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October 5, 2014**

THE PRAYER OF A PENITENT

Psalm 51:1-17

According to recent polls, Bill Clinton is by far the most popular living President! He presided over the country during a relatively peaceful and prosperous period and during the one year the federal government actually had a balanced budget, even a small surplus! Bill Clinton was the President who began Americorps, like the Peace Corps, except with a domestic focus to challenge young people to invest their skills and talents in helping the poor in our society. He was also very public about his Christian faith. At the same time, who can forget his deceitful public protestation about not having sex with Monica Lewinsky and his debate over the meaning of the verb “is!”

King David, Israel’s most famous king also had his highs and his lows. Under David’s leadership Jerusalem became both the political and religious capital of the Hebrew nation as David brought the Ark of the Covenant there. He built his palace there, which some archeologists believe they have discovered. David

was a warrior-king who built a strong standing army and greatly expanded Israel's borders with many military victories.

Spiritually the Hebrew Scriptures describe David as "a man after God's own heart." And yet that same David betrayed one of his loyal, foreign-born military commanders, Uriah the Hittite, by seducing his wife Bathsheba in Jerusalem, while Uriah was away waging war on David's behalf. When Bathsheba later informed David she was pregnant with his child, David schemed to cover up his adultery. He invited Uriah home on leave from the battle front, and got him liquored up and sent him home to his wife, hoping he would sleep with her. But out of dedication to the soldiers under his command who did not receive leave from the battlefield, Uriah refused to sleep in the same room as his beautiful wife and then dutifully returned to the front. Since Uriah would realize the child his wife was carrying was not his, David then conspired to have Uriah killed on the battlefield, leaving him exposed to enemy fire, as his fellow soldiers abruptly retreated.

Think about David's actions as related to the Ten Commandments. David broke the commands forbidding coveting, adultery, murder, and bearing false witness! That's 4 of the 10 commandments in one single incident from David's life!

At that point in the story David thought he was in the clear. No one would discover his sinful acts. But God revealed the truth to Nathan the Prophet who cleverly confronted the King!

How did David respond? That's what Psalm 51 is about. As the preface reads, "A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba." In the words of Scripture scholar Don Williams, "Psalm 51 is David's deep, prayerful, agonizing response to his catastrophe" (pg.362; The Communicator's Commentary; Psalm 1-72; c.1986; Waco; Word Books). (read Ps. 51:1-17; pgs. 520-521 OT in pew Bibles)

The Psalm has 4 parts. Verses 1 and 2 are a plea for God's mercy and forgiveness. David pleads with God to graciously blot out, wash, and cleanse him from his sin. Sin can be defined in many ways. It includes everything that stands in the way of selflessly loving God and neighbor. It is a rejection of God's

guidance, an attempt to live independently from God, to defiantly chart our own course in life. And it often involves idolatry – trying to substitute something in place of God as the object of our ultimate trust and worship - whether ourselves, our wisdom, our wealth, our family, our lifestyle, or something else.

David asks for God’s mercy according to God’s steadfast love. The phrase “steadfast love” comes from the word “chesed” which might also be translated God’s covenant love or grace. I mentioned last week that most Hebrew words have both a concrete and theoretical meaning. The Hebrew word translated “mercy” comes from the word womb. So God’s mercy is God’s wombish, mother-like love! In fact in the Prophet Isaiah (49:14-15). Yahweh likens himself as a nursing mother, caring for Israel, her child.

In verses 3-5 David describes his own enmeshment in sin. We can appreciate our need of God’s mercy only when we have acknowledged the depth and gravity of our sin. David admits that sin is a pervasive power and influence in his life, to which he often succumbs. “I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever

before me . . . so you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.” This means that that the whole human race has been infected with the deadly spiritual virus called sin. In Scripture sin is not only something we do or fail to do, an act or an attitude, it is also a condition! David confesses not only that he has sinned, but his identity is as a sinner. No one except JC is exempt. We have all inherited that flaw from our forebears. We read in Psalm 143:2, “Do not enter into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous (sinless) before you.” And the Apostle Paul writes (Rom. 3:9b-10), “We have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written: ‘There is no one who is righteous, not even one.’”

In verses 6–15 David returns to his prayer of supplication, in quest of God’s forgiveness. David asks God to hide his face from his sins, and blot them out; to purge him with hyssop, to wash him spiritually so that he will be spotlessly pure, to create a new heart and spirit within him (to make him a new person,

something only God can accomplish); not to cast him away or remove his Holy Spirit from David's life. He asks, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit" and "deliver me from bloodshed (or bloodguilt) O God," a reference to his murder of Uriah, Bathsheba's husband.

Finally in verses 16-17 David concludes with a wonderfully insightful statement – "For you (O Lord) 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." The problem is that going through a ritual, even that of sacrifice as spelled out in the Torah, may not be an expression of a person's inner disposition. You can "go through the motions" without having your heart in it! David knows the limits of the whole sacrificial system. Guilt and sin offerings are two important kinds of sacrifice regularly used in Hebrew worship. The problem is that such sacrifices only atoned for "unintentional sins" rather than those committed willfully "with a high hand" (see Num. 15:27-31) as were David's acts in this instance. And so when no

sacrifice would do, David wisely threw himself on God's mercy, in a spirit of humility. All David can offer God is a "broken spirit and a broken, penitent heart." He comes to God just as he is.

The remarkable fact is that when David admits his sin and guilt, what does he get? Forgiveness! God's forgiveness! God's outrageous grace! The text of 2 Samuel reports simply the words of the Prophet Nathan in response to David's admission of guilt, "Now the Lord has put away your sin."

How does the gospel of Christ transcend the entire Jewish sacrificial system? According to the Letter to the Hebrews, rather than seeking forgiveness of sin through the death of a blemishless sacrificial animal, we are to trust our forgiveness comes from the fact that the sinless Jesus offered himself in sacrifice for our sin! And rather than needing to be repeated again and again as were sacrificial offerings, Jesus offered a once-for-all sacrifice for sin for all humankind. So what the animal sacrifices only vaguely represented, Jesus has offered in full! David prays requesting God's steadfast love and mercy to forgive his sin. Jesus' incarnation, his sinless life and selfless

ministry, his vicarious suffering and death, and glorious resurrection are the most profound display of God's steadfast love and wombish mother love and mercy for each of us!

Some Christians I've known have tortured themselves, believing that their words, actions, or thoughts were somehow beyond God's power to cleanse and forgive. Friends, if God could forgive David who broke 4 of the 10 commandments in one single event, God can and will forgive us! Further, we are rejecting the essence of the gospel, that Jesus has the power to cleanse and forgive!

So, how can we receive God's forgiveness and cleansing power for the pervasive presence of sin in our lives today? First, like David, by admitting our sin instead of making excuses, coming just as we are to the throne of God. Second we can throw ourselves completely on God's steadfast and wombish mother-love! Third, we can receive cleansing from sin by trusting in the ultimate, once-for-all sacrifice God provided for sin, through the death of God's unique Son, Jesus the Christ!

Today we celebrate the Sacrament of the Eucharist which reminds us of God's steadfast love and mercy, available to each of us through the sacrifice of Christ. You are invited to come, just as you are. Amen.