

Psalm 32 3.27.25 4 Lent Bill Uetricht

The Psalm appointed for this weekend, even though I heard it scores of times, really grasped my attention. It begins with a couple of what are called “beatitudes,” statements about what makes for a good life, a blessed life:

Happy, blessed, are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.

Happy, blessed, are those to whom the Lord imputes no
iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

Happy are those whose sin is forgiven. Note something here. It is not, “Happy are those who don’t sin.” A lot of times that is what we think religion is telling us. The happy people are the folks who don’t sin. If you want to be happy, then don’t do this and then don’t do that. Frankly, sometimes that helps. Doing stupid things can produce bad results. It's just the way that life works.

But this is not the focus of the Psalmist. No, what he says is that blessed are those who have been forgiven. There is great joy in knowing not that you got it all right, but that your not getting it all right is not the last word about you, and in fact, is probably not the most interesting word about you. How blessed are those who’ve been forgiven.

Listen to how the Psalmist goes on: “Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity.” In other words, happy are those who realize that God is not holding on to their sin. You may be holding on to it, but God isn’t.

I remember when I was in seminary participating in the rite of individual confession and forgiveness of sin. It was a meaningful rite and frankly, a humbling one. My confessor for the day was an odd-

duck man, a professor of mine, whom I am sure had much to confess himself. After I confessed, I remember thinking every time I saw him in the hallways or out and about anywhere that he had to be processing our encounter through what he learned about me in the confession. “Oh, there’s Bill. This is what he has done, said, or thought.”

It wasn’t until I became a pastor and listened to person after person tell their stories, list their mistakes, admit to their brokenness that I understood that this is not how it works. Oh, there is no doubt that listening to people tell their stories makes you realize how broken they are. Our tendency and need to place people on some kind of pedestal does begin to disappear as folks are honest with you. But most healthy people aren’t busy counting your mistakes. They know that everybody has the same story to tell. They know the common human story. They’ve heard it over and over again.

The Psalmist wants us to know that God knows the common human story. God has heard it over and over again. Blessed are those who know, as Eugene Peterson puts it, that “God holds nothing against you.” And, as the Psalmist says, “Blessed are those in whose spirit there is no deceit.” Again, I like how Peterson puts it: Blessed are those who are “holding nothing back from God.” Blessed are those who are not so preoccupied with their own guilt that they cannot tell the truth.

Our biggest problem is not our sin, the mistakes we’ve made, the brokenness we know and experience. Our biggest problem is that we don’t tell the truth about it. We deceive ourselves, convinced, I guess, that if we don’t admit our issues, they aren’t real.

As I was reading the story about the family whose daughter died from measles because her parents wouldn't vaccinate her, I concluded that some of us would rather be dead than wrong.

As I observe and participate in our cultural and political landscape, I see people who work so hard to not tell the truth. They would rather live such unhealthy lives and impose their unhealthiness on others than admit that they were wrong, made a mistake, have a remarkable amount of brokenness. The Psalmist does not say, Blessed are those who are never wrong. No, he says, "Happy are those in whose spirit there is no deceit." Happy are those who come clean.

And notice what happens when we don't come clean. The Psalmist is totally transparent: "While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of the summer." Our lack of coming clean, our lack of telling the truth, takes a toll on us. Walter Brueggemann puts it in a fancy way: "The body pays for covenantal disturbances." Living with deceit, living with unresolved guilt, living with anger of all kinds takes a toll on life, on our physicality.

We see that in the amount of anger that is apparent in our own time, something we experience when we drive, when we are on social media, when we consider what happened on January 6 four years ago, when we stand back and look at the political realm of our day. This anger is especially real among many men. Our psychology friends like to point out that anger is often a secondary emotion. It often reveals unresolved grief or sadness, reveals how we often have to forgive not only people, but life itself. This is hard work for many

men. They would rather be angry than sad or in deep grief. So they stew in their anger. They get violent. They join up with groups of folks who think like they do. Now again, don't get me wrong. Many women can do the same thing. And these days, I think there are growing number of such women. But from my observation, this is a big concern for men.

Not coming clean has obvious effects, bodily effects, emotional effects, social effects. Lack of truth telling doesn't leave us unscarred. But note the Psalmist's experience when he comes clean, when he couldn't handle anymore that his lack of truth telling was drying him up: "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."

I think sometimes we are afraid that when we tell the truth, the truth that will meet us won't be very friendly. But the Psalmist said: "God forgave me my sin." The truth that he met was grace and forgiveness.

What will we meet when we come clean? What will we meet when we admit that we blew it? What will we meet when we tell the truth about our brokenness? What will we meet when we move beyond our anger and get in touch with our grief and our sadness?

Notice what the bold, dumb son in Jesus' parable today meets when he comes to his senses. By the way, I am not so sure that this parable is taking on the immorality of the younger son. It's the older son who says something about the younger son "spending time with prostitutes." That reality is not in the story of what happens to the younger son. I like what John Petty says about this: Obviously, "the older brother appears to have tapped into his own fantasy life."

When the younger son finally wakes up, when he realizes that the life that he is living is not giving him what he wants, when he understands how truly stupid he has been, he heads back to his father's place. He goes home. And what does he encounter when he comes back toward home? Not a father who has been counting his sins, naming his stupidity. No, he encounters a father who, when he sees him from afar, comes running to greet him. You see, this man, this father, doesn't mind being vulnerable, doesn't mind letting go of his status as the king of the family and the household, doesn't mind looking silly to the neighbors who are watching him, thinking "what in the heck are you doing running after that no-good, impulsive, ungrateful son of yours."

You see, this father lives life on the basis of compassion, grace, forgiveness. This father is a prodigal father, one who is extravagant, wasteful, profuse, excessive with love. And in case you don't get it, this father is our God. This is the one we meet when we come clean, and truthfully, even before we come clean. The father didn't wait until the boy got home to greet him. The father didn't wait until the son came groveling. Grace meets us when we come home. And grace meets us even before we get there.

Grace and love are the bottom-line truth of life. So why would we then not want to not tell the truth, not join the Psalmist in admitting our sin and our brokenness? Why would we want to continue to live a life of deceit? Oh, there is such joy in being forgiven.

"How blest are those who've been forgiven. Shout to God, O faithful people. Who know the Lord will always listen. Be glad! And trust the Lord, steadfast love surrounds you." (sung)

