

Words Forming Witnesses

**Psalm 126 & Psalm 51:1-2
(Hymns – 682, 640, 647, 498)
March 17, 2013**

The Power of Forgiveness

The communities that refined and translated this Psalm
into the words that we have before us in the NRSV
were, by God's grace, very wise.

They were confronting the most perplexing reality of human life – sin.
It's that complex interaction of thoughts, feelings, and instincts
that takes possession of our beings
far more often than we would like to admit
that separates us from God, from others, and from our best selves.
It disorients, depresses, and destroys the beings God created us to be.

Powerful as sin is, however, in the experience
of those who wrote and rewrote this Psalm,
it is neither the first nor the last word of the Psalm.

The Psalm begins and ends
with the power of God's grace, God's mercy,
God's steadfast, abundant cleansing love.
It is God's mercy and forgiveness, not our sin,
that define reality in this world,
hard as that is to believe at times.

Have you ever noticed that many of the heroic leaders of the Bible
have committed horrifying sins
that have separated them from God, from others, and from their best selves?
Moses was a murderer, David an adulterer and conspires to murder,
Paul (the former Saul) is an oppressor and murderer.
They all would have had convincing reasons at the time
for the attitudes and behaviours they chose.
Their survival and security were at stake.
Their personal esteem, and perhaps that of their community, was at stake.
Their power and control was at stake.

But God's forgiving grace pursues them until they repent and reform,
finding the Spirit working within them
to restore them to God's original intention that they be blessings.
They are confronted by God's way of seeing things
and inspired to accept redemption, to see things from God's perspective.
They see things afresh through the eyes of love, grace, and mercy.

Psalm 51 is *the* great prayer of confession in the Bible.
It's words and phrases show up throughout the history of the church
in devotions, in resources for worship, and in Biblical commentaries
whenever the subject of sin is raised.

The whole Psalm, not just its first two verses,
is worth memorizing and pondering
as we write it on our hearts and minds afresh
and find its resonance deep in our guts.

The first two verses capture the essence of the Biblical teaching on forgiveness.

It begins and ends with God's merciful, steadfast love
for the human beings he created to be companions and co-workers.
God wants these special creatures to take up their calling to be blessings.

That love, and that love alone, frees us to accept this forgiveness.
In accepting the freedom of that forgiveness, then, we can flourish.

To flourish means to live as God intended,
loving God, others, and ourselves.

That's how we live in God's energy or glory
and enjoy that flow of abundant grace forever.

The power of forgiveness, then, is the freedom to flourish.

It is God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ
that frees us from slavery to sin
and creates the space for us to mature
as God's beloved children and friends.

Thomas Keating is a Trappist monk and priest
who is one of the composers of a devotional discipline
called Centering Prayer.

He suggests that there are three legitimate needs within human beings
that easily and inevitably get distorted into sin –

the need for security and survival,
the need for esteem and affection,
and the need for power and control.

Control is the key here.

In our sense of insecurity and fear,
in our sense of isolation and rejection,
in our sense of powerlessness and victimhood,
we try to grasp control of our lives in ways
that separate us from God, from others, and from our best selves.

We engage in violence, exploitation, and abuse.

We try to go it alone,
thinking we know more than we do on our own,
thinking we can do more than we can on our own.

When our attitudes and behaviours are shaped
by this strategy for meeting our needs for security, esteem, and power,
then we stay stuck in the swamp of sin,
sucked deeper and deeper into the muck and misery
of our futile attempts to satisfy and save ourselves.

Freedom from this sink hole
comes only through our acceptance of God's forgiveness.
With that acceptance comes the power to flourish.
Insecurity and fear are replaced by confidence in God's grace.
Isolation and rejection are replaced by gratitude for God's love.
Powerlessness and victimhood are replaced by energy in God's service.

In the conversations at our Bible Study this past Friday evening,
Terry Wells reminded us of the ways the Serenity Prayer
captured this transformation that takes place
through the power of forgiveness.
They prayer has become famous
through its use by in the twelve-step recovery movements,
the best known of which is Alcoholics Anonymous.

It was originally written by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr,
who taught Christian ethics at Union Seminary in New York
from 1930 – 1960.

It was written for a chapel service at the seminary
sometime in the 1930s.

The text was included in a book of prayers
for American chaplains and soldiers in the Second World War.
It was in 1942 that AA workers found a version of the first couple of lines
in an obituary in the *New York Herald Tribune*
and began to use it in their work.

Here is the full version as Niebuhr wrote it:

*God, give me grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
courage to change the things
which should be changed,
and the Wisdom to distinguish
the one from the other.*

*Living one day at a time,
enjoying one moment at a time,
accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
taking, as Jesus did,*

*this sinful world as it is,
not as I would have it,
trusting that You will make all things right,
if I surrender to Your will,
so that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
and supremely happy with You forever in the next.*

[read it again]

Here's the key to this kind of serenity,
what members of Session here at Brentwood call 'joy and contentment.'
I don't know whether you remember,
but the Brentwood Session has its own vision and mission statement
that guides us in every meeting as we seek to serve you in Jesus Christ's name.
We envision "A church blessed with the gifts
to do the work of Jesus Christ with joy and contentment."
To achieve this, we promise "to serve together to make wise decisions
that further the work of Jesus Christ at Brentwood Presbyterian Church."
The key here is the 'joy and contentment'
that arises from the power of God's gift of forgiveness
that, in turn, frees us to flourish in helping this congregation be a blessing.

And it's the same kind of serenity, joy, and contentment
that enable each and every one of us
to take the nourishment of this time together in worship
out into the muck and mayhem that seems to dominate
so much of the world in which we live
and freely witness to the power of forgiveness in everything we do.
We change the world by being different in the world.
We build the reign of God's *Shalom*
by being the forgiven and freed agents of God's *Shalom*.

So, carry these words from Psalm 51 in your souls
as you go out to serve this week
in the power of God's forgiveness and freedom.

*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.*