

Psa. 51:0 *To the leader. A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.*

- 1 Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
- 2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.
- 3 For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
- 4 Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.
- 5 Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.
- 6 You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
- 7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- 8 Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
- 9 Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.
- 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
- 11 Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
- 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

- 13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
- 14 Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.
- 15 O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
- 16 For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.
- 17 The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

- Is. 53:4** Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
- 5 But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.
 - 6 All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

May 7, 2017

Take, Bless, Break, Give

Psalm 51:1-17

Isaiah 53:4-6

King David may have been many things, but one thing no one considers him is a paragon of virtue. One thing he certainly was is a paradigm of humanity. This man who played music so beautifully that King Saul hired him to soothe him when his demons began to take over; who led armies to victory after victory; who brought the nation together in unity of purpose and faith...this man also committed adultery – some would call it rape. Bathsheba certainly had little ability to say no to the king. And when things got complicated by Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, coming home at just the wrong time, David wove a tangled web so twisted and snarled, he committed murder to get himself free. Which never works.

The prophet Nathan comes to David and tells him a story of a wealthy man who has the gall to steal a poor family's one beloved sheep to be the main course of a party he was throwing, which enrages the king to such a point that he demands the man be brought to him for immediate punishment. Nathan stands before the king and utters the convicting words: "You are the man."

Out of that terrible traumatic event come the words of Psalm 51. David has seen himself in the mirror of a prophet's words. No longer a man filled with pride and selfish desire, he's a man broken by the moral mirror that reveals to him exactly who he is. His arrogance is crushed; his conceit is broken and he writes this psalm of repentance.

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.*

This proud king is a broken man. He sees for the first time the full extent of his ability to hurt others and sin against God. The next line of the psalm causes us to pause sometimes: *Against you, you alone have I sinned.* We want to say, "Excuse me, David, but I think both Uriah and Bathsheba are victims here." And they are. David has done a terrible wrong, an immense injustice to them, but sin is theological; we sin against God. We commit crimes against other people, but we sin against God.

I can traumatize, victimize, and brutalize you, but I cannot sin against you. Sin is about violation of the law of God. David was guilty of violating Bathsheba and eliminating Uriah; he was guilty of sinning against God and God alone. So, perhaps he can go to Bathsheba and ask forgiveness; he certainly can't ask Uriah's forgiveness, but he asks for something more from God – not just forgiveness but a request to give him a clean heart.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

Bathsheba can forgive him for stealing her from her husband and then taking her husband's life; but only God can create a clean heart and put a new and right spirit in place of the old sin-stained one within David.

Finally, he sings these words in his song of brokenness and contrition:

For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

When Jesus sat at table with his disciples for the last time, he took bread, blessed it, broke it, then gave it to his disciples. Those four Eucharistic verbs encapsulate the life of love which Jesus lived for us, and the life of faith we live for him. We take the grace he offers us; we bless him and those around us with good words and actions; and we allow ourselves to be broken as Jesus broke the bread, said, "this is my body," and then lived those words on the cross. We, too, are called to be broken people in the sense that we need to see ourselves as David did, in the mirror of brutal honesty and look with shame on the ways we have wronged others and sinned against God.

Like one in the grips of addiction who is in such denial that they truly believe they are in control, so are we in the grips of denial about this addiction we have called sin. We may not have been guilty of the same sins as David, but we are guilty of sins greater than we are willing to admit. We are idolaters, worshiping other gods; we pass by the homeless one on the street; we consider ourselves to be privileged people so it's ok for us to consume a much higher percentage of the world's resources than anyone else; we love money and use people.

And until we have the courage to look into that brutal mirror and see ourselves for who and what we are, we cannot sincerely say the words David sang,

you have no delight in sacrifice;

if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.

The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;

a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Several years ago I shared with you a story about a Methodist church conference at which some very controversial issues were being debated that were very personal to many of the folks attending. When the vote was taken and the decision made, anger arose among those who voted the other way. Later that day the entire body gathered for worship including communion and when some of the worshipers came forward to receive the elements, one very angry man approached a leader who had spoken for the majority side of the vote; the leader held a chalice of wine and the man knocked it to the ground where it shattered into dozens of pieces. People began to gather and pick up the pieces of the broken chalice. When the service was over, the man who had done this was deeply contrite. He and the others pieced the chalice together and a woman who had some wire in her purse made a wire frame that held the pieces in place, even with cracks and gaps between the pieces.

They placed the mended chalice on the communion table with a candle in it, and light shone through all of the broken spots. It sat there the rest of the conference as a reminder of what we in our sinfulness can do, and also a reminder of what the light of Christ can do when we let him use our brokenness to shine his light into the world.

Jesus Christ allowed his body to be broken that we might be healed. As the prophet Isaiah so perfectly says it: *But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.* In order to truly and deeply understand and be changed by the thing Jesus has done for us, we must realize how much we need it, how desperately broken we are without it.

What is required from us in exchange for the broken body of Christ is a broken spirit. For, a broken and contrite heart God will not despise.