

Let Us Bring Our Broken Hearts to God

Funeral Sermon – Psalm 51

by Michael G. Lilienthal

Dearly beloved,

Some believe that Christians must be strong in the face of grief, that we must keep a stiff upper lip, that it is inappropriate to let our feelings show. But that is not the Christian way at all. You know, Jesus himself wept at the death of a friend (John 11:35). Grief is a human experience, fraught with human emotion. So “why should[n’t] we too properly mourn and grieve...? For God has not created man to be a stick or a stone. He has given [us] five senses and a heart of flesh in order that [we] may love [our] friends, be angry with [our] enemies, and...lament and grieve when [our] dear friends suffer evil” (LW 51:232-233). If you need proof that God encourages us to express these deep, throbbing emotions, look no further than this psalm, which our Lord has provided for us to pray to him, which is full of these emotions of lament and weeping and sorrow. In fact, this psalm tells us that “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart.” These are the things God wants us to bring to him. On this day of deep sorrow especially, we may, and we should, bring God our broken hearts.

I. For We Are Broken

Now, I should be clear. The “broken heart” of which this text speaks is not one undergoing just any kind of grief. This is a very specific grief: the grief over our sins. This psalm was composed and sung by King David, just after the prophet Nathan had confronted him about his sin, the sin of stealing the woman Bathsheba from her

husband, getting her pregnant, and trying to cover it up by having her husband killed. The double-sin of adultery and murder he added to even more by pretending that he was good and righteous and that no one could hold anything against him. He was a sinner walking around as though he were righteous. But once Nathan showed David his sin, with his famous words: "You are the man!" David repented, and he composed this psalm: "Have mercy on me, O God!"

David's heart was broken over his sin. Just hear the anguish in his words, as he complains to God, "I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me" – it was inescapable, always pointing a condemning finger at him; "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" – by his actions he had sinned, but more than that, his entire being was sinful, infected by a corruption he had inherited from his ancestors going all the way back to Adam and Eve, causing all manner of pain, suffering, evil, and even death.

Those without the Word of God suppose that death is some natural necessity, part of the "circle of life." But there is nothing natural about death. Death is a result of our across-the-board corruption, our sin, both that which we have inherited, and that which we actually commit. Sin has corrupted the whole of man – it makes us immoral, selfish, seeking to do what we want to do, rather than what's best, what God desires; but also it has corrupted our senses, our minds, our abilities, our muscles and bones, so that we make mistakes, we grow weak, so that we are unable to trust even our own bodies as they waste away and fail before our very eyes. This is all the effect of sin.

And this our dear sister Helen felt acutely. Her independence, which she held so dearly, her ability to learn, to be social and caring toward others, all this was stripped away from her. No, it wasn't immediate, but it came over time, as her hearing failed, as she was forced to depend on a walker to move around her own home. And she was right to hate these inabilities. I'm told that when company would come to visit her, she would hide her walker away in the bedroom, so that they wouldn't see her as anything less than the independent woman she was.

But I'm also told that this psalm was a favorite of hers. The most familiar words of it, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me," this may have been one of many in Helen's personal prayers, because she knew her own weakness, her own brokenness, and so she had to rely on God to strengthen her. I have no doubt in my mind that, even if she didn't use these precise words in her pleadings before God, she most certainly brought before him her weaknesses, her troubles, and yes, her sins.

We remember Helen today as a mother, a grandmother, a sister, a friend, and no doubt we want to keep that pure image of her in our minds, but for just a moment, let Helen also be to us a sinner, like all the rest of us, we who also must come before God handing him many countless and terrible trespasses, and relying fully on something we call "forgiveness of sins." Think of her as a sinner, because that allows us to think of her as redeemed, that though her flesh was weak and sinful, God provided her his Holy Spirit, to create in her a clean heart and a right spirit – God upheld her throughout her life like a child, giving her a spirit that was willing, despite her flesh being weak.

II. For He Upholds Us

This is one of the great ironies of the Christian faith: in order to gain, we must lose; in order to live, we must die; in order to be righteous, we must admit that we are sinful; in order to be independent, we must be dependent on God. I have said this psalm is about repentance, and Martin Luther evaluated and ascertained the “two elements in true repentance: recognition of sin and recognition of grace” (LW 12:305). Listen to what we may cry in our psalm: “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.” These are confident words. This is the confidence that if God cleans us, we will indeed be clean, pure and whole where we were once corrupt and broken. Why after all direct a lament to God, but that we are confident that he can and will comfort us? We see that confidence in this psalm, and we could see that faith in the heart of our dearly departed sister, Helen.

I’m told she valued her independence. I’m told she instilled that value into her children. I’m also told she used that independence, even at the age of 88 driving through the roundabouts which confuse so many of us, in order to go and visit friends in need. Now don’t you think it strange that someone who had so much independence, with the whole world available to her, would choose instead to go to places that were not perhaps so cheerful, places where people were down, where she had to give, give, give, rather than get, get, get? Those who knew her would not think this strange. Helen was a caring person. I’m not unclear about where she got that virtue.

“Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit,” says the psalm, “Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to

you. Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.” Helen was a sinner. But she knew this. She could see in her own body the decay that sin caused. But rather than let that stop her, she went to the one who could uphold her. God gave her faith that, because of the death of his Son Jesus on the cross, paying for the sins of the whole world, Helen herself was washed clean by his blood, forgiven of all her sins. Because she was forgiven, washed clean, God’s Spirit upheld her, gave her the willingness to use her newfound independence to proclaim his praise, to bring godly comfort to her friends and family, because such a wonderful thing couldn’t be kept to herself.

And more than that, Helen had faith that because her Savior had died and forgiven her, and also that, no longer to be found in the tomb where he was laid, for he had arisen on Easter morning just as he said he would, she also would rise to a new and glorious, purified life with him, as he has promised that she will. And now, right now, Helen is enjoying her blissful eternal life: no longer must she rely on her walker, no longer must she even rely on a body weakened by sin: she has attained true independence, and is in the company of the purest “joy and gladness.” On the Last Day, should our faithfulness to God remain upheld by him until our end and until the return of his Son, we will join her in that same “joy and gladness,” and our very bodies will arise, so that these “bones that...have [been] broken,” these hearts that have been broken, will be able to “rejoice.”

Amen.