

Pastor T.C. Arnold
1st Sunday in Lent
Psalm 32
February 21st, 2010

Before we begin this morning, please turn to the front of your hymnal (again) to Psalm 32. Please follow along (read with me) while I read a few selected verses...

(1-2) Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

(5) I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity, I said, "I will confess my transgression to the Lord," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.

(8) I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go, I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

(10-11) Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the Lord. Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

This Psalm appointed for today is the second Psalm of Lament from King David (the first is Psalm 6). The struggles of sin entangled David but God's blessed righteousness wins out. This Psalm was written after David's sin of adultery with Bathsheba, wife of Uriah the Hittite (who he had killed to hide his sin) was exposed. He was greatly troubled by his sins, but the Lord would not leave him floundering in the deep trenches of despair. The precious treasure of the Gospel forgiveness brings the sinner out of the abyss of spiritual distress. This would happen for David and he would shout the words of joy in this Psalm. This would happen for others as well.

For example, there is a (true) story of a man born more than 300 years after Christ in what is now modern day Algeria (Africa) to a woman named Monica, a Christian, and man who was a pagan. He was a brilliant boy and would later be educated in the world's most prominent schools. He began to align himself with "non-Christian" religions while studying as a youth, much to the dismay to his mother, Monica. Monica would not give up praying for her son and would continue to urge him to look toward God's truth.

This brilliant, well educated man would also live a promiscuous life. He would surrender to the pleasures of the world, much like King David. He fathered a son out of wedlock and would later completely break ties with the woman. As he got older, his dealings in false religion would continue and his shady personal ethics would not improve. But mom continued to pray - as I'm sure did many others for the bright young star.

Eventually, he would confess Christ as his Lord and Savior. He would devote the rest of his life to the church and became one of the most recognizable "Church Fathers" in the history of the world. He was baptized by Bishop Ambrose (another well known Church Father) on the Vigil of Easter and brought great joy to his mother who died shortly after just outside of Rome on her return trip home from the baptism. He would return to Hippo, North Africa and became the Bishop and would fight for the confessing church for the rest of his life

The man I'm referring to is none other than Saint Augustine and Psalm 32 was his favorite Psalm. As a matter of fact Augustine had it inscribed on the wall next to his bed before he died in order to meditate on it better. He read it and reread it time and time again. He liked it because, as he said in his writings, "*intelligentia prima est ut te peccatorem.*" That is, "the beginning of knowledge is to know oneself to be a sinner."

Augustine's words were very wise and perhaps you have never heard it put that way before. It's a bit strange to think of knowledge that way. The reason, because often times we think of Christian knowledge as being what we can know about being saved – or – how we "understand" God's gracious Gospel and His unimaginable gifts. We might think that when we start to get our minds around these sorts of things we will be on our way to gaining true "knowledge."

Augustine puts a bit of a twist on it. He says that your knowledge begins when you realize the way you really are. Knowledge is to know the truth about oneself. Knowledge is the understanding of how you really stack up next to God's perfect law – and admit – with every bit of the knowledge you have – you are the chief of sinners. That's why so many of you wore ashes this past Wednesday. From dust you are and to dust you will return. "The beginning of knowledge is to know oneself to be a sinner." How elementary.

Elementary indeed – but perhaps not so widely accepted. Though it would make sense to see ourselves before God as what we are...though we know that we have sinned and continue to sin...though St. Paul would write to Timothy, "*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst*" ... though St. John would clearly say, "*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us*" ... many people, even many Christians, don't believe they actually are sinners. Some believe that one has to be an "either/or." In other words, one is either a saint standing before God a forgiven of all transgressions or one is a sinner condemned to Hell and out of the reach of God's love and salvation.

Here's where the "misunderstanding" takes place. It's not an "either/or". Rather, it's a "both/and." We are truly and clearly both sinner and saint at the same time. We know what we have done and what we have left undone. Those sins are what the Christian continues to struggle with each and every day. Those sins cause distress to our lives and the lives of others. Sin is very much alive in your life and you are still very much a sinner. For that reason, you, a Christian, are going to have to work all that much harder at combating the forces of evil and sin in your life. That's hard – but expected and even demanded by our Lord. He expects obedience from His children – like you would expect it from yours. The beginning of knowledge is to know oneself to be a sinner. And that is what you are.

But if that is the beginning – here is where God brings it to completion. It's the other thing you are – a saint. You are as much of a saint as you are a sinner, that is, every bit of you through and through are both. But you are not a saint alone. You are a saint with the Lord Jesus Christ – what has made you what you are – forgiven, loved and redeemed.

In this penitential season of Lent we begin to inch closer and closer to the passion where it all happened for you. And it truly happened – for you on that cross at Calvary. They say that the first step to addressing a problem is to admit that there is a

problem. Let that be our first step here in Lent. Augustine had it inscribed on the wall of the bedroom in which he would die and would write about it when he called it, "the beginning of knowledge." David would say this in Psalm 32, "*I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.*" King David's words in this blessed penitential Psalm of lament would show us the beginning of true knowledge - the knowledge that our salvation is wrapped up in a man, who was also true God, who died for us on Good Friday.

The struggles of sin entangled David. God's righteousness won out. The struggles of sin entangled St. Augustine. God's righteousness won out. Nothing is different for you and me today. Thank God that God's righteousness wins out. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.