

Sunday 21st August 2022
Glynde Lutheran Church
Sermon on Psalm 51:16 – 17
Theme: “Breaking up is hard to do”
“Keep (re)turning to God”

Question: “Will God forgive me after what I’ve done!?”

Introduction:

As I said, the theme for this morning’s message is: “Breaking up is hard to do”. It’s the title of a song about how difficult it is to breakup a relationship with a boyfriend or a girlfriend.... But *this* isn’t what I want to talk to you about this morning.... I want to talk to you, rather, about *being broken up*.... I want to talk to you about being broken up, so that we turn to God for help and forgiveness, rather than turning away from God in defiance and in pride (*cf. the two responses to sin: hands out humbly to God or hands up in defiance to God*)

Let me try and explain what I’m on about, by reference to the psalm from which our text for today is taken, Psalm 51. This psalm in the Old Testament of the Bible is a song that was written by someone who broken up, so to speak, by his or her sin, so much so that he or she wrote this song of confession to God:

**Be merciful to me, O God,
because of your constant love.
Because of your great mercy
wipe away my sins!
Wash away all my evil
and make me clean from my sin (*Psalm 51:1-2*)**

I say “he or she” wrote this, but tradition has it that this psalm, this song, was written by a man: by King David. And it is popularly thought that he wrote this song after he had entered

into an adulterous relationship with the beautiful Bathsheba and after he had had Bathsheba's husband, Uriah killed (*The heading to Psalm 51; 2 Sam 12*).

I guess that most of you have heard the story before.... Suffice it to say that according to 2 Samuel, chapter 12, David broke down and confessed his sin and cried out to God for forgiveness, when the prophet Nathan brought out into the open what David had done (*2 Sam. 12:1-7*).

Now David didn't *have* to turn back to God and ask his forgiveness: he could have rationalised what he had done, and refused to turn to God and ask for forgiveness.

That is the choice that all of us have when we fail to love the people around us, or when we actively hurt others: we can be broken up, so to speak, by what we've done or by what we've failed to do and turn to God, asking him for mercy and forgiveness....

Or we can rationalise what we've done, stand firm in our disobedience, and refuse to turn back to God for mercy and forgiveness....

The difference, in what happens, lies in *us* and what *we* do in the face of our sin.... God remains constant in His love and in His offer of forgiveness, a forgiveness which He made possible for us, and for everyone who has ever lived, by giving up His Son, Jesus, to suffer and to die for us....

No where is this made more clear than in Jesus' story of "The Prodigal Son", or the story of "The Lost Son" as I prefer to call it. Again, this is a story that I guess most of you know well.... But let me remind you of the story....

There was once a man who had two sons. The younger one said to him, 'Father, give me my share of the property now'. So the man divided his property between his two sons.

After a few days, the younger son sold his part of the property and left home with the money. He went to a country far away, where he wasted his money in reckless living. He spent everything he had. Then a severe famine spread over that country, and he was left without a thing.

He wished he could fill himself with the beanpods the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything to eat.

At last he came to his senses and said, ‘All my father’s hired workers have more than they can eat, and here I am about to starve! I will get up and go to my father and say, Father, I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired workers.’ So he got up and started back to his father.

He was still a long way from home when his father saw him; his heart was filled with compassion for him, and he ran, threw his arms around his son, and kissed him... (Luke 15).

It’s a wonderful story that Jesus told about God’s constant love for us, and his constant willingness to forgive us. In spite of all that the younger son has done to hurt him, the father keeps a constant look out for his son, ever waiting for him to return. In fact, one well-known pastor, Helmut Thielicke, calls this “the parable of the waiting Father”.

The father, in Jesus’ story, is always out there on the verandah, so to speak, looking and waiting for the son for return..... And Jesus wants us to understand that *this is a picture of God*: God is our loving Father, who is always there for us, always willing to throw His arms around us and to forgive us....

How different, by the way, is the Hollywood version of this parable!! In Steven Spielberg’s film *The Color Purple*, it is the wayward child who constantly reaches out to the father and who constantly tries to win the father’s affection and forgiveness. I

don't know if you remember much about this movie....

