

## Let The Bones You Have Crushed Rejoice!

Lent is the season of the church year when Christians are offered the opportunity to lighten their hearts by reflecting upon the seriousness of their sins and the abundance of God's mercy. Sometimes Christians ask: "Why should we dwell on our sins? If God has forgotten them, why should we remember them? Doesn't it make more sense to just rejoice that God has forgiven them and get on with life?" It's an attractive proposition—and not without a certain degree of merit. After all, we Lutherans do spend a fair amount of time focusing on the subject of sin. Sometimes our brothers and sisters in other Christian denominations like to call us the "Misery Synod" because we take sin so seriously. There are four reasons why we should take sin seriously.

The first is that the Bible tells us to. Isaiah wrote, "For our offenses are many in your sight, and our sins testify against us." If God takes our sins seriously, we should too.

The second reason is that if we don't take sin seriously we're not likely to take forgiveness seriously either. Jesus said to Simon the Pharisee: "The one who has been forgiven little, loves little." Our ability to rejoice in God's mercy is proportionate to our willingness to face up to our sins. We have to cross the wilderness of repentance before we can enter the green pastures of grace.

The third reason we should pay attention to our sins is that if we don't bring them to light, they work in the darkness, and sin is like mould: it thrives in darkness. If you let your cellar fill up with mould, it will soon be growing in your kitchen and living room too.

But there is a fourth and, I believe, even more important reason why we should take sin seriously, and that is because when we fail to do so, we make ourselves vulnerable to our enemy, Satan, who is devilishly clever in using temptation to surprise and overpower us. Nowhere is this more clearly and powerfully illustrated than in the case of David, the king of Israel.

David was "a man after the Lord's own heart" who had gone to extraordinary lengths to honor God in his life. As a teenager he challenged the Philistine giant Goliath to man-to-man combat and won the war for Israel by slaying him.

Then he endured fourteen years of abuse by the jealous King Saul without retaliating—even when he would have been justified in doing so. In David's eyes, no matter how cruel and unjust Saul had been to him, he was still the "Lord's anointed king," and David refused to lay a hand on him.

And finally, when David became king, he tried very hard to rule with justice and compassion. He pleased God so much that Nathan, the prophet of Israel, told him, "Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the Lord is with you." Then one day David's eye fell upon a beautiful woman and suddenly he turned into a totally different man. Taking advantage of his power as a king he had the woman brought to his palace where he committed adultery with her. When she became pregnant, he tried to dupe her husband, Uriah, who was an officer in David's army, into believing that he was the father. When that scheme failed, he resorted to cold blooded murder. Betraying the sacred trust a soldier places in his commanding officer, David arranged for Uriah to be abandoned by his fellow soldiers in the midst of combat so he would be overpowered and killed by the enemy.

Almost overnight, David had been transformed from "a man after the Lord's own heart" into a covetous, adulterous, lying murderer. He blew away four of the Ten Commandments in one fell swoop. ***Sin has the power to completely and suddenly corrupt a person's will and dominate their behavior.*** Paul wrote that "...anyone who sins is a slave to sin." By that definition, you and I are slaves to sin. And if we are slaves to sin then sin has the power to control us. And it won't help us to put our heads in the sand and pretend otherwise. The shackles of sin are there whether we acknowledge them or not. But David's conscience, which had been commandeered by the onslaught of lust, was awakened by God's prophet, Nathan, who accused David of his sins to his face: "YOU ARE THE MAN!" He said. And to David's credit, he didn't try to justify himself or explain away his sin. He didn't say, "Well, I'm sorry, but you see I was attacked by a bear and a lion when I was a kid and I haven't been the same since." He didn't say, "My brothers were really mean to me when I was a teenager, and I've never gotten over it." He didn't say, "Don't you know how traumatic it was during the fourteen years when King Saul was trying to kill me? Can't you cut me a little slack?" He didn't say, "My problem is that my wife—excuse me, my wives—don't understand me and I needed the consolation of another woman's love." David didn't offer any of those excuses. All he said was, "I have sinned against the Lord."

Then he poured out the agony of his shame and guilt by confessing his sins to the Lord in the words of the Psalm we read today: *Psalm 51*. "Have mercy on me, O God...for I know my transgressions and my sin is always before me. If you will notice, there are no "buts" in that confession. There are no defenses, no qualifications, no pleading for understanding, no attempts at justifying what he had done. There is only the humiliating, agonizing confession of sin. Not only of the sins he had committed, which were bad enough, but of his essential sinfulness. "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." David's sin was not just what he had done, but of what, down deep, he actually was. He was sinful to the core, he had always been sinful, he was responsible for his sins and all he could do was to beg God for forgiveness. This is not an easy thing to do. We prefer to make ourselves feel better about our sins by comparing ourselves to worse sinners than we are. To serial killers maybe or career criminals. We say to ourselves, "At least I'm not one of **those!**" Consider, for example the Pharisee in today's Gospel lesson. He strives to do everything right by God. He tithes, he prays, he's at the temple every Saturday. But down deep he nurses the worst sin of all: the sin of pride. "I thank you Lord that I am not like this miserable tax collector." Someone once said that when we hear this parable we think, "I thank you Lord that I'm not like this miserable Pharisee!" We can always find someone who is a worse sinner than we are. Jesus' parables have a way of turning on us and smacking us right in the face. A heart steeped in pride is hateful to God and nothing that a proud person can say or do will please God. But the tax collector, who makes his living by robbing his fellow Jews, is forgiven his sins and is justified before God strictly on the basis of his heart-rending plea: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Those words could have come from David's heart as well. Both the tax collector and Jesus acknowledge their utter sinfulness and their utter dependence upon God to forgive them. But let's be clear about something. As deep as their contrition is, neither David nor the tax collector is in despair. Despair would say "I'm a mess and I can't help it and I'm lost." David and the tax collector are in repentance rather than despair. Repentance says, "God I'm a mess and it's my own fault and I desperately need Your help." Despair says, "I give up." Despair is abandoning hope in God; repentance is turning to God in hope for forgiveness and restoration. And David's next words are addressed to the Source of his hope: "Cleanse me with hyssop and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice! Hide your face from my iniquities and blot out my transgressions." It is a short journey from repentance to forgiveness. When we honestly confront our sins, repent of them and confess them to God and to each other, God doesn't leave us in the dark night of our souls—He gives us mercy and the consolation of his love.

That is why David can say with confidence: "Let the bones you have crushed rejoice!" He knows that, as the Psalmist said, "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." He knows that, "A bruised reed he will not break nor a smoldering candle will he snuff out." God loves the truth and the truth is that sin is always with us and in us because we are sinful from root to branch from the time we are conceived. When we admit that truth to ourselves and confess it from our heart to God, then God forgives us and creates new hearts and upright spirits within us. And then, as new creations we can pray with all our heart: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me!" "Lord, I have humbled myself--now exalt me as you have promised!" So I encourage you during this season of Lent to spend some time doing an inner inventory of your sins and confessing them to God—and to each other, if you have the courage to do so. When we honestly confront the truth about our sins and sinfulness, we are forced to the conclusion that we are all train wrecks about to happen. But with that knowledge we can also feel joy and anticipation, knowing that with Christ there is forgiveness, hope, and renewal. From time to time God has to crush our bones with repentance, but in the next moment he will cause the same bones He has crushed to rejoice.

Amen.

