

THE CLOUDS OF SIN

Psalm 51

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GATHERING: *Bring Us Home*

Good morning. It's great to see you but I think I should warn you that we are talking about sin this morning.

And the first thing I want to say about it comes from the late great theologian and bible scholar, Marcus Borg. He says that talking about sin, as the primary metaphor for the human condition, is to tell only part of the story. After all, according to the biblical tradition, human beings are made in the image of God. And our human condition includes all kinds of circumstances that don't have anything to do with sin. Borg says:

People in bondage need liberation ... people in exile [need to find their way] home ... people who are wounded need healing ... people who are outcasts need community.

To cast all these needs in the light of sin is to cloud the picture of who we really are.

Several years ago – and many of you have heard this story before – a young man came to this church. He had been rejected by his family because he was gay. What they understood to be “sin” became the primary way these parents came to see their son. And when he was diagnosed with AIDS, they believed that the disease that eventually took his life was the consequence of sin. Whatever beauty and love and creativity and grace was part of their son's life, all they could see was overshadowed by this cloud of sin.

When this young man showed up at this church, Dr. Romney knew that it wasn't forgiveness this young man needed. What he needed was to find his way home. And so he wrote this hymn we sing together this morning, “Bring Us Home.” Will you stand as we sing together?

Psalm 51.1-2; 10-14

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a right spirit within me.

Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.

Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

SERMON: *The Clouds of Sin*

“Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine,” is one of 8,000 hymns and gospel songs written by Fanny Crosby in the mid-1800s. Maybe you didn’t know that she was blind and that she taught at the New York Institute for the Blind, where she met and married another faculty member who was also a musician. One historian suggests that “Blessed Assurance” was written after the death of their only child in infancy.

You may also not know that Fanny Crosby had political connections. She was an outspoken abolitionist and a spiritual advisor to Presidents Van Buren, Tyler, Polk and Grover Cleveland. And she once addressed

a joint session of Congress about policy related to the education of those who are blind.

It's ironic that, at the time when women were rarely allowed to have a voice in worship, Fanny Crosby was speaking in the halls of power. And her voice in these 8,000 hymns has continued to lead worship in all kinds of churches for more than a century.

You can probably imagine that through her life, there were religious people who wondered if her blindness and the loss of her child were the result of some sin; that, like the young man who showed up here all those years ago, with his parents' eyes clouded by this idea that sin so defined the life and death of their son that the only thing he needed was forgiveness, when the truth is that what he really needed was to find his way home.

Let's just say that when we start talking about sin, things get a little cloudy.

Take Psalm 51, for instance. The general consensus is that there is a back story.

A couple weeks ago, I said that I thought the back story of Psalm 23 was I Samuel 16 when Samuel anoints David's head with oil. In Samuel 16, Samuel anoints David as a king. And the problem with that is that Israel already has a king – Saul. So, the context for Psalm 23 is about more than comfort. It's about resistance.

The consensus seems to be that back story for Psalm 51 is II Samuel 11 and 12 about David's affair with Bathsheba. You know the story – David has now taken the throne and has sent his army away to fight. He doesn't go out to battle with them but he is up on his roof and he looks down and he sees this beautiful woman. And he calls for her and he takes her into his bed. The problem is that she happens to be someone

else's wife. And to make matters worse, David arranges for Bathsheba's husband to be killed in battle.

That's about the time that the prophet Nathan shows up and tells this story about a rich man and a poor man. The rich man with all his power and his all his flocks, takes the poor man's beloved lamb for himself. And David is outraged: "Who is this man that has done such a thing."

And the prophet says: "Thou art the man."

And the consequence of that sin is the death of a child.

So, Psalm 51 is supposed to be David's confession. It is the expression of his raw regret. It is his prayer for some kind of blessed assurance that forgiveness and new life is possible.

But here's my problem. Is the story in II Samuel just the story of David's individual moral failure? Or is anyone else concerned that the accusation the prophet actually levels at David is not that he had sex with another man's wife and then had her husband killed, but the sin is -- like the rich man in Nathan's story who stole a poor man's sheep -- the sin is that David stole another man's possession who happens *not* to be a sheep but a woman?

From this distance, it seems to me that the sin is not just David's tragic moral failure but the way the culture systematically treated women as possessions that could be taken and traded and thrown away.

It seems to me that religious communities either understand sin almost exclusively as individual moral failure or almost exclusively as systemic evil.

And, as someone who grew up in a community that cared a lot about sin as almost exclusively a matter of individual moral failure, I can tell you that the way of seeing things clouded my vision of myself -- it taught me

a deadly kind of shame. And it clouded my vision of other people and the world as well. Poverty was about individuals having a bad work ethic rather than an economic system stacked against them. Corruption was about individual greed instead of a whole system designed to make the rich richer and the poor poorer. Racism was the bad actions of a few people rather than a whole system of prejudice and privilege that happens to benefit me – no matter how sorry I am about it.

