



July 29, 2018

God Hears Our Prayers and Graciously Forgives Us

Carolyn Isaak, Zumbro member

PSALM 51NRSV

¹Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

³For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

⁴Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgement.

⁵Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

⁶You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

⁷Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

⁸Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

⁹Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

¹¹Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

¹²Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

¹³Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

¹⁴Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

¹⁵O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

¹⁶For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased.

¹⁷The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

¹⁸Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,

¹⁹then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt-offerings and whole burnt-offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

Hybrid cars, designer dog breeds, coffee drinks....what do they have in common? They are all blends of the best qualities. Toyota Highlander's, Golden Doodles and Soy Carmel Lattes 1/2 cafe with a dash of whipped cream!

For 30 plus years I have been navigating my Catholic heritage and Lutheran faith. Thus I consider myself a religious hybrid of sorts.

My family attended St Casimir's and Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary church's in the Polish Catholic neighborhoods of St. Paul. My brothers, Dave and Dale, and I took the required RCI classes and completed the Sacraments of Faith. My Catholic upbringing still calls to me and I currently attend weekly mass at Assisi Heights receiving the Eucharist in the Catholic tradition, am committed to the universal Franciscan values, and participate in programming. I am inspired by the inclusive approach of Pope Francis and am deeply humbled by the selfless service of Mother Teresa's lifetime commitment to lepers and poor.

Yet, when it came time to choose a college 30 years ago little did I know how this would alter my spiritual path. I selected Augsburg, an ELCA-affiliated college in Minneapolis. This choice was wonderfully received by my family. As a student I delved into the history and religious studies programs, and my favorite class - The Reformation with Dr. Eugene Skibbe - was fascinating! Eventually I would work for another Lutheran college, meet and marry a Lutheran, and raise our boys here at Zumbro. I teach confirmation, participate in Bible Study groups, attend events and share yoga. I appreciate and value the Lutheran faith. I relate to the writings and spiritual struggles of Martin Luther. And Lutheran Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber has deeply altered my understanding of being a Saint and Sinner in any given moment.

When Pastor Vern invited me to speak on a Psalm of my choice, I selected Psalm 51 because much like King David of old, I have things in my heart that keep me separated from God. And I desire that clean heart and willing spirit. There is something UNIVERSAL about confessing our sins to God, a priest, a pastor and even a trusted friend that frees us. Martin Luther wrestled with the ecclesiastical rule that commanded or required Confession. He found confession to be a gift from God that anyone who desires to be free from sin may share with another in secret or with God directly. And one who has strong, firm faith knows that his or her sins are forgiven. We trust that God hears our prayers and graciously forgives us. Yet, is this personal cry in the silence of our thoughts to God enough? Does sharing the darkest parts of ourselves with trusted friends absolve us? For many years I resisted this path to "forgiveness." Facing sin is difficult. I detested going to Confession with a priest and questioned this Sacrament. Why did I have to tell anyone anything?

What I eventually came to know was that my struggle with confession doesn't really lie with "having to see a priest to give me absolution." No. It is the truthful, revealing examination of my own conscious.

King David needed the truth unveiled to him by Nathan the prophet in 2nd Samuel. Nathan begins by sharing a parable with David: There were two men in a city, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had exceedingly many flocks and herds. But the poor man had nothing, except one little ewe lamb which he had bought and nourished; and it grew up together with him and with his children. It ate of his own food and drank from his own cup and lay in his bosom; and it was like a daughter to him. And a traveler came to the rich man. The rich man refused to take from his own flock and

from his own herd to prepare one for the wayfaring man who had come to him; but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him.

King David responded to Nathan with words of anger: "The one who has done this deserves to die!" To which Nathan replied: "You are the man!" The king was immediately convicted. His transgressions ranged from adultery with Bathsheba, that one little "ewe lamb," to trying to cover it up later by arranging for Bathsheba's husband to be killed in battle. When exposed by Nathan as "that man," David cried out to God and asked God to wipe away his transgressions, cleanse him from his guilt, and wash and purify him

This confession of our sins and receiving God's great mercy and forgiveness is at the heart of this Psalm. If David hadn't been called out by Nathan, would he have repented? Am I really honest with myself in the quiet of my own thoughts? Or do I give in to rationalization and justification for my sins? When I share secrets with friends, do I appear to be the wronged, the victimized, the "it really wasn't my fault"? Or do I take full responsibility?

