

Give Me a Clean Heart

Psalms 51; John 12:20-33

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“It’s like fire shut up in my bones, and I just can’t keep my peace.” I learned this line of scripture from the choir as a teen. I just thought it was catchy. I had no idea the choir was quoting Jeremiah, but I find myself walking boldly into that reality every day. When we know the truth of the Lord, that truth burns within our core, and we just can’t let things pass us by.

We enter our Psalm text as a prayer for help, an individual lament if you will. Who is lamenting? King David. David prayed this prayer to the Lord after he woke up from his Bathsheba reality. This man abused every bit of power he had. He was rich. He was good-looking, he was the law, he was in the religious majority, and he had people working for him in every industry. He also held himself out as a man of God. But even men and women of God fall short and fall into sin. David said, “Bring her here.” “But, sir, she has a husband. He works for you, too, by the way.” “Did I ask you for your opinion? I said bring her here.” “Yes sir!” He sexually takes advantage of her, gets her pregnant, kills her husband to make it right, and she is nothing, nothing to him, nothing to the townspeople, nothing to society. She was a silent victim, even in David’s conversation/lament with God. Our text says in verse 4, “‘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 great OT scholar Clinton McCann, Jr. sides with David and says that what David meant to say was that his treatment of Bathsheba and her family was a failure to honor God and that he didn’t discount her. I beg to differ, David and I beg to differ, Dr. McCann. Isn’t this just like a person who sits in a seat of privilege to write about and make excuses for another person who sits in a seat of privilege? I am sorry, Dr. McCann, a woman with no voice, whom society has made an object of some sick man’s desires and will kill to get it sins more than just against God. David sinned against Bathsheba, against her husband, against her parents, against her friends, and against other women who were also powerless.

Oh, this sounds too familiar today, doesn’t it? A 21-year-old man of privilege gets to kill eight people, and instead of being called what he was, like David, a murderer, his privileged friend gets to say he was a sex addict. Since when did *sex addict* become synonymous with murderer? I am painfully reminded of the 21-year-old who went into Greater Emmanuel church and killed nine people, and officers took him to Burger King on the way to jail. How quickly we come to the rescue of King David, even when he murders nameless, faceless people? They are not nameless. They are not faceless. They are God’s created ones. Then the press tries to demonize the way in which these innocent women made a living in an effort to care for their families.

“Give me a clean heart, O God! And put a new and right spirit within me.” We are in the season of Lent, a time to struggle with ourselves and the world in which we live. What part are we playing in hanging Jesus on that cross? We tend to look for kumbaya moments in life. We don’t want to listen to the truth, especially when it means looking into the eyes of those injured. I have had so many conversations with multiple friends this week. They reached out because they wanted to vent without judgment. “I am afraid for my parents. They are elderly. I don’t know what to do, and this keeps getting worse. Ever since Trump called it the Chinese Flu, we have been bullied. Nobody wants to hear our pain because we are not black or white. We feel invisible to this, especially the Christian USA.” These are things I have heard this week. This is not a kumbaya moment. The season of Lent is not designed for kumbaya, light a candle and run off into the sunset! No, this is the time to embrace the injured and to stop the injuries.

John expresses the words of Jesus powerfully. He says, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” Church, if we are to bear fruit, we must die. Think of that beautiful seed that comes from a piece of fresh fruit. If you plant it, it will mold and not bear fruit. In order for a seed to grow, it must dry out, yes, die, so that it may live. We have all watched death up close and personally over the past year. I have personally lost ten people very close to me since March of 2020, only two to covid. It is painful to watch. It hurts, is sad, and takes us through a myriad of emotions, and we don’t know what to do with all the pain, but we must die to live. We must die to have eternal life. In this season of Lent, we are called to die.

We must let old ways that are not good for the whole die. We must let our lack of trust die. We must let our negativity die. We must let our judgment die. We must let our anger die. We must let our addiction to yesterday die. “Well, preacher, I am tired of hearing about oppression. I am tired of hearing about racism. I am tired of hearing about equal rights. I am tired of hearing about gay rights. Where is Jesus? That’s what I want to hear about. I am just tired and troubled by all of this. I wish someone would just tell me what to do so we can get past it. Where is Jesus? I want to hear about Jesus.” You are right. Let’s consult with him. John 12:27: “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.”

Friends, we are here at this horrific crossroad of our journey. Jesus said that is why we have come to this hour. We have come to this hour to rise up, get up, stand up, pray up, gird up, and Jesus up so that we may prosper. We all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. This is why we pray that prayer, like David, “Give me a clean heart so that I may follow thee.”

Reflection

As I reflected on this sermon, I knew I was angry. I was angry at all the killings in our society. I was angry at all the Covid deaths and the folks choosing not to get vaccinated because of poor leadership advice. I even had to rewrite a few sections of it to send a similar message so many months later. My congregation was feeling very similarly. They were confused and seeking some release. Covid, coupled with the bad behavior of the powerful, has made us quite skeptical and not secure in our faith. Our faith has been shaken to its core. Sometimes we must offer people an outlet for their grief and emotions. They were able to do that through this sermon. What I shared was my vulnerability. I, too, suffer and grieve.

Following this sermon, I offered a time of reflection and study the following Monday evening. The participants were able to share their frustrations and griefs as well. They were encouraged to go back and listen to the sermon again via YouTube prior to the class. The class was a powerful time of cleansing. We worked in small groups of two in breakout rooms and the large group as well. As we journey into the Lenten season, we as leaders must be keenly aware of where we may be extra human. We must know where our struggles are so that we may work collectively to the cross with others. It is not always easy to share our deepest feelings, but the scripture offers entry and exit points for us and others.