

“Anabaptism@500 - A prayer of penitence”

Psalm 51:1-9 (August 20, 2023)

Please join me in this prayer:

Living God, by the power of your Spirit, help us to hear your holy word, that we may truly understand; that, understanding, we may believe; and believing, we may follow in faithfulness and obedience, seeking your honour and glory in all that we do, through Jesus Christ. Amen.
(Ulrich Zwingli, 16th-century reformer)



In two years time, Anabaptist congregations around the world will be celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Anabaptist movement.

And to mark this occasion, a Study Bible is being produced. It will have notes and commentary in the margins – some by academics, and some by ordinary folk who gather to read scripture with the unique understanding and life experience they bring.

“Could our church be part of that?” I wondered. And the Deacons said, “Yes, let’s do it!”



Getting volunteers to sign up was another thing. There was some *gentle* arm-twisting. “What could we contribute?” people asked.

However, at the end of the process we concluded: “This has been good. We learned so much.” How could we share it with our congregation?

We began each session with the prayer we just used. Over the next few weeks, we’ll consider each of the passages we studied. I’ll share some thoughts that came from the group, as well as my own. Maybe it will whet your appetite to read it in greater depth yourself.

And for those who’d like to do that ... we’ve printed some copies of our work. They’re available on the table in the vestibule for you to take home.



Our passage today comes from one of the Psalms, Psalm 51. But before we dig into it, let me tell you about our grand-daughter, Isla. It’s been a while since I’ve given you an update.

Isla is a year and a half now – can you believe it? She’s a proper toddler, wobbling all over the place on her little legs. It’s given her a new-found freedom – to go where *she* wants and explore things that may, or may *not*, be good for her. Her parents keep a close eye on her.

One thing I’ve noticed: If you say “no” to Isla, a mischievous glint appears in her eye. She takes it more as a challenge than a prohibition! “No” becomes an invitation to go right ahead and see what kind of reaction it may bring.

Isla herself has also learned to say “no,” and does so frequently. “Would you come here Isla?” “No.” “Would you like to go for a walk?” “No.” Read a book? “No.” Have a hug? “No.” It’s a game for her, and it’s quite humorous.

This is part of any child’s natural development. It’s important for children to have a healthy sense of autonomy and independence. I know that. But I also wonder when it might go just a little too far. Is there a point at which the exercise of our freedom can be destructive to our life?



Are you wondering what all this has to do with our scripture passage? Psalm 51 is a “penitential” Psalm. It’s a prayer that expresses remorse for having crossed a line and gone too far. It has to do with transgression, and that ancient word “sin”. Which involves acting contrary to the purpose of our Creator, rebelling against God’s good, life-giving way.



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

These opening lines of the Psalm reveal a heart-felt prayer. The Psalmist has come to a realization: Destructive things have been said or done. Ears have been closed to God, doors have been shut to the moving of the Spirit.

The Psalmist has said “No” to God’s intent and moved in a different direction. Now, all of a sudden, it hits him: The gravity of this. The inevitable consequences. The terrible tearing of relationships. The awareness that damage has been done, and there is no going back.

Have you ever found yourself in a place like that?



I remember a conversation, concerning a young couple who chafed at the Prayer of Confession that was used at the beginning of every church service. “Why do we have to do that?” they complained. They could see no need for it. Isn’t the concept of sin outdated? Besides, it is a bit of a downer isn’t it?

One wise elder commented: They haven’t yet experienced the *power* of sin in their lives. But give it time. At some point there will be mistakes and harms and regrets – with each other or with their children. And sorrow and guilt and all the rest of it. And unless there’s some healthy way of dealing with that, they’ll be in trouble.

Sin is not some abstract concept invented to keep everyone in line. It is instead a universal experience, something common to all humanity. Whether we’re religious or not, there are times we find our conscience troubled. We see around us injustice, wrongs and atrocities. There is a moral order embedded in the very fabric of the universe.



The Psalms are given as resource for the worshipping community of God’s people. Psalm 51 is a prayer. Perhaps you’ve used these words in worship, especially at certain times of the year, such as Good Friday or the season of Lent. But this prayer is meant not only for corporate use. It is intensely *personal* as well.

