

SERMON: “ABOUT WORSHIP ... WE CONFESS”
TEXTS: OLD TESTAMENT LESSON PSALM 51
NEW TESTAMENT LESSON 1 JOHN 1:5-10

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INTRODUCTION

After our time together in the park with our siblings in Christ from St Lukes Episcopal Church (I enjoyed the jazz. I enjoyed our fellowship) we return to our series of sermons about worship. We've been walking through our order of worship – we gather, we sing, and we confess

That is our subject matter for today – confession and forgiveness
Next week we will talk about talking ... God talking to us through the word read and proclaimed and heard. That's next Sunday. But can I jump ahead and ask you a question about my preaching. Is it any good?

Let me be a bit more specific and give you some criteria
Please answer that question about my preaching using this yardstick
It is one of my favorite quotes. It is from Robert Farrar Capon, an Episcopal priest (and chef) and his book The Foolishness of Preaching: Proclaiming the Gospel against the Wisdom of the World

I think good preachers should be like bad kids. They ought to be naughty enough to tiptoe up on dozing congregations, steal their bottles of religion pills, spirituality pills, and morality pills, and flush them all down the drain. The church, by and large, has drugged itself into thinking that proper human behavior is the key to its relationship with God. What preachers need to do is force the church to go cold turkey with nothing but the word of the cross – and then be brave enough to stick around while it goes through the inevitable withdrawal symptoms.

For that author and this preacher, the sermon is connected to what proceeds it
It is the watershed moment in our worship, the defining moment.
It follows an honest prayer of confession. It is the assurance, the re-assurance of our forgiveness, the good news, when the preacher or worship leader says, “Friends believe the good news, in Jesus Christ we are forgiven.”

If we could, we ought to drop confetti at that moment. It's that good
We don't drop confetti – too messy, too expensive. But this good news is that big of a deal ... we are forgiven. Thanks be to God!

If we somehow skip over this good news ... we've made a mistake
and whatever I say in the sermon runs the risks of sounding like the adults in Charlie Brown or another ad for some religion pills

AN HONEST PRAYER

You know by now of my real frustration with Christians, especially Christian leaders,
who act all put together, all wholesome, holy and handsome
Is that what Christianity is ... some self-help course? some morality pill?

I've been in ministry with you for eleven and a half years. Let's do the math
That is 52 Sundays a year, Johnny preaches once a month – That makes 40 a year
40 times 11.5 (minus some vacation and study leave). Let's make it around 444.
444 times I've stood in this pulpit. And how many out of those 444 times
have I been up here as a shiny example of goodness? Not a one!

I am, we all are, no matter how many times we've been to church
in need of God's forgiveness, in need of God's mercy, in need of God's grace.
We are all, to use the church word, sinners. We are all grace dependent
Both our scripture lessons get that point across, the whole of scripture does
First an honest prayer of confession that is Psalm 51

**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.
For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against
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 judgment.**

The psalmist doesn't make comparisons or explanations.
The psalmist doesn't try to argue about how good he is, how innocent
The psalmist begins (and ends) by appealing to God's mercy ... **Have mercy
on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your
abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions.**

The psalmist recognizes the reality of his sin, asks to be washed thoroughly
Then in a key couple of sentences, tells us two things about sin we need to hear.
The first is that sin is ever before us (it is in and around us)
It is the mistakes we make, in the misbehaving and in the behavior
we tell ourselves is good, in the answers we insist are the 'right' answers

The second thing is that sin is against God. That is how it is measured
It is not about comparisons and explanations (not about other people)
You may have heard the origin of the word 'sin.' It is archery term
It means to 'miss the mark.' Think of an arrow (or dart) falling short
Sin is falling short of what God calls us to be and do.

I remember my Old Testament professor challenging us. Can we pray this psalm?
He asked the class (but it sure sounded like he was asking me),
"Do you really want to be washed thoroughly from your iniquity?"
I'll admit I was thinking "Thoroughly? How about just the economy wash?"

LEANING INTO MERCY

I appreciate how Dr Mays seemed to be asking the question of the whole class
and of each of us individually. Our sinfulness is both individual and corporate.
It is the Catholic confessional, in a little booth with a priest separated by a screen
And it is a prayer we pray together, maybe a written prayer, maybe a
silent prayer with a prompt / theme suggested like we often do on Sundays

Sin isn't just a me thing. It is a we thing too.
Let's be honest about that. Bullies often don't 'do their thing' one on one.
They tend to like drawing crowds, getting their bravado from the mob

And while we are being honest about the connection between me sin
and we sin, let's be clear our missing the mark of what God expects is often
measured not just by what we do or say ... but by what we do *not* do, what we
do *not* say – what Dr. King called “the appalling silence of good people”

We need to keep it real especially when we are before God in worship
We need to confess. I look forward to being honest like that each week
We need forgiveness. I look forward to being reminded of that each week
I need grace. We need grace. I don't come to church to polish my shine
I come to church because my sin needs washing away

I come to church trusting in and leaning into God's mercy
Remember that is what the psalmist appeals to ... according to God's mercy
We hear a similar tone in 1 John

**If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not
in us. If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us
our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have
not sinned, we make God a liar, and God's word is not in us.**

It is rather blunt with all the “if we say” language, but again the focus is more
on God's mercy than on us ... **“God who is faithful and just will forgive us
our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”** That truth is what
we can count on ... not how good (or relatively good, compared to
those people) we think we, pretend we are or say we are.

I like how ‘in your face’ 1 John is ... he is definitely stealing our bottles of religion pills
He says that not only are we lying when we say we have no sin
He says in doing so we make God a liar – pretending that those religion pills work
They do not. They are a placebo, just a tablet we take to help us pretend

Please, Dear Lord don't let that be what the Church has become or might become
Help us walk away from the lies we hear and the lies we tell ourselves
Help us to be humble and honest – not standing on pride or pretense
But instead leaning into the only sure thing ... Your mercy!

SUMMARY

More and more these days I find myself thinking about the root word of 'ignorance'
Ignorance is not stupidity, a lack of smarts. It is ignoring the truth.

There are plenty of people practicing ignorance who have lots of 'know what'
and 'know how' but they are practicing ignorance by ignoring the truths in front
of them - literally ignoring the truth. Lying to themselves, lying to ourselves

**If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves,
and the truth is not in us.**

I use the language of practicing ignorance because much of our ignorance is willful
We just choose to ignore what we want to ignore. We click on something else.
We reach for the bottle of morality pills or our good friend – the false equivalent.
“I may be out of line here, maybe ... but look at them. They're worse!

What we hear in these verses from I John is very much akin to how Jesus,
in the sermon on the mount, talks about focusing on the speck in another's eye
while there is a log in your own eye. We are a bit too quick to see the sin
of another ... and to ignore the log (bigger than a speck) in our own eye.

As your fellow sojourner, friend and pastor I'm asking you to see two things
And to see them in perspective.

One is the log is your own eye
In our worship we intentionally give you a chance to do that every week
a chance to confess – what you have said and done, and not said or done

And the second thing, the one that follows that confession in our order of worship
the one thing we must not ignore, the one thing I most want you to see ...
God's mercy – a mercy that cleanses us, claims us and keeps us

**“God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins
and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”**