

“The Power of Confession”
Sermon from Psalm 51:1-17
Given Sunday, September 20, 2020
for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville
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*O God, have mercy on me!
Because of your love and great compassion, wipe away my faults;
wash me clean of my guilt; purify me of my sin.
For I am aware of my faults, and have my sin constantly in mind.
I sinned against you alone, and did what is evil in your sight.*

*You are just when you pass sentence on me;
blameless when you give judgment.
I was born in sin, conceived in sin, yet you want truth
to live in my innermost being. Teach me your wisdom!*

*Purify me with hyssop until I am clean;
wash me until I am purer than new-fallen snow.
Instill some joy and gladness into me;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice again.
Turn your face from my sins and wipe out all my guilt.*

*O God, create a clean heart in me,
put into me a new and steadfast spirit;
do not banish me from your presence,
do not deprive me of your holy spirit!
Be my savior again, renew my joy, keep my spirit steady and willing;
and I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.*

*Save me from bloodshed, O God, God of my salvation –
and my tongue will acclaim your justice.
Open my lips, YHWH, and my mouth will declare your praise.
Sacrifice gives you no pleasure - were I to give you a burnt offering,
you would not have it. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;
you will not scorn this crushed and broken heart.*

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The students believed firmly in their cause. They'd watched the news and done the reading. They were horrified at what was happening, appalled that their governmental leadership could commit these atrocities, they would not stand for what they read as such injustice to be committed in their name. So they took to the streets; they sung their songs and they chanted their slogans and they hurled insults at the people in charge. And from his corner office, the guy with all the decision-making power scoffed when he was asked about them. He said, "Carrying a picket sign in support of an honest conviction is certainly at least as good - maybe better than - some youthful diversions, such as panty raids, dropping water-filled balloons out of dormitory windows, or tearing down goalposts. And it's certainly better than stealing hubcaps, smoking pot, or rolling drunks."

They gave him a chance to apologize.

Instead, he sent out his public relations director. Now, this was fifty-two years ago. Here's what E.N. Brandt, at that time the PR director of the Dow Chemical Company, said to defend his corporation against the charges leveled at them. He said: "The people who have mounted this campaign against us say the war in Vietnam is immoral and illegal. They say napalm is inhumane and that it symbolizes the senseless cruelty of war. They demonstrate against Dow because we make napalm and because we're handy.... Our critics ask if we are willing to stand judgment for our choice to support our government if history should prove this wrong. Our answer is yes."

They just couldn't say sorry. When accused of profiting off of manufacturing a destructive chemical of an unpopular war, when accused of being in the business of killing, they said, "We do not and should not try to decide military strategy or policy. Simple good citizenship requires that we supply our government and our military with those goods which they feel they need whenever we have the technology and capability and have been chosen by the government as a supplier." And they kept producing it until the contract was given to a different company in 1969.

They didn't apologize. They deflected, said, "only ten employees are involved in making napalm." They minimized, said, "at no time has that contract represented more than one-half of one percent of our profits." They attacked their accusers, said, "science should determine product usage and potential hazards, without sway from the politics of the day."

I mean, they couldn't apologize, right? They couldn't apologize unless they were going to break the contract, were going to start doing something different. They couldn't apologize because they didn't believe they'd done anything wrong.

And if they did, who would issue the apology? How does a company apologize? For that matter, how does a country, a people, apologize? How does a power confess?

The writer Eve Ensler says an apology is "a sacred commitment. It requires complete honesty. It demands deep self-interrogation, and time; it cannot be rushed."

She survived years of abuse at the hands of her father, and they never talked about it. He died when she was an adult, and she regretted that he never did, maybe never could, own up to what he had done to her. But one day she sat down to write, she says, and her father's voice came out. And he was sorry. She knew, somehow – he came to her, through her, somehow – to confess.

And as she wrote his apology for him, she says she learned that there are four steps:

First: say what you did. Your accounting cannot be vague, she says. The liberation is in the details.

Second: Ask yourself why.

Third: Open your heart and feel what the person you wronged must feel, might feel.

Fourth: Take responsibility for what you have done. Make amends. Pledge to do something new, something different, something to make it better, and do it.

David's Psalm that we read here follows many of these steps. Not the first - it doesn't recount his sin in detail – his own accounting is vague. But the tradition fills in the details for us. It's thought that David composed this Psalm after Nathan confronted him about what he'd done.

Here's what David had done: he'd seen a woman and desired her, then had her abducted and brought to him, raped her, and then,

when he found out she was pregnant, sent her husband to the front lines of the war his army was waging so that he'd surely be killed. Nathan, who served as prophet to the king, came to David to tell a story. Nathan said, "Ok, imagine this: two guys, one's rich, one's poor. The rich guy has many flocks and herds, they roam his property, he can't count them all; the poor guy has one little lamb; he'd saved up and bought it, he brought it up alongside his children, he fed it from his table, and it drank from his cup; when it went to sleep, it cuddled up next to him – this little lamb was like a child to the poor man, like a sibling to his children.

