



Pastor Ken's Sermon

ASH WEDNESDAY HOMILY

PSALM 51:1-13

FEBRUARY 17, 2021

The summer of my pastoral internship in Grenora, North Dakota, I attended a community supper, which included an auction. The auctioneer was a farmer and member of my congregation named Howard Ross. I knew Howard pretty good by this time and that he liked to playfully get under people's skin. I guess he figured the bidding on some baked goods was running a bit low plus I wasn't paying real good attention, so after another *"going once, going twice"* he paused and said something like *"hey pastor Ken how many books in the New Testament?"* "27" I replied. "Sold" he said! Gosh, how could a guy be so dumb as to fall for that! But I gathered myself and said *"Howard, how many Commandments are there?"* He said "10". I said *"well, I think you just broke about half of them, so maybe you need to come see me later this week!"*

I think I could have made the case for stealing for sure...which always starts with coveting – that's numbers 7,9 and 10 right off the bat. Throw in a case for #8 - bearing false witness...not to mention #4 about honoring father and mother, which Luther says extends to *"others in authority"* which as Howard's pastor I figured I qualified as, and I wasn't far from the mark!

I mention this because Psalm 51 is the best example of a confession of sin we have we have in the Bible. It was a confession wrung from King David by the prophet Nathan – based on an incident described in II Samuel 11. It wouldn't be a stretch to say that David had left the tablets of the 10 Commandments in pieces in the run-up to Nathan confronting him. If you don't know the story, the immediate cause of Nathan's visit to the king was adultery – the breaking of the 6th commandment. David had "taken" another man's wife – Bathsheba, from Uriah, a soldier in David's army.

But all trespass has its origin in a thought – in this case lust, another word for which is covetousness - the object of both the 9th and 10th Commandments. The New Testament book of James says; *"each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death."* Right out of the gate David is a third of the way through shredding the decalogue.

It's gets worse – David had a pregnancy to cover up – and he figured the best way to do that is to lie (again) and have Uriah come home to his wife for a little soldier's R & R – the hoped for result being a (legitimate) baby on the way. But Uriah would have none of it – not with his army buddies still on duty, so David schemes to have him killed in battle. But first he has to start a war, so he orders his commanders to do just that, endangering their lives and other soldiers all so he can swoop up an attractive woman he made into a distressed widow.

By the time the whole affair ends – David has stolen another man’s wife and killed her husband. If you assume, and it’s not hard to do, that David dishonored his parents (family reputation...religious upbringing) in this sordid episode, you see that David was batting a perfect 7 for 7 of the commandments pertaining to our relations with others.

Which is where Psalm 51 takes over. It would be hard enough to try to clean up the mess David as king made among his fellow Israelites – members of the faith family living under the same covenant of Moses. But the confession Nathan schooled out of David recorded in this Psalm closes the deal, when it says in verse 4 *“against you and you alone have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight. Therefore, you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.”* All sin is a trespass against God – in other words. It dishonors God’s name, renders suspect the attention we pay to God’s word on the Sabbath, and sin by sin asserts that we are our own gods. David scored a “imperfect 10”.

Psalm 51 is more than a formula for personal confession however - it teaches about the very nature of sin. To sin is to covet what does not belong to us, but to God alone - lordship of our life. Sin asserts we have a say in matters of right and wrong and if God won’t step aside and let us have a say – we’ll have it anyway! Moreover, Psalm 51 does more than say against whom our sin is directed – it teaches us from whence it comes. It comes from our very being as descendants of the garden and its first covetous gardeners Adam and Eve. *“Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”* David is not passing the buck off to mom – he would shudder at modern attempts to contextualize, systematize or psychologize sin, soften or excuse it, and put some other culpability between a person and their actions!

No, David confesses that what needed cleaning up more than his disgraceful actions was his sinful heart. *“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me...Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.”* Create, renew, restore, grant – all these words David directed to God who he knew alone can do such things with a heart.

I never got around to having that visit with my friend Howard – after his “scandalous behavior”. If we had, I would have had to be the one to confess that paying \$27 for some of Avis Kohlman’s apple muffins was no burden. Besides, as P.T. Barnum famously said, *“there’s a sucker born every minute”* and I’d proved it! Therefore, I took no great satisfaction months later, when on Ash Wednesday I placed some dust on Howard’s forehead.

I think he and I both understood whose commands it was we live under, and break, for no human heart can keep what is foreign to it for long. But what we and our hearts can do is receive a promise of mercy – which is about all someone who is and will return to dust can ask for if you think about it. So, we do...for we also know, thanks to this great Psalm, that when it comes to the heart – a broken and contrite one is just the kind a merciful Lord like Jesus Christ is looking for. He takes it from there. AMEN