one such day that I passed by in the hallway, asking if anyone needed to speak to a chaplain or wanted to pray about anything. I heard a faint voice say, “Chaplain?” I responded, “Yes mam, would you like to talk?” “Just pray for me,” she said. And so, I walked over to her door, which was locked (all the doors in maximum security building stayed locked). I pushed open the tiny flap, about the size of a mail slot, and asked her what she wanted to pray about. She didn’t say a word. For a long while she just sat on her bed and sobbed. After what felt like an eternity she said, “Chaplain, does God forgive...does God forgive, no matter what you’ve done?” I took a deep breath, and then said, “I think so. I know so. God is a God of love, and God loves us and forgives us.” We sat in silence for a few more moments. Then I asked her, “Do you think you can forgive yourself?” “Never,” she said, “Never,” and she burst into uncontrollable crying. Every time I hear Psalm 51 I can’t help but think of her. This is her psalm. This is her prayer. Without words, she prays it every day. “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love...For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me...so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment...Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.” This is her psalm. This is her prayer, just as it was David’s.

This prayer is the prayer of someone who has been smacked in the face the reality of his or her sin. For David it was lust and murder. For the woman in prison it was horror at her drug induced killing. But we must be careful that these extreme examples don’t keep us from hearing how these words speak for us all. All of us who have, at one time or another, come face to face with the reality of our sinfulness. For some of us it is the unkind words we say to someone we love. For some of us it is the realization that we’re addicted to our jobs and are ignoring our families. For some of us it is that moment when we see that we’ve spent years of our life concerned with only our own needs, and have been taking advantage of those around us. For some of us it is the slow and steady process of realizing that our old stereotypes of people

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different than us were only based in fear and hate. For some of us, it may be something as simple as leaving our shopping cart in the parking space and being humbled by the saint who is willing to take back what we were too lazy and self-absorbed to return. Whatever the moment is for each of us, this psalm is our prayer. These words, “Have mercy on me, O God,” are spoken out of a real heartfelt acknowledgement that we are stuck in a state of addiction to ourselves, which God did not create us to live in. These words aren’t just nicely written phrases that we can read in our bulletin nonchalantly. No, they are the real, honest to God, words of someone at their lowest of lows, who has nothing left to do but cry out to God.

Someone has once said that the doctrine of sin is the only Christian teaching that is able to be proven empirically. The idea, being that in reading the newspaper every day we are surrounded by the proof of sin. Well, on the one hand, that is certainly true. From the horrors of war crimes to the betrayal of trust in relationships we see sins all around us. On the other hand, though, sin, as we understand it, isn’t just a list of bad things we do, whether in the news or in private. Sin isn’t just Santa Claus keeping tabs on our actions all year to see how naughty we’ve been. No, sin, understood biblically, is more than the sum of our unjust, or hurtful actions. It is a state that we live in. It is a state of broken relationship. Think of being in love. Love isn’t just the things we do, like buying boxes of chocolate or writing love letters. Love isn’t just an emotion we feel when we’re around someone dear to us. Love is a state of being, a way of living in relationship to someone else. So too is sin a state of being, a way of living in broken relationship with one another, and ultimately with God. The sinful acts we commit certainly have serious effects on the lives of our brothers and sisters, but ultimately for all of us, our sin is a rejection of God. It is with this in mind that the psalmist prays to God, “Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight.” When we live lives that revolve around ourselves and our own needs whatever they may be, we make ourselves gods. This idolatry is at the core of our sin, for it keeps us from God. Thus, confessing our sin, is an act not only of admitting our wrongs, but of asking God to restore the relationship that we have broken. Confession, or repentance, is the movement of being turned from our own inward isolation towards God, who alone is lord of all.

It is precisely with this movement, from sin to restoration, that the psalmist utters his prayer. As Christians, whenever we talk about sin, we must remember that we always talk about “forgiven sin.” Though, as the psalmist says, our transgressions are ever before us, our sin does not have the last word. For we know the good news of God’s grace in Jesus Christ, that we are forgiven. Though this psalm is certainly about sin, it is even more so a psalm about grace. A psalm about the God of mercy, who loves us no matter what. The psalmist doesn’t just wallow in self-pity because of his sins. No, he asks God to act in his life, with words such as: have mercy on me, wash me, cleanse me, teach me, purge me, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me...Restore to me the joy of your salvation.” Imagine that, Joy in the middle of a prayer of confession.

Not only does sin not have the last word, it doesn’t even have the first word. Before we have even uttered our confession God has already forgiven us in Christ. That, my friends, is precisely what grace is all about. And, it is only out of confidence in God’s grace in the first

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place that we are even able to direct our prayers of confession to God. Every Sunday, we pray our corporate prayer of confession, but before doing so, we hear words of grace that call us into confession. We hear words such as, “the proof of God’s amazing love is this, while we were sinners, Christ died for us. Because we have faith in him, we dare approach God with confidence. In faith and penitence, let us confess our sin before God and one another.” Faith in God’s grace leads us to confession. It is precisely with this in mind that the psalmist begins his prayer, with words that acknowledge God’s grace, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.” It is with this confidence in God’s love that he has the courage to say the words that are so hard to say: I have done wrong. I have sinned. All is not as it should be. All is not as you have created it to be. “God be merciful to me, a sinner.”

With this in mind, we can see that prayers of confession aren’t just hard-lined, brow-beating, fear-based means of guilting us into admitting we’ve done something wrong. No, our time of corporate and private prayers of confession are gifts from God, times of clarity where we remember that God’s love is stronger than this mess we’ve gotten ourselves into. Cries for mercy, are deep down moments in which we dare to risk being vulnerable enough to be real before the one who loves us no matter what. Confessions of our sin and depravity are freedom giving movements in which we see that all the ideologies around us, which would claim to save us, are in the end just as filled with sin as we are. We confess that God, not us, has the final word on who’s included in the gift of grace. When we confess that our relationship with God is broken we do so remembering that God has already acted in Christ to restore it.

Therefore, we, like the psalmist, should confess our sins (not as part of some step-by-step process of achieving our own salvation) but because in confessing our sins we acknowledge that God is God, we let go of our self-occupied obsession with perfection, and we open our attention to the ways God is already at work in the world, reconciling us to one another and to God through Christ. With apologies to Barney Fife, Grace, God’s Grace, is “that one subject you just can’t talk enough about.” Thanks be to God for the grace which enables us to confess our sins. Amen.