

Those of you who know me well or who have studied with me realize that I think that the church sometimes has overplayed the “sin” card. Throughout our history, it seems to me, we have made people feel guilty for what often is normal human behavior. We have made people feel as if “sinner” is their overarching identity.

What is the first thing that can be said about me? I am a sinner. Bah humbug. According to the book of Genesis, before I am a sinner, I am one who is created in the image and likeness of God. As Matthew Fox has said, before there was original sin, there was original blessing, which is why in my leadership of worship, I don’t always have us start the service with confession. We’re more than sinners. Foundationally, we are children of God.

Yet sometimes I worry that people like me, with my approach to the faith, have contributed to people not taking their sin seriously. I know that sometimes I don’t take my own sin seriously. I downplay it. I excuse it. As I was praying the other night, I became aware that clearly I don’t often enough confess to God. I work real hard at getting everything right, at being healthy physically, emotionally, mentally. I try my best not to be reactive, not to get angry at people who say things that offend me, recognizing that reactivity has to do with my little ego feeling threatened. I try to get all that right. So, what do I need to confess? What do I need in order to lay it on the line with God? What I think is important I do well with. Goody for you, Bill. But let’s be honest. You’ve got confessing that needs to be done. What about that ego? What about your knowing too much, knowing, as Thomas Driver puts it, “what everybody else needs to do in order to be saved?”

The author of the 51st Psalm today is phenomenally candid about himself. There aren't many scholars who think that King David actually wrote this song. But it sure applied to him, as he was facing what he did to Bathsheba and Uriah the Hittite. He was overwhelmed with Bathsheba's beauty, and he wanted her. And he, the powerful one, got her and used her. And what's more, so that he could be sure that he could keep her, he had her husband Uriah placed in the front of the battle line so that he would be killed. And killed he was. David was a murderer and an adulterer.

Today's Psalm would be the right song for him. "Have mercy on me, O God. Blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions."

I *know* my transgressions. The author's transgressions are in his face. They are right before him. He can't get away from them. I so appreciate the honesty. The problem is not everybody else. It's not everybody else's fault. We need to come clean about that. Life before God is a matter of coming clean. "You desire truth in the inward being," according to David. (Let's call him that from here on out for the sake of convenience.) God, David believes, wants us to lay it on the line with ourselves. Phoniness doesn't work with God.

And our sin, David claims, is fundamentally about our lives before God. David sings: "Against you, you alone, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." In other words, our sin doesn't just hurt ourselves or other people; it is an affront to God. Walter Brueggemann says, "Our skewed lives finally must deal with God." David knows this. He has been knocked off his high horse, laid bare before God.

You know, I find it interesting what David reveals about his physicality as he has been laid bare. Speaking to God, he says: “Let me hear joy and gladness; let the *bones* you have crushed rejoice.” I am looking for some good news, especially good news for my body, for my bones.

I know that we don’t always grasp this, but sometimes we wear our brokenness, our weariness, our sin on our bodies. Our bodies register when our lives are skewed. Now, please don’t hear this as an argument that people with physical challenges are somehow dealing with more sin than the rest of us. That’s hogwash, bad theology. But without a doubt, sometimes our bodies pay the price for what we have done to ourselves, or others have done to us. We’re whole human beings. Our bodies are integral to who we are. They will display what our emotions, minds, and relationships are dealing with. They will help tell the truth to us.

I have this sense, though, that lots of us these days don’t want to tell the truth, don’t want to take responsibility for what we’ve done, for our actions. We hide behind blame. We hide behind conspiracy theories, so-called hoaxes. David will not hide behind those things. He tells the truth, begging God to create within him a clean heart and a new and right spirit. He wants to be changed.

I wonder what makes that possible for David? What gives him the strength to come clean. I suspect that the first thing he sings gives us a clue: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions.” He’s going to God with the truth because he knows God to be a God of steadfast love--love that lasts, love that begins it all, love that is present in the highs and the lows, love that is not

dependent upon me to initiate or to sustain it. David is going to God with the truth because he knows God to be a God of ever-flowing mercy, lovingkindness, favor, compassion. He knows that God is for him, not against him.

Note what Luke tells us about God in our gospel reading for today. While the religious folks are grumbling about who Jesus invites to his parties, he tells them a couple of parables about who God is. In the first parable, we are told that God is like a crazy shepherd who leaves behind 99 sheep to go after one lost sheep. That is weird. What kind of shepherd is this?

In the second parable Luke reveals to us that God is like a crazy woman who turns her house upside down to find one lost coin and throws a big party for her neighbors and friends because she finds the one lost coin. Can you imagine her telling her neighbor, “I’ve opened up the champagne, purchased the caviar, brought in the West Side Soul Surfers, because I discovered my one lost coin?”

This is crazy. But this is who God is. God has a penchant for the lost. The only thing you need to be in order to be found by God is lost. God loves lost people. God loves sinners. Now don’t get me wrong. The Bible tells us that God sometimes gets really ticked off at our sin. Our story from Exodus today reveals a God who got so ticked off with his people for creating a false image of him that he wants to be left alone so that his wrath might burn inside of him and eventually consume them. We can’t operate, therefore, with the assumption that whatever we do is okay and that there won’t be consequences for our actions. Sin produces results.

But pay attention to what the story from Exodus tells us. “And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to

bring on his people.” Changed his mind. Those words mean “repented.” God repented. Yes, there is a call for *us* to repent. But before we hear that call, hear this truth: God changed God’s mind. God changed God’s heart. God decided to behave differently.

What enables us to come clean? What frees us to lay it on the line with God and with ourselves, and yes, with other people? God is a God of mercy and steadfast love. God has a heart for the lost. God ultimately wants our good.

Herb Brokering tells this story:

Once there was a girl who always started over when she made mistakes on her violin. When she was 30, she was famous. Many people came to hear her. One night she gave a concert, and everyone was There. She made a mistake and so started over. Everyone got up when she was done, and they applauded for ten minutes. She was glad she had learned to start over.

Our big problem is not making mistakes. Our big problem is not our sin. Our big problem is not telling the truth about it. God is full of mercy and steadfast love. We can tell the truth. We can even start all over again.