In this past Wednesday's conversation on racism, Doug Avilesbernal led us in a confession that included: "We confess that we have lacked courage, been content with the status quo, and looked to others to solve issues of injustice rather than ourselves."

Doug was trying to get us to see that I have my own personal responsibility for racism *and* there is a social system beyond me that generates its own brokenness and destruction.

And that, at long last, brings me to Barbara Gibson's adaptation of Psalm 51. It's printed in your bulletin if you want to follow along.

Psalm 51 *adapted by Barbara Gibson*

Have mercy on me, O Spirit,
According to your steadfast love.
With your abundant compassion
blot out the errors I have made.

Forgive the mistakes I've made in the past;
I know what I've done and I'm sorry.
I have sinned against you, Spirit,
And against myself, my friends, and the earth.

I just want to be truthful and sincere!
Wash me inside out and I'll be clean,
ready to start over and make a new self.
Teach me everything I need to know.

I'm ready for happiness, Spirit;
my sore and aching body will rejoice.
Wipe away the stain of my self-hatred,
and teach me how to accept who I am.

I need to remember your presence,
I need to remember your beauty each day.
May I be given the joy of wholeness and
may I find my willing heart.

Spirit, open my mouth, and I will sing to you.
I know you don't want more guilt from me;
you don't want me to beat my breast in shame.
All you want from me is my joy.

I think Barbara Gibson is trying to account for both the individual and the institutional nature of sin.

The Spirit doesn't "want more guilt from me," she says. Frankly, when I was in that religious community that saw sin as almost exclusively my own individual moral failure, it seemed like I never really had to change. All I had to do was to feel guilty. As long as I felt guilty about something and ashamed of myself, that was enough.

But Gibson says, "you don't want more guilt from me; you don't want more shame ... I know what I've done ... against myself, my friends, and the earth ... I want to be truthful and sincere ... [I am] ready to start over and make a new self."

"All you want from me," she writes, "is my joy."

"Restore to me the joy of your salvation," the standard version of Psalm 51 says.

If it is not more guilt and more shame that's needed, what part does joy play in redeeming the world?

Whatever the loss experienced by Fanny Crosby and however clouded the eyes of other people were when they saw her blindness, she wrote: “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine; O what a foretaste of glory divine.”

However clouded the eyes of his parents about his true identity, there was a young man who found his way home to this place. And every time we sing “Bring us home,” we are singing his song. We are celebrating the love that brings scattered people home.

For all the work there is to do to dismantle racism, I remember Joan Baez saying in a concert that she was marching with Dr. King in Alabama in 1963 when she heard a sermon by a young black preacher, “Singing at Midnight.” The preacher said that “white folks will see us – they will see our joy – and ... they’ll come join us in this movement because they will realize that’s the only place on earth to be right now.”

Every time I see that old movie about kids at a Catholic school in a broken down neighborhood learning to sing, I get choked up. It’s not a great movie but here are these kids that are dismissed and underestimated and about to be thrown away, celebrating who they are and their gifts and the community they have created.

A young African-American woman steps on stage and starts to sing, tentatively:

*Joyful, joyful, Lord we adore thee,
God of glory, Lord of love,
Hearts unfold like flowers before thee,
Hail thee as the sun above,
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness,
Drive the dark of doubt away,
Giver of immortal gladness,
Fill us with the light,
Fill us with the light,
Fill us with the light of day.*

And then all heaven breaks out!

The kids are on stage dancing and singing and celebrating the joy that can melt the clouds of sin and sadness.

I don't know what more guilt and shame will get us. But I can imagine that joy could change the world.

So, today, if you hear that voice – that voice singing, “Joyful, Joyful, Lord we adore you,” and you feel those clouds of sin and sadness start to melt away – well then, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

from The Gathering, Marcus Borg, *Speaking Christian* (HarperOne, 2011), pp. 143-148. The Fanny Crosby story is available online at www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-blessed-assurance. The connection with “Blessed Assurance” and the death of her child is mentioned briefly in *Her Heart Can See: The Life and Hymns of Fanny J. Crosby* by Edith L. Blumhofer (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), p. 93. While Blumhofer does not make the direct connection, as has been made by others, she does begin the chapter that reports this experience with a reference to the hymn. The relation of Psalm 51 and II Samuel 11 and 12 is discussed by J. Clinton McCann, Jr. in *Psalms for Preaching and Worship*, eds. Roger E. Van Harn and Brent A. Strawn (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), “Psalm 51,” pp.169-172. The confession from our racism conversation led by Doug Avilesbernal is by Drew Bongiovanni (2018). Barbara Gibson’s adaptation of Psalm 51 is in her *Psalms for Trouble Times* (Crestline Press, 2003), p.39. The story by Joan Baez is told in a live concert on YouTube; see “Let Us Break Bread Together – Freedom.”