In the superscription above the Psalm, there are some words of instruction: “To the leader,” it says, describing an instance in the life of Israel’s best-loved king, David. Now these words of introduction are later additions to the text. But they root the words of the Psalm in a real-life situation.

Do you recall the story of David and his encounter with Bathsheba? It was not one of his better moments. David was lolling on his rooftop while others were fighting his battles. And he set his eyes on the wife of one of his most trusted soldiers. And he determined to have her. Just because he wanted to. And because he could.

So he commanded that she be brought to him. And he violated her. And then he covered up what he had done. And had her husband murdered.

When it was finally exposed he was full of remorse. How do we live with ourselves? Whether our sin is large and spectacular and public, like David’s. Or smaller, ordinary and hidden from common view, like most of ours?

What’s the remedy for what we feel inside us? How can we escape the haunting recollection of words and actions? Are there things in your life that trouble your soul?



“Have mercy on me, O God ... blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.”

The Psalm begins with the assumption that God is, in fact, merciful. If God is not merciful, there is no use continuing with our prayer.

But see how these opening verses are piled high with a rich theology of *grace*. Which is to say, God’s undeserved favour. Phrases like “steadfast love” and “abundant mercy”. These are some of the most significant words in all of scripture.

We can pray this prayer because God *is*, in fact, merciful. We find this testimony everywhere in the Bible: A people who are rebellious – and a loving, forgiving God who will not let them go.



What is your image of God? Is it an angry, unforgiving tyrant? A legalistic “letter of the law” judge? A petty “tit for tat” bureaucrat? All of these are mere caricatures and projections of our own flawed selves.

Our group acknowledged that God is just, and will hold us accountable for our sins. There’s no easy escape from responsibility.

But as we confess our sins, it opens us to the experience of God’s transforming love. To the possibility of forgiveness and hope and new life!



As the Psalmist continues to pray, there is a shift: Away from sin and toward forgiveness.

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

Notice, this is *God's* doing, this cleansing and washing. It's not something we do for ourselves. This comes as a free gift from the heart of God.

“Let me hear *joy* and *gladness*,” the Psalmist prays, eagerly. “Let the bones that you have crushed *rejoice*.” There is a move from sadness to joy. From sorrow to hope. So what starts as a dark and desperate prayer turns toward a celebration of God's good news. We do not remain in a slough of despond. Instead there is a promise of new life.

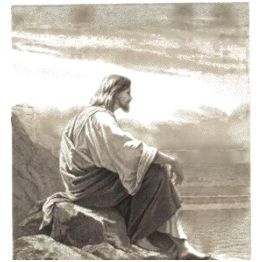
“*Create* in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.” The apostle Paul later spoke of new creation. Not only for our individual lives but for the whole blessed universe! (2 Corinthians 5:17)



When we turn to Jesus, we see a God who forgives enemies. And a God who teaches us to extend that same forgiveness to others. “Forgive us our trespasses, even as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

One of the hallmarks of an Anabaptist interpretation of scripture is that we always read the Bible through the lens of Jesus, who is the fullest revelation of God.

So we read in the Gospel of John: “God so loved the world ... God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3:16-17)



Paul says: “The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance: that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost.” (1 Timothy 1:15) Paul owns his sin. And he also knows he's been forgiven.



Could this be *your* prayer? Can you admit the ways that you have, and still do travel your own independent way? Saying “No” to God. Bringing harm to yourself and others.

More importantly, have you received God's mercy and grace? Do you know the freedom it brings? A freedom far greater than our rebellion ever did. A freedom that leads to life. Releasing us from sin's deathly grip. And opening the door to a fresh start, a new beginning.

The good news – what is always good news for God's people – is that God does not give up on us. (Even when we are tempted to give up on ourselves!) God forgives us and enables us to move forward.

Not that we forget who we are or what we've done. We take responsibility for it. We learn from it. We make amends, where possible. And then we move on. Trusting God loves us. Will always love us. Will never let us go.

Thanks be to God!