And one day a guest comes to visit the rich man, and the rich man needs to feed his guest, but doesn't want to take one of the animals from his own herd, so he popped over to the poor man's yard, stole his one lamb, and killed it for his guest to feast on." And David was enraged. He said, "That guy deserves to die." And Nathan says to him, "Uh, David? You're that guy."

And, legend has it, David says sorry. He understands that he did wrong. And not only that he committed this one wrong – he understands that there is so much that is wrong. And he's part of it. Maybe he's not to blame for all of it, but he is directly responsible for some of it, and some of it – some of what's wrong in his world – well, he was born into this world where people betray one another, where they use violence to get their way, where kings take what they want, and he plays that game exactly.

When he says, "I was born in sin, conceived in sin," I know Christians are tempted to hear "original sin" there, that doctrine, but there's no Jewish concept of original sin and these are Jewish writings. "Born in

sin, conceived in sin," here, means that the world was broken before we entered it and we bring all our own shattered pieces, too. It means we know that walking humbly and loving mercy and doing justly would make for a more beautiful world, and even so, sometimes we actively choose against that anyway. To confess that is to say something that we're guilty of because of choices we've made and because of just being who we are, just being alive in the world.

How do you apologize for something that both is and is not your fault?

In 1982, Dan Rather reported from Chicago that a 12-year-old girl and two men were dead after taking poisoned capsules of extra-strength Tylenol. No one knew how widespread the poisoning had been, who had done it, or why. These many years later, we still don't know most of that.

But the afternoon of the first deaths, the company set up toll-free numbers staffed by company employees. It sent 450,000 messages to doctors' offices, hospitals, and trade groups. It stopped all Tylenol advertising. Chicago police marched through the city with megaphones, shouting out warnings to people to avoid taking the medicine. When another death was announced, in California, the company's then-CEO James Burke ordered that all 31 million bottles of Tylenol capsules on store shelves be removed. He spoke to the public through his tears, saying, "While this decision is a financial burden to us, it does not begin to compare to the loss suffered" by the families and friends of the people who had died. All of that was their initial confession.

But then, Burke headed up a committee that designed tamper-resistant packaging. All of those safeguards that now cover our pill bottles weren't there before this crisis. The boxes glued shut, the plastic wrap around the bottle's lid, the seal inside – Burke said in an interview that the new packaging “affords the public the best protection we could reasonably devise.” And the interviewer said, “Ah, so, consumers can expect to see prices go up,” and Burke said, “No. We're absorbing it. This is the new cost of doing business.”

Reflecting on it all these years later, he said, “My job was made simple. There wasn't anything else I could've done. Every person who worked for Johnson & Johnson in the world was watching, waiting to hear what we would say. They knew how much depended on this. The very soul of the corporation was watching us.”

And maybe we could take issue with the idea that corporations have souls – but you get what he's saying. There was a lot at stake in his confession. The future of his company. The trust, and potentially the health, of the country. The well-being and the conscience of every employee.

It wasn't their fault. Maybe. At least, as a whole, it wasn't their fault. The perpetrator was never caught. But they owned it, because they knew how much depended on them responding to this crisis, and because they had the power to right someone else's wrong. They knew actual lives were at stake, and they had no idea how many. So they issued a confession that meant real and meaningful change for how they operated.

We say sorry in little ways all the time, every day. We say sorry for dropping things and for bumping into people, sorry for smiling at the wrong time, sorry for burping at the dinner table. That just helps keep our social contract intact. It's some basic thoughtfulness. But I'm thinking these days about big apologies. About the kinds of confessions we need to make as a people.

What does the church need to confess? What could the country apologize for? What could our collective power repent of, and identify meaningful steps to address, and begin to make right?

What difference would it make if we – those of us caught up in systems of privilege – and maybe we, as a country, followed Eve Ensler's process? If we said what we did. If we named the sins of nationalism, racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, militarism. No vague accounting. And we asked ourselves why. And we opened our hearts to imagine what others must feel, might feel. And we take responsibility, and we pledge to do better, and we do it. What if we sat down, pen in hand, and began to confess? Would the words of others come to our fingers, too? Could we give voice, for ourselves and for more than just ourselves, to some of the sorrow that abounds, some of the healing that is needed?

Or maybe more, maybe better – could we call on our leaders to give voice to this? That's why David's Psalm has endured, right? Because it's his. Because it is a potentially world-changing thing for the person with the most power to step away from that for a moment and say, "I'm sorry. I did wrong and I am a part of something that is very wrong." That confession opens up the possibility of everyone who hears it doing something new, becoming someone new, being

part of something new. That vulnerability is an invitation to all of us; it is frightening and it is revolutionary.

David says he was born in sin, conceived in sin. And that image at the very beginning of the Psalm, where he calls on God's great compassion? Some translations have it as "abundant mercy?" That word is womb. The image here is of the womb of God. This prayer of David's, this confession, says we are born into a difficult and broken world and a world in which love surrounds us, cradles us, carries us from the very beginning. A world, a God, whose mercy and compassion holds us always. It is one and the same world. That same womb that holds us also sends us out. So friends, may we hear David's confession as challenge and hope, as promise and possibility. May we claim that same power as our own and for all people. Amen.