

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Whiter Than Snow"
Dr. J. Dent

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Fifth Sunday in Lent

Two significant themes come across our view screen every Lent. The first is the fact that we are unfinished and needy individuals. This is the beginning of any serious spiritual path. It is also the beginning of every support and recovery group. It is in fact "Step #1, That we are powerless over our addiction or need and our lives have become unmanageable." Now if you think that you are in no need, or if you cannot see imperfections and flaws in your character, Lent is a good to turn to your spouse or your good friend and ask them what they think might be your flaw or imperfection, if you dare.

Our imperfect life and lifestyle, the Bible calls a sinful or rebellious state, and notes that all human beings are alike in this regard. We've all been bitten by the same snake. Only one lived a life in complete dependence on God the Father, and that was Jesus. So a major step in our spiritual development is acknowledging this need. If we don't truly believe this, then we don't get very far in our spiritual development, because denial always plays against recovery or improvement.

The second theme we come across in Lent is that we tend to sabotage our basic need for love. We hide from God, just as they did in the garden, when they should have said, "We've really messed things up, God, we need to talk about what we and more importantly You can do about it." Instead they hid, and covered themselves, with a large leaf or leaves. We too can try to pretend like nothing has happened when we have sinned against another person or against God. But the healthiest and most honest thing to do is to confess our sin, our flaw, our rebellion. So Lent is a time for us to do this very thing. It is a time to get right with other people we have hurt. It is time to admit our need for others to love us in spite of our flaws and sins. We need the community to care for us, and to reflect reality back to us, both the reality of our sin and the reality of the grace of those who care for us to help us through the hardest times of our lives.

David had been caught in his secret sin of adultery and murder. This is the context for Psalm 51. God had placed a person in his life named Nathan to tell him the truth, the truth from God about his sin. Very few of us have

such a person in our lives, but if we do, we have a great gift (which is what the name Nathan means in Hebrew, "gift.") We all need to hear the truth about ourselves, but it is hard to hear it. No one enjoys hearing about one's flaws, let alone the secret sins. But David got to hear about his.

Confrontation with the truth brings one into a desperate understanding of their need. Just as those fifty or so people that the RCMP has been rounding up around the country in regard to child pornography. There are many more than this.

And we know that although David had to have higher elevation real estate to see what he saw, anyone with a computer today can go into adultery and murder and abuse and the worst of all our crimes, right there on the screen in the privacy of your own home. And yes, I know the computer also has a wonderful side and has helped us, but there is this secret sin side to it. And all I can say is that if you know you are harboring secret sin in this way, or in any way, look for help. I would be pleased to help.

David started with a plea for mercy, not denying what he had done. In this way, he started at a good place for recovery. He asked God to blot out, to wash, to cleanse away his sin, and recognized that these two great sins of adultery and murder were not the only ones in his life. Just as Jesus reminds us lest we think we are better than David, that any thought of hatred or bitterness against another is like murder and any lustful or inappropriate sexual thought about another is like adultery. This includes movies, novels, magazines, internet, you name the media. It's all about what is happening in the heart.

And it is about what this does to our relationships, with God and with one another. God doesn't want us living in shame or guilt. He also doesn't want us to live in confident rebellion and calling something that is sin not sin. He wants us to experience the freedom of truth and grace. He wants us to know the power of a grace-giving community that recognizes our sins, but also give us grace to function and change.

In David's prayers, he constantly is aware of his own sin and rebellion.
Verse 3: I know my transgressions and my sin is always before me. Verse 4: Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; Verse 5: I was sinful at birth...not just a sweet, innocent child.

All of us need to take David's example, that we might have the longing for relationship with God that he did. He needed cleansing, washing, blotting out his sins, creating in him a new heart, and restoring joy, a willing spirit, and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

As someone once said, the reason we do our wash regularly is that we regularly soil our clothing. Regular soilings require regular washing. As in any relationship, we need to keep on top of what's happening and not let our close friends, spouses, children, grandchildren slip away from relationship with us. It is possible to lose relationships as we begin to forget birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays such as Christmas and Easter, and hang on to the perceived offenses and faults of the others, to begin to drift away from people we don't see or with whom we don't communicate. It is the same way with God. We need to keep short lists in our wrongdoing. As we seek God often to change our hearts and minds, to make us more like Christ, we can experience the washing away of our sins. We can become more the way God wants us to be. This does not mean we will be perfect in this life. It does mean that we will experience more care and concern for others and ourselves as God gives us clear boundaries of responsibility and clarity in relationships.

We will even be able to experience the "whiter than snow" washing that David sings about. This has nothing to do with the brand of soap or bleach we use. This has everything to do with the purity and freshness of knowing and honouring the truth with a heart full of love.

Many of us know how to speak the truth, but need work in becoming more sensitive to others and ourselves as we speak such truth. We can destroy others with truth, and maim ourselves as well. But when we bring together truth and grace, we can see others with the love and compassion that we need ourselves. It is then we can truly care for one another. Because simply caring for another without the truth means that we are walking on eggshells about the real issues below the surface. And delivering the truth without love can wreck the other person. God calls us to deliver both truth and love. This can be a difficult balance to strike at times. But may God give us what we need to accomplish it.

The gospel of John in chapter 12 that we read shows us we need to practice self-giving as Christ showed us the way. The Hebrews 4 and 5 passages show us we have in Jesus a high priest who can sympathize with what we are going through, because He Himself has suffered. The suffering that we go through may be so that we can minister to others in the area in which we have gone through so much. I don't have all the answers for why some of us go through so much, and others of us don't. I simply draw us all together again to the Scriptures which help us.

And when we know we need help and mercy, we can read again the penitential psalms, that is, the psalms of confession: 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143. It is good in our spiritual journey, to feel and express our remorse for our misdeeds or sins. This is not for the purpose of shame or guilt, but rather the opposite, to be freed from such self-judgment, as we hear the love and forgiveness of the Lord, bought with such a great price as the cross.

At Lent, let us celebrate again God's mercy and care of us, which goes beyond what we can do for ourselves. Let us not be shy in proclaiming where we need help, but rather "carry one another's burdens and thus fulfill the Law of Christ." (Gal. 6:2)

Let us pray.