

Psalm 32

32:1 Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

32:2 Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

32:3 While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.

32:4 For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

Selah

32:5 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.

32:6 Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.

32:7 You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. Selah

32:8 I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

32:9 Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you.

32:10 Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.

32:11 Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

5:16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.

5:17 So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

5:18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;

5:19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

5:20 So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

5:21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Proclamation of the Word

I understand that "David Noel Freedman is the kind of Bible scholar who can recite obscure chapters of the Old Testament from memory- in Hebrew. Now an elderly man, he has one foot planted in Judaism and the other in Christianity. He has been immersed in the study of Scripture his whole life. Once asked if all he had learned could be summed up in one sentence, he thought for a moment and answered, 'There is forgiveness.'"In the end it is all Grace from Genesis to Revelation. Grace is God's middle name, he is saying. To refuse forgiveness is actually to refuse God whose very nature it is to forgive.¹

Have you ever thought about that? To refuse forgiveness- whether to accept it yourself for wrongs and harm done or to offer it after repentance has happened is to refuse God.

You see some of us have a hard time forgiving ourselves being held captive to guilt or shame or regret. Others of us have a hard time extending grace and forgiveness, just stubbornly content to seethe with anger, cutting off others. People that once were friends have somehow become enemies. It is awkward to run into one another at the grocery store or the ball field. Forgiveness and reconciliation is only possible when the parties are willing to confess, forgive and move on. That is easy for me to say. It is so much harder to practice, I know.

But for those of us who follow Jesus, we believe and behave knowing that the impossible for us is only possible through the power of God Almighty. God's middle name is Grace.

David's path to forgiveness and reconciliation was to come clean. He is wasting away in silence, groaning, suffering physically, emotionally, spiritually.

Stan Mast offers this personal example of the damage silence and non-repentance can bring:
Every married couple has experienced the kind of guilty silence David talks about. In the depths of a marital dispute, it can be very hard to come clean and say that you were wrong and ask forgiveness.

So we don't always do it.

But that un-confessed sin becomes part of the relationship, laying a brick of hurt and sorrow and anger between the two of you. If that happens often enough, a brick wall of offense given and taken can separate you.

Finally the love is blocked [by that brick wall] and you are wondering about the future of the marriage. Simply feeling bad about it, wishing it were different, thinking about how to make it better, trying to act like everything is fine—none of that will fix a marriage broken by sin and the ensuing guilty silence.

Only the hard work of confession and forgiveness can restore the joy of "unfailing love."ⁱⁱ

The first step is to tell the truth, to admit our failing, or our part in the harm done. David tells us what he did. He sings, "Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity;"

Confession, repentance, and reconciliation are only possible because of forgiveness offered to us by the God whose middle name is Grace. Healing can begin when we do the hard work of truth-telling.

Forgiveness is needed not only for healing souls, but for the healing of the world. While we were attending the NEXT Church conference last week, we had the powerful experience of hearing theologian Alan Boesakⁱⁱⁱ, a leader in the South African movement to heal his nation from Apartheid. Speaking of horrible sins committed against a people, the church was working in the shadows, under the leadership of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Boesak, and others.

He described writing the Belhar Confession.^{iv} I picture the men who wrote our confession sitting comfortably in a conference room with pastries and coffee supplied. But all our confessions are written in life and death situations. Boesak describes creating the Belhar in a little church filled with black S. Africans in the 1980s. Every member had a family member, a neighbor, a friend in jail for standing up to Apartheid. They knew their loved ones were being tortured. And in the face of horrible treatment, as Christians who have been offered forgiveness by a God in Jesus Christ, they crafted a statement of faith that declared forgiveness and reconciliation. They confessed Jesus as Lord. And they stood up, speaking truth to power to those in authority. And at the same time they offered grace.

When I heard him speak, my eyes welled up with tears.

Tears for the courage of these people, the church of Jesus Christ.

Tears for the suffering of these people.

Tears for their own grace and forgiveness.

I felt a sense of pride that our church, the Presbyterian Church, was there to support this group of faithful people of God.

I also felt ashamed at my petty complaints about comparatively meaningless things in light of their suffering and courage.

It really is not a big deal that I had to eat chicken for lunch and supper.

These same leaders led the “Truth and Reconciliation” movement in the new South Africa.

They called the people who had committed these crimes against humanity to account. But if they were to confess the truth of their actions, they would be forgiven, serving no prison sentence.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu stated, “There is no future without forgiveness.”

What might our community, our church, and nation learn from that? There is no future without forgiveness and forgiveness starts with confession. What if we practiced that in all our relationships?

Paul writes, “seek reconciliation.” In the end reconciliation between you and me, one another, can be a means of being right with God. Righteousness is the biblical word for that, right relationship. It is a way for us to move forward, binding up all our broken lives and broken hearts. Forgiveness and reconciliation is the way to bring healing and peace.

Paul writes about it this way,

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;

that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.^v

We have been given the ministry of reconciliation.

Tom Long was once asked to preach at what was billed as a special “family worship service.” It was a great idea . . . on paper. The notion was to hold the worship service not in the sanctuary but in the fellowship hall. There, families would gather around tables, in the center of which would be the ingredients for making a mini-loaf of bread. The plan was to have the families make bread together and then, while the sweet aroma of baking bread filled the hall, the minister would preach. When the bread was finished, it would be brought out and used for a celebration of the Lord’s Supper. It was a great idea . . . on paper. But it didn’t work well.

Within minutes the fellowship hall was a hazy cloud of flour dust. Soggy balls of dough bounced off Rev. Long’s new suit as children hurled bits of the dough at each other. Husbands and wives began to snipe, nerves were frayed. Then the ovens didn’t work right and it took forever for the bread to bake. Children whimpered, babies screamed, families were on the verge of falling apart. But finally, and mercifully, the end of the service came. The script called for Long to pronounce the normal blessing saying, “The peace of God be with you.”

Too tired and irritable to ad-lib anything, Long just said it straight out, holding limp, flour-caked hands to the air and saying, “The peace of God be with you.” And immediately, from the back of the trashed fellowship hall, a young child’s voice piped up, “It already is.” When we come to the Lord’s table, we do so coming from the broken mess that just is our life in a fallen creation.

Maybe we’ve reconciled what we can and, by God’s grace, perhaps we will be able to do still more. But it’s not all fixed, not yet. Much though we might like to, the fact is that we still can’t shake hands with some folks. Yet we reach out those same hands for the bread and wine now. And over the chaos of it all come the words, “The peace of God be with you.”

The good news is that somehow, some way, it already is. Because once upon a time God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. Amen. ^{vi}

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ⁱ Michael Lindvall, *A Geography of God; Exploring the Christian Journey*, (Westminster- John Knox, Louisville, 2007) 104-105.

ⁱⁱ Stan Mast, “Sermon Starters on the Psalm, Lent 4C” at Center for Preaching Excellence, Calvin Seminary.

ⁱⁱⁱ Read more about Alan Boesak at www.cts.edu/faculty/cts-faculty

^{iv} To download a PDF of the Belhar Confession go to www.pcusa.org/resource/belhar-confession/

^v 2 Corinthians 5:17-19

^{vi} Scott Hoezee, “Sermon Starters on the Epistle, Lent 4C” at Center for Preaching Excellence, Calvin Seminary.