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Psalm 51:1-12; Jeremiah 31:31-34

HEART HEALTH

It begins pretty much as soon as we get out of bed--the blaming we do of others for the brokenness of the world. Listen to the news, read the paper, and you and I can find plenty of people to blame for the sorry state of the world. There are the politicians who succumb to greed and cater to special interest groups. There are our civic institutions that are clogged with bureaucracy and inefficiency. There are all those narrow-minded people who discriminate against other people for a whole variety of reasons, and those people who make everyone afraid with their criminal behaviors. There are the lazy and selfish people who won't alter their lifestyles to save the planet. There is our next door neighbor who doesn't pick up after her dog and leaves the trash bins out all week. And then there are our family members whose behaviors are the reason we aren't happier in life. There are a lot of people to blame for the brokenness of the world.

While these individuals and groups may indeed be culpable of harm and wrongdoing, even *great* harm and *great* wrongdoing, none of them is the focus of our Psalm today. Instead, the writer of Psalm 51 makes an unusual admission, confessing "*I have sinned, O God. I've done wrong.*"

What makes this admission unusual is how rare it is for us humans to admit wrongdoing. It is hard for us to face our own mistakes and shortcomings. Notice how public figures will try to soften their culpability with phrases like, "mistakes were made," or "I misspoke," or dismissing behaviors as "youthful indiscretions." Even if we are forced to admit our wrongdoings, notice how often we will deflect responsibility by saying, "yes, but . . ." But.

There are no "buts" in today's psalm. The psalmist blames nobody but herself or himself. Instead, the writer admits to God, "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."

Would it surprise you to know that this psalm, Psalm 51, is said to have arisen out of a sex scandal? We are very familiar with sex scandals: priests who abuse children, movie directors sexually assaulting subordinates, elected officials sexting explicit photos of themselves. We live in age of sex scandals. Psalm 51 is said to have been written by King David after his sex scandal with Bathsheba had been exposed and David had been confronted with his guilt of not only adultery but of orchestrating the death of Bathsheba's husband. And instead of seeking to justify his behavior, instead of making excuses, what we hear David make in this Psalm is an astonishing admission of his sin.

Nowadays we shy away from the word *sin*. Apparently it is regarded as "old-fashioned" and not very palatable to our modern sensibilities. We use words like *shortcomings* and *mistakes* and *flaws*. There is nothing wrong with those words. But I can't help but feel that they are insufficient in addressing the scope of the problem. Such words make it sound like we are afflicted with minor issues that we could correct if we could just be a bit more aware and sensitive. But listen to Psalm 51 and you will hear about an affliction that is far from minor. The writer states, "Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me." We aren't comfortable thinking of babies in all their sweet innocence as "sinners." But what the writer is expressing is the belief that sin is an inherent part of the human condition. Is there goodness in us? Absolutely. We kissed by God with God's very blessing. But try as we might, we are flawed and imperfect. We can try to be good, kind, caring, generous and despite our best intentions, we will still fall short. We hurt the people close to us, we ignore the sufferings of

others around the world, we participate in systems that oppress, we have thoughts that are not honorable, and we place our trust in earthly securities. The issue of sin lies deep in all of us and is expressed in all kinds of ways.

That is why the writer of Psalm 51 pleads with God for help. "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin." And the writer adds, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." You see, the writer has identified the root of the problem. We think of sin as behaviors that are wrong or bad or hurtful. But the writer understands that it isn't enough simply to curb our behaviors in order to be in right relationship with God because the matter of sin lies within our hearts. Our hearts are the source of our broken behaviors. And thus, it is our hearts that need a thorough cleansing.

We hear a similar message from the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah wrote to people who had every day reminders of the ways they had messed up. God had given them a covenant to live in, with commandments to guide their behaviors with one another and with God. But the people had broken that covenant. The consequences of their rupture were all around them: Jerusalem had been sacked by foreign invaders, the Temple destroyed, the people pulled from their families and homes and marched off to live in a foreign land. Every moment of every day was a reminder of their sin. But God has Jeremiah speak these words to them: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors . . . a covenant that they broke." Instead, God says, "This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel . . . I will put my law *within* them, and I will write it on their *hearts*; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." What we learn is that God doesn't simply want us to follow rules that have been carved out on stone or written on paper, but that God desires the covenant to be written upon our

hearts. God desires a relationship with us. And for that to happen, our hearts need transforming. Because the root of the problem lies within our hearts. Sin clogs our arteries. We may be going about our everyday lives, but all the while, we have heart disease. But because we don't like to acknowledge our sin, we don't like to admit our blame, we pretend that our hearts are just fine. We pretend they are healthy. And we do our best to ignore the sin that lies within our hearts and the heart of our society.

In the adult class this Lenten season, we have been exploring the issues of race and racism in America. What we ultimately see in this exploration, in learning about how racism became part of the American landscape, how people of color were treated in American history, in discovering the deeply entrenched systemic racism within institutions of our society, what we ultimately see in all of this is the story of human sin. We get a glimpse at the heart disease that is killing us and distorting our relationships with one another and our God. White citizens could not behave the way they have toward African Americans, Native Americans and other peoples of color if God's covenant were truly written upon their hearts.

And so the most important first step toward becoming heart healthy is to admit the sin-- whatever sin that may be, to face one's culpability, to be honest. Understandably, this is not comfortable or easy. When confronted with guilt and shame, we tend to run the other way.

Carolyn Helsel is a white Presbyterian pastor and seminary professor who has helped white congregations talk about racism. In her book, *Anxious to Talk About It*, Helsel writes that, "Every time I learned about racism, and as I began to see myself as white, I kept feeling guilty and ashamed. And that was not a pleasant feeling." But she adds, "For me, the realization that guilt and shame are *not* the final goal was redemptive. I began to understand my emotions as

necessary to the challenging process of learning about racism, as well as helpful to helping other whites understand that racism remains a problem."

Hiesel's wisdom about her feelings of guilt and shame run counter to modern ways of thinking in which guilt and shame are regarded as destructive emotions. But what Hiesel suggests is that guilt and shame are not destructive as long as they are not the final goal. Rather, guilt and shame are essential if we are to be honest about ourselves and the sins of our lives. Instead of running away, Psalm 51 calls us to dwell in that uncomfortable place for awhile, that place where we are honest about our sin, where it is before us and we must acknowledge it.

The writer of Psalm 51 expresses great guilt and shame for his or her sin. But that guilt and shame are not the final goal. Instead, the writer appeals to God's grace and compassion not only for forgiveness but for transformation. The writer appeals to God for a new heart, and a right spirit.

The good news about this psalm, Psalm 51, is that there is more grace in God than there is sin in us. There is more grace in God than there is sin in us. Trusting in that good news, we are making our way to Easter. In two weeks we shall be there--to that place where we await a heart transplant. That is what Easter is designed to do: to offer us love and mercy to change our hearts and our lives. The new heart God offers us through the Easter experience allows us to move from sin into the fresh possibilities made possible through God's grace.

But the joy that awaits us on Easter, that joy and hope, are only realized when we first undertake the difficult journey of honesty, the journey of admitting why we so badly need God's redeeming love in the first place.