Lent 5

March 21, 2021

Psalm 51:1-12

When I was a teenager, weekends often included the task of cleaning my bedroom. Frequently, my mother would pass by as I worked and declare that my room looked *worse* than when I started.

She was right. I’d have piles of things all over the place. Sometimes, I decided it wasn’t enough just to clean my room. I’d tear apart the whole room, move furniture around. I’d have piles of things on my bed, on the floor. There’d be a trash bag for getting rid of things I didn’t want anymore.

Cleaning my room didn’t really have to involve considering the merits of everything I owned, but it sometimes did. At least, it did until it was almost time for dinner and I just shoved things back into my closet so it looked like my room was clean.

When my mother would pass judgment on the state of my room after a couple hours of me working on it, what she was seeing was incomplete. It was a work in progress.

I have come to suspect that this is an apt metaphor for my life in general. I am a work in progress. We all are. Sometimes, life is tidy and orderly, with everything in its proper place. And sometimes, life feels like 2 hours into cleaning my room: no sense of order at all, feeling like everything we do just makes things worse, and fighting the temptation to curl up in a corner and read a book, hoping everything will magically sort itself out.

But, usually, life is somewhere in between. We get things right, we get things wrong. Some things go well, other things blow up in our faces.

All of us are works in progress. We all struggle with our sinfulness and the effect it has on our lives and the lives of each other. And that can lead us to despair, burden us with guilt.

St. Paul understood this. He said he didn’t do the things he knew he should and did the things he knew he shouldn’t.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Psalmist we hear from today understood it, too.

After a confession of his guilt, and an acknowledgment that his sinfulness is so much a part of who he is that it feels like it’s always been a part of him, the psalmist begs God to forgive him.

But he doesn’t stop there. He asks for God to create within him a whole new heart, to put within him a new and right spirit. The psalmist understands that his sinfulness is keeping him from experiencing joy and gladness. And *that’s* something only God can fix.

He is essentially asking for God to do a complete reset of his heart and mind, trusting that God alone can fix what’s wrong with him. That God alone can forgive his sins and wipe away his guilt. That God alone can save him from himself.

So he doesn’t just want forgiveness. He wants renewal. He wants to be freed from the burden of the guilt that weighs him down. He wants to have God’s will so clearly and deeply etched into his heart that it is as much a part of him as his sinfulness once was.

But he doesn’t stop there, either.

In words that we don’t hear today, the Psalmist continues by saying: “Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, you who are my God and my Savior, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Just as much as his sinfulness affects others and himself, the psalmist knows that God’s mercy should also affect himself and others. By asking for a new heart and telling God what he would do if God were to not just forgive him but put a new heart and spirit within him, the psalmist shows us that it’s God who does the work. But *we* choose how to respond to what God has done.

Freed from the guilt that can weigh us down, freed from the fears that God will give up on us and abandon us, we are freed to feel joy and gladness. We are freed to sing God’s praise. We are freed to embrace the fact that we are all works in progress, that God’s not done creating that new heart in us, God’s not done putting that right spirit within us.

Faith is aspirational. We aspire to keep the 10 Commandments. We hope to love our neighbor as ourselves. We try to trust in God. And we want to have God’s will be our will.

That’s how we know we *should* live, how we know we should *want* to live, but we fall short. And sometimes, we don’t even want to try.

God knows we’re works in progress. God’s OK with that. It’s how we’re created. But God also knows who we can be.

God’s steadfast love and mercy and forgiveness are all about looking at the mess we make of our lives and saying, “I love you. I forgive you. Leave that behind. Come on this journey with me and we’ll do and see amazing things. Learn to see creation through my eyes. Learn to love as you are loved.”

As we make our way through life, we will get things right. We’ll offer grace and mercy. But we’re also going to find ourselves distracted and wandering off the path has set before us. We’re going to find ourselves reminded of our need for repentance.

That’s our sinfulness. It’s a part of who we are. But it’s not a part of what God intends for us. And so God is persistent in reaching out to us, even going to the point of taking on human form and dying on the cross, only to rise again, and declaring that nothing will separate us from God. Nothing.

There’s a story about a girl who knew much sorrow in life going to heaven, where she asked God why God didn’t create us as beings who wouldn’t make mistakes. God said, “Because that would be boring.”

The girl said, “But then things wouldn’t hurt so much.”

And God said, “Yes, but you also wouldn’t know joy.”

Because we know the pain our sin causes, we can also know the even greater joy of God’s redemption and mercy. And we are invited to act on that joy, to share it with others.

We are works in progress. But unlike a messy bedroom, the work of creating in us clean hearts is not work we need to do. God has done it.

The solution to our sin lies not with us, but with the God who created us knowing we’d be works in progress. Ours is simply to know that the work needed to be done because of our sinfulness, and to respond to that work of salvation and renewal by singing aloud of God’s deliverance and declaring God’s praise.

1. Romans 7:15 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Psalm 51:14-15 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)