A few weeks ago, as I struggled along the discernment process of what to share this morning, I received an invitation from my friend Melissa to attend a Tuesday evening Healing and Reconciliation presentation given by renowned healer, Alan Ames, at Church of the Resurrection. I hoped to receive some inspiration or direction from the event. The evening consisted of recitation of the Rosary, Mass, Communion, Confession, "laying of the hands," healing from Alan Ames, and a Benediction.

First, for those unfamiliar with the Catholic Sacrament of Confession let me briefly summarize. A priest acts as an agent of God and forgives sins committed after baptism. Next, there are 5 steps to a "Good" Confession.

- 1) Examine your conscience
- 2) Be sincerely sorry for your sins.
- 3) Confess your sins to a priest.
- 4) Resolve to amend your life.
- 5) After confession, do the penance the priest assigns.

When I was young, we would go to confession on Saturday afternoons from 2-4. We would wait in a line with other sinners and watch for the green light above the confessional booth to indicate it was time to enter the small space. We would be separated from the priest by a privacy screen, kneel and begin with the famous line "Forgive me Father for I have sinned". Following Saturday's confession, I was then eligible in the eyes of the church to receive communion on Sunday.

The evening of the Presentation, I prepared for confession by examining my conscious, and then I stepped into the line of sinners and waited my turn. I jokingly told the lady behind me I was going to be awhile. When it was my turn, I bravely stepped in the confessional room and sat across from the priest. He smiled, looked at me, and asked my name. Such kindness, acceptance, and compassion radiated from him. My solar plexus was trembling. He quietly invited me to share. And I did. When I finished, we quietly looked at one another. He nodded a few times as if still listening. Listening to God, I am now certain. And then he spoke. He said, "Carolyn, God wants you to put down the club that you beat yourself with and pick up his cross." Just like in the Gospel of John when at the pool Jesus tells the crippled man, "Get up, pick up your

mat, and walk.” The priest proceeded to give me a blessing by placing his hands on my head and praying over me. Warmth and peace flowed through me. Throughout the Gospels of Matthew and Mark we read of the “laying on of hands” and the healing that follows. In Acts we see Paul channeling extraordinary miracles by laying hands on people. Forgiveness is a powerful act and an overwhelming feeling in the heart of the sinner.

The next morning I joyfully picked wild raspberries at Quarry Hill and I felt such freedom, calmness and peace. God had heard my prayers and graciously forgiven me. King David and I both confessed to God- one directly to God and me with the help of a conduit. I still felt raw inside. But suddenly this psalm spoke to me in a different way. Somehow for me, sitting with a priest or pastor for confession and absolution, and speaking aloud my transgressions, uncovers and exposes the wounds that sins leave behind. A sin that is held to the LIGHT loses its power.

We recall John 3:20 “For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.” Jesus is the LIGHT. Once that LIGHT shines forth, I now pray Psalm 51 with a different intention.

Create a clean heart for me , O God, and a willing/steadfast spirit within me. God is thee “creator” so only God can create this clean heart and give me a willing spirit to sustain me. God hears our prayers and graciously forgives us!

Cast me not from your presence, and your Holy Spirit take not from me. A truly repentant soul dreads and fears being cast away from God. It’s dark without God’s presence.

Give me back the joy of your salvation and a willing spirit to sustain me. Just like Timothy, I need endurance. In 2 Timothy Paul says to him, “I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith.”

In closing I’d like to share a bit about a painting by Rembrandt called The Return of the Prodigal Son. I encourage you to check out this painting online to experience the transforming effect of forgiveness, unconditional love, and God’s healing grace. This painting resides in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg and depicts the emaciated, worn, prodigal son returning home, on his knees in front of his father. His clothing is tattered and hangs off his gaunt body. He is dirty with a shaved head. One foot is covered with sores from the long journey home and the other foot hosts a broken sandal. The father is noticeably aged from worry. His holds his son closely, with hands resting on his son’s shoulders, and the son’s head resting on his father’s chest.



What are we to make of this painting? This could be a picture of King David and his Father in heaven. Or it could be a picture of me or you in the arms of Christ Jesus, as we are willing to let the light shine in the darkest places of our hearts. Whether that light shines through a priest, pastor, or friend, or in the stillness of our own hearts, we trust that God hears our prayers and will graciously forgive us. AMEN