

Psalm 51:1-12 A Willing Spirit

When I first came here about a year ago, I gave a sermon entitled, “The Pink Brick,” about a brick in a wall of one of my childhood homes. If I hit that brick with a basketball, it would bounce off the wall into the basket. It was a delight to me because it was easy and free and I was always able to make that shot in HORSE games. It also serves as an illustration of the givenness of life and of the gospel, of how our place here on earth has been prepared for us as well as our place in heaven, about how life is undeserved and comes to us unbidden and free, without strings attached. I mention it today not so much because I want to illustrate these things but to give some thought to my response, which is in itself an illustration. My response was simple, I threw the ball at the brick to see what would happen.

Psalm 51

Our text today is the 51st Psalm which envisions the situation of King David after the prophet Nathan had confronted him about his relationship with Bathsheba, and about how he had sent her husband Uriah to the front lines of the hottest battle where he would likely be killed, enabling him to marry Bathsheba without it appearing to be immoral. It was immoral, of course; murder and adultery, and David was reduced to

sackcloth and ashes as he repented of his evil, acknowledged his sinfulness, and prayed for forgiveness and restoration. It is possible to relate David’s prayer:

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love, according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.”

“For I know my transgressions and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.”

Although there is surely some poetic hyperbole here; he surely sinned against Uriah too, among others, the nation he was king over; one gets the point that it always comes down to a relationship with God. So before there is a prayer request, there is a prayerful acknowledgment:

“Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach wisdom in the inmost places,”

Even though David lived 3,000 years ago and the Psalms were the hymnal of the Jewish people as early as 2,300 years ago, one can see the significance here.

The Psalms are among the first of all the written introspections in human history. That is part of what makes them sacred and historically important. They acknowledge the human inner life. They are provocative and ahead of their time. Then, at last, the prayer:

“Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean, wash me and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness. Let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities.”

David had sinned the sins of the powerful, they are all too common, (almost cliché) and almost never do we see genuine repentance. One can imagine that since David didn't have to run for re-election and wasn't campaigning for a job, he did not have to feign humility or remorse or religious devotion like so many of our present day leaders. He could afford to be authentic, to appear vulnerable. He asks the most human request, one that has seeped into our consciousness and also become the most famous lines in the psalm:

“Create in me and pure heart, O God and renew steadfast spirit in within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation

and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

A Willing Spirit

There is much here to preach about, many different angles of the spiritual life to think about and draw out for close attention. Certainly each person must come to terms with their own sinfulness even if they do not have power like David did nor sin the great sins like adultery and murder. I would like to emphasize for a moment just the last line, “grant me a willing spirit to sustain me.” How might we understand this? What does it mean to have a willing spirit?

It occurs to me that what David is praying, or the psalmist (whoever that was) is praying, or the people of Israel are praying, or the the congregation is praying, or we ourselves are praying for is a restoration; a prayer for renewed joy in a tacky world in which we are bombarded with moral and ethical failures at every turn. It is a prayer for the return to innocence. It is a prayer for the original spiritual circumstances of excitement and joy that sin has destroyed. It is a prayer for the time when we had no history and all of life was in front of us.

That is quite an astonishing prayer. It is a prayer for the undoing of things that cannot be undone, for the putting of the worms back in the can, for a time when

there is no cynicism, skepticism, when one is not jaded by life's failures and disappointments. A prayer for a willing spirit is for a spiritual quality in our inmost selves of almost childlike playfulness, willing to believe and to journey and meet new challenges and reach for the sky.

The Response

Strangely enough I am taken back to my adolescence standing in front of that wall with that silly brick in it and that ball in my hands and that goal behind. There was no thought and no prayer. I had no expectations and would have been happy had there been no wall and no brick. I did what any boy would have done in that moment. I threw the ball at the brick and it bounced off that wall and into the basket and I laughed and said, "that is *too* easy." In other words, I had a willing spirit.

Upon reflection, I realize that once my life had led me into that situation, nothing in the universe could stop me. Without thought or hesitation or any caution I played the child. My will, my inclinations were in complete harmony with the circumstances and I acted purely out of my inmost self. It would have broken the foundations of my humanity to have left that moment without throwing that ball against that brick. Life has been given like that.

Working Against It

Life was always meant to be lived that way and one is reminded of Jesus when he used children as an illustration by saying that anyone who does not accept the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter into it. Children don't think they just live. They don't stew about things.

The trouble is that when we grow up we do think things over and we do stew about them. The trouble is that the can of worms *is* open; the tragedies have happened, both the personal ones and the great rise and fall of civilization ones and the things that have happened can never be undone, nor can the meaning of those things. And what is most troubling is that we have found ingenious and creative ways to work against life as it has been given to us. We do not always throw the ball as we have been invited to throw it. Sometime we knock the wall down or ignore it altogether. And once we do that we are never quite able to recapture the moment again. But that is what this psalm prays; for David, for Israel, for you, for me, for all of us. It prays for the miracle when the significance of the things that have happened is defeated, and there we all stand again, before life, before Grace.

The great discovery of the gospel is that this great prayer has been answered, and nothing that has happened, no sin that has been committed, no evil that has been done, is powerful enough to steal away the grace before which we all stand.

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