

Ash Wednesday Meditation  
February 17, 2010  
Psalm 51

Ten years ago I first preached this text – my idea was about guilt and guiltlessness and how too much in our culture had given way to the idea that we should feel guilty about nothing. So many people make excuses for their shortcomings, pass the blame, or simply deny that there is anything wrong. Denial is an old trick, it's not just a river in Africa. Too many of us and too many of our neighbors, near and far, live as though there is nothing to confess.

It was Martin Luther, the great Reformer and Bible scholar who said of Psalm 51 that “The Doctrine of true repentance is set before us in the Psalm.” And because of the strength of the Psalm 51 and its theology it has become the most used of all Christian Scripture in the liturgy of the church – the liturgy is what we say it in worship. We sing Psalm 51 in our hymns and our choirs sing it in their anthems. We use it on Ash Wednesday because Psalm 51 is the theology, the thinking, and the spirit behind the entire season of Lent.

Just listen to the verbs in the text and their subsequent nouns –

*Wash me*  
*cleanse me*  
*purge me*  
*blot out what I have done wrong*  
*create in me a clean heart*  
*renew in me the right spirit*  
*restore me to your joy*  
*Wash!*  
*Cleanse!*  
*Purge!*  
*Blot!*  
*Renew!*  
*Restore!*

Psalm 51 is an outcry to God. A call to repentance. An admission that something has gone terribly wrong and we need to set it right.

I can remember long ago when I was a summer camp counselor. There was just something about those 9 year old boys at that soccer camp. They refused to take a shower. “You smell bad,” we said. “No I don’t,” they replied. “You are unpleasant to be around,” we begged after two days. “It doesn’t bother me,” they retorted.

Is not the first step to true repentance the admission that something is wrong. What if it took a larger force to get us to the shower of confession?

Those many years ago the other counselors and I on night three declared that every boy on our hall was going to take a shower, and we lined them up 60 in a row and they all showered. They got clean – by force yes – but they were clean. It was awesome – I never so appreciated the smell of Dial soap in all my life.

This was a case where the former, the clean boys, were so much better than the latter, the boys you could smell before you could see. In one sense it was a shame that we forced them. In another, we were doing them a favor.

Somebody forcing us to come clean? A favor?

Did you ever wonder what happens to the soul that refuses to confess? What happens when we are unwilling to admit any wrong?

I am reminded of that tragic, horrible scene in Shakespeare's *Tragedy of MacBeth* that happens in Act V – Lady MacBeth has been broken by the murder she has committed. It has driven her mad. She sees blood on her hand when there is none. The doctor is called, her lady in waiting is distressed. “Out damned spot! Out I say! Hell is murky! What need we fear who knows it? Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him? Here's the smell of blood still [on my hands] – all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.”

It is my opinion that guilt un-confessed, guilt unacknowledged, guilt run amok is poison to the mind and soul. Ash Wednesday and Lent offer the antidote, my friends, and the antidote is called confession;

*sometimes it goes by the name confession, yes....but*

*sometimes it goes by the name renewal;*

*sometimes it goes by restoration;*

*still others may know it by repentance.*

No matter what name we know it by, the antidote is found here in Psalm 51. It is found in the attitude of this Psalm and in Jesus' gift of the cross.

If you will, Lent affords us, as it points the church toward Easter and beyond, the opportunity to come clean, to unload our guilt, to think and pray about the wrongs we have given and received and be honest about who we are and who God is.

When we come through the doors of the church we know three things to be true – there is God

God's gift of grace is Jesus

we all need that grace.

How do we feel grace? That's a hard question to answer. Usually we know it when we feel it, but I think that our experience of grace begins with confession.

Confession of sin. Confession that we need God. Confession that we are mortal.

Confession that we hope to be forgiven.

Lent is the time of year when the church is forced into that long shower line – made to be clean even if we are not totally convinced that the cleansing is needed.

The alternative? Personally, I'd rather not think about it. Yes – the life mired in guilt is a life I would pray away from all of us. I'd rather not think about somebody I love gone mad with guilt and given way to sin. Just too much poison there.

Ash Wednesday is the antidote to all that. In it's strange but time tested way, it is the antidote.

Psalm 51 reaches its apex at verse 12: “Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.”

This road to restoration begins with the ‘round about of confession. Bathe in those waters this Lent, my friends.

Wash.

Cleanse.

Repeat.

Wash.

Cleanse.

Repeat.  
Amen.