

March 27, 2011

Third Sunday in Lent

The National Presbyterian Church

A Song for Lent

Psalm 32

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We are always trying to find the right song to sing. That is especially difficult during Lent. What kind of music is appropriate to a season of repentance and self-denial, a time of reflecting upon our lives in the mystery of God? Some churches drop the “Gloria” and all the “Alleluias” for the season of Lent. National Presbyterian adds a “Kyrie”: “Lord have mercy.”

The next three weeks we will be examining three songs for Lent proposed by the Psalter.

What is appropriate for Lent? Do we sing sad songs? Dirges and funeral marches? No, songs like that are not appropriate to the One who welcomes us home at Lent. Do we sing about how lousy we are? Country Western Music and Punk Rock sing songs like that but they don’t fit so well in worship. In Lent we seek something else.

“We have a song for times like this,” says the book of Psalms, and the 32nd Psalm limps forward and begins to sing. The psalmist bears testimony.

The voice is rough. This person has been around. The words don't come easy, they are words learned at a price. There is buoyancy to the song, however, as if great weight had been lifted. The psalm sings:

*Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.*

*Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes
no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*

Happy are those who are forgiven. Happy are those who have been clothed by God's grace. Happy are those whose debts have been erased by the miracle of God's merciful accounting. Happy are those who do not kid themselves about their need for forgiveness. Happy, happy, happy: this song is *so* happy. Is "happy" appropriate for Lent?

Ah, but it has not always been so, sings the psalmist. It was not always so happy.

*While I kept silence,
my body wasted away through my groaning all day
long.*

*For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.*

There was a time when the psalmist "kept silence," when everything was kept tightly wound around the psalmist's heart, and it was like poison. "My body wasted away . . . your hand was heavy . . . my strength was dried up."

Silence can do that to a person. Silence has a way of magnifying things until they seem unmanageable. Silence enlarges things until they crush us. Silence amplifies things until we can no longer lift our voices to speak of them.

But the psalmist broke the silence and spoke:

*I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;*

*I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the
LORD,"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.*

The psalmist broke silence and all the things that seemed so unmanageable were shrunk by God's mercy; all the things that threatened us were tamed by God's grace; all the things that shouted us down were silenced by the power of God's word to us: ***You are forgiven.***

This is not an easy process the psalmist describes, and I fear that I am moving so quickly that I may sound glib. When the psalmist declares, "Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered," that affirmation has come at extravagant cost. It costs something to discover that truth. It requires honesty and humility, it costs tears and pain, it requires trust and courage to speak of tender things. Those words, "Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven," have been forged out of raw human experience. The psalmist didn't know that beforehand. It costs to learn lessons like that. Make no mistake about it.

The psalmist's assurance is not that this is easy or cheap, but that the cost is nothing compared to the gain. So the psalmist emerges from the rigors of experience to invite others to discover this truth:

*Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you
[O God].*

That seems so much the sort of thing we expect to hear when we come to church we may not suspect the cost behind those words. This seems such predictable sentiment, such expected church-talk that we brush over it without a second thought:

*Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven . . .
Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you.*

Well, of course, why not? Who could argue? What's for lunch? How long is the preacher going to go?

But look again, I beg you:
*Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.*

I want propose to you this morning that isn't the way we usually think about such matters. That isn't the way we invest our energies. That isn't the way we assume happiness comes.

No, not "Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven," but rather, Happy are those who have no transgressions for which they need to be forgiven. Isn't that the way we think about it?

Consider with me carefully, here. Don't we usually think of happiness as not needing to be forgiven? Isn't that the customary calculation?

Happy are those who never fail and whose lives ascend from one sublime success to the next. Happy are those who never sin and therefore require no pardon. Happy are those who never stumble and never need a hand up. Happy are those who are blameless and never come to the moment they must declare, "I am responsible for the wrong I did." Happy are those who never make a mistake and never need to say, "I am sorry." Happy are those who know it all and never have to admit, "I was wrong." Unrealistic as that may sound, isn't that the way we think? Aren't those standards by which we sometimes condemn ourselves?

After all, we know people who live sinless lives and have no need of forgiveness, don't we? And aren't they really happy people? Aren't other people happy to be around them?

We know people who are blameless and innocent, who never say, "I am responsible for the wrong I did." They're happy people, aren't they? And we're happy to work with people like that, who never say, "I made a mistake," but who say instead, "Mistakes were made."

We know people who know everything, and they are happy, fulfilled people, aren't they? I mean, if someone knew everything you'd think that would be a happy person, wouldn't you?

How strange it is that quest for perfection leaves us so empty, so unhappy and so estranged from others. Moreover: how strange that giving that up to God gives us such incomparable happiness. No, not just happiness—joy, real joy.

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,

The 32nd Psalm is a good song for Lent. It sings of happiness born of pain, of reconciliation brought about by confession. Though it is hard to say exactly when it begins, the happiness starts sometime after this moment:

Then *I acknowledged my sin to you,*

and I did not hide my iniquity;

I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,"

and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Forgiveness begins with asking for forgiveness.

The most popular television drama series these days is "NCIS." If you are not familiar with it, it can be easily explained. A team of young investigators in the Naval Criminal Investigative Service are headed by Leroy Jethro Gibbs, a seasoned Marine no longer on active duty.ⁱ The situation is much like that presupposed in the Book of Proverbs where the experienced teacher guides young neophytes using wisdom distilled into proverbs. Leroy Jethro Gibbs does not have proverbs, however, Gibbs has rules, about fifty one of them, and as the young investigators gain wisdom as they learn the rules.

Rule #2: Always wear gloves at a crime scene.

Rule #12: Never date a coworker. (How our political history would have been different if that rule were observed!)

Rule #9: Never go anywhere without a knife. (After the 8 a.m. service someone asked me if I always carried a knife in my preaching gown. Well, it depends where I'm preaching!)

Then there's **Rule #6:** Never apologize—it's a sign of weakness.ⁱⁱ

As much as I enjoy "*NCIS*" I wish they would run one of those disclaimers: "Do not try this at home!" "These are professional drivers on a closed course."

Rule # 6, "Never apologize," may make for a terrific television show, but "never apologize" can make family life sheer hell and turn our workplaces into trenched battlefields and isolate us from the One who would so graciously heal us even of our virtues.

As a matter of fact, "Rule # 6: Never apologize—it's a sign of weakness," is simply not true. It certainly is not true to the good news of God and it does not square with reality. The fact of that matter is that there are men whose stature would be immeasurably magnified among their children if they had the confidence to say, "I'm sorry." There are women who would find healing they cannot imagine if they only would say, "What I said was wrong and it was not fair. Please forgive me?"

Far from being a sign of weakness, to say "I am sorry," "I was wrong," is to tap into the vast power of God whose forgiveness knows no limits. The **rule** proposed by this 32nd psalm is: apologize gladly and your will find power.

As a measure of realism on "*NCIS*", Gibbs does indeed apologize in spite of his own rule! One passionate fan of "*NCIS*" has documented that in the eight seasons of the show Gibbs has apologized six times.ⁱⁱⁱ Six times in eight years? Most of us need forgiveness more frequently than that.

I can promise you that I will need forgiveness much more than that during my season as interim pastor at National Presbyterian Church.

Jesus Christ designed his church to run on forgiveness. People experiment with all these alternative fuels, trying to make the church work on our own do-it-yourself-righteousness, wanting to believe the church can run on grudges or anger or bitterness or resentment, but the church operates on the fuel of forgiveness.

Yes, there's a question at the back... I'll repeat the question for those of you who didn't hear it. Peter asked, "How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

And the Lord answered Peter, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." [Matt. 18:21-2] Or perhaps that should read "seventy times seven"—it could be translated either way—but whether the mathematics proposes seventy seven times or four hundred and ninety times, what is unmistakably clear is that forgiveness is far more abundant than we dare imagine.

Far from being a sign of weakness, to apologize is to tap into the greatest power we know, the dynamo who created us and who welcomes us in this season of Lent.

To say "I am sorry," to say "I made a mistake," to ask for forgiveness, we may sometimes speak of as "eating crow." To confess a sin, admit a mistake, accept responsibility, to grant that you were wrong: people sometimes call "eating crow."

The metaphor is apt and vivid. Crow tastes of where ever it has been. The garbage heap, the carrion alongside the road, the half eaten burger in the gutter—the crow feeds on all of it. If crow has a pungent flavor that is because it tastes of wherever it has been, just as our particular excesses and eccentricities flavor our own failures.

Crows are tough old birds. They hang on to life by their wit and deception, and their defensiveness makes them muscular and stringy. Just so, our defensiveness and evasiveness makes us tough, so tough that even those who

would love us are sometimes put off, so tough that nothing less than God's love may to penetrate our hides.

Nobody wants to eat crow. To concede you were wrong, to admit you even have sins, to ask forgiveness—no one wants that.

In spite of its pungency and toughness, the Church of Jesus Christ has always ranked crow among the most nutritious of dishes, and the one appropriate for Lent. Turkey for Thanksgiving, Ham for Easter, for Lent: crow.

If crow does not delight the palate, it does feed the spirit. Served up with the spice of surrender to God, the herbs of humility and a sauce of thanksgiving it can be rather tasty. I have been nourished by it more than a few times. Crow will never be one of my favorites, but on the whole, I recommend it. Served with the spice of surrender, the herbs of humility and a sauce of thanksgiving, crow has the most remarkable aftertaste, a distinctive sweetness.

For several decades Paul Prudhomme has been one of the great chefs of New Orleans, and he says that you can always tell if something is cooked Louisiana style. If something is cooked Louisiana Style, he says, “It makes your mouth happy.”

The psalmist has the same thing to say about asking forgiveness:

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven.

ⁱ Following worship a worshipper pointed out to me—even as Leroy Jethro Gibbs frequently points out in NCIS—that there is no such thing as an “ex-Marine.”

ⁱⁱ Rule #6 is actually a borrowing from Captain Nathan Brittles, the character John Wayne played in “She Wore a Yellow Ribbon”: “You're not quite "Army" yet, miss... or you'd know never to apologize... it's a sign of weakness.”

ⁱⁱⁱ I am deeply appreciative of the blogger <http://www.ncisfanatic.com/2010/06/gibbs-rules-ncis-the-complete-list-of-gibbs-rules.html>