It's a movie based on Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize winning novel of the same name, and it's all about the life story of a negro girl, Celie, played by Whoopi Goldberg, and how she is separated from her sister Nettie.

There are many sub-plots, though, and one is about the preacher's daughter, Shug ("Sugar") Avery, who leaves home and becomes a blues singer and, I guess you would say, a fairly 'loose woman' so far as her relationships with men are concerned. Her father who is the preacher is heartbroken by his prodigal daughter's actions, and he steadfastly refuses to have anything to do with her. A number of times in the film, Shug Avery tries to reach out to her father and to return to her father's affections, but each time he rebuffs her.

Finally, at the very end of the film, Shug is singing in the bar down the street from her father's church, and she hears the choir in the church singing "*Speak to me, Lord*", a song that she herself sang in the choir in her childhood. So she joins in singing this song, and goes down the street with heaps of other prodigals, all singing this song. She enters the church where her father is preaching on the parable of the prodigal son and saying:

All of us have been Prodigal children at one time or another. And I tell you children, it is possible for the Lord to drive you home, and he will fix it for you if you trust him....

She goes down the length of the aisle and reaches out to her father, who is scowling at her. She hugs him, and says to him, "See Daddy, sinners have souls too". Her preacher father initially doesn't respond, but eventually he is won over by his daughter, and he in turn hugs his daughter....

This Hollywood portrayal of Jesus' story, though, misses the

main point of Jesus' parable. In Jesus' version, the father doesn't scowl at the child, or refuse to have anything to do with the child, or have to be won over by the child: he is there waiting for the child to return, waiting to wrap his loving, forgiving arms around the child.

As one writer puts it in relation to all this:

By making a sinner the magnanimous hero, Hollywood dodges the scandal of grace. In truth, what blocks forgiveness is not God's reticence...but ours. What blocks forgiveness is not God's refusal to act, but ours! God's arms are always extended; we are the ones who turn away (Philip Yancy, "Forgiving Bold Sinners" in *ON BEING*, March '94, p.9).

Where does all this leave us? With the choice: to turn to God for mercy and forgiveness, as we look at ourselves and our sin; or to rationalise our sin, and to turn away from God in defiance. We can enjoy the all-embracing hug of our Father, God, or we can languish in the pig-pen and try to make a life there, amidst the squalor and dirt and filth that is there.

I like the cartoon that is on the Powerpoint slide (*On Being*, March '94, p. 9). It sort of sums up the option of turning away from God: people, who do it, think that they are carving out the good life for themselves, but compared to the joy of being in the Father's arms, they are living in a pig pen.

Perhaps I should give a practical example, too, of all that I've been talking about. It comes from Philip Yancey's book *What's So Amazing About Grace*. Philip Yancey writes:

Not long ago, I sat in a restaurant and listened to yet another variation on a familiar theme. A good friend of mine, whom I'll call Daniel, confided that he had decided to leave his wife after 15 years of marriage. He had found someone younger and prettier, someone who "makes me feel alive, like I haven't felt in years".

Daniel, a Christian, knew the personal and moral consequences of what he was about to do. His decision to leave would inflict permanent damage on his wife and three children. Even so, he said, the force pulling him toward the younger woman was too strong to resist.

I listened to his story with sadness and grief. Then, during the dessert course, he dropped the bombshell: “The reason I wanted to see you tonight was to ask you a question. Do you think God can forgive something as awful as I am about to do?”

Philip Yancey said that he pondered the question for a while and then said to his friend:

Here is what I told my friend Daniel: “Can God forgive you? Of course. Read your Bible. David, Peter, Paul – God builds his church on the backs of people who murder, commit adultery, deny Him and persecute his followers.

But because of Christ, forgiveness is now our problem, not God’s. What we have to go through to commit sin distances us from God – we change in the very act of rebellion – and there is no guarantee we will come back. You ask me about forgiveness now, but will you even want it later, especially if it involves repentance?”

And Philip Yancey adds:

Several months after our conversation, Daniel made his choice *to leave his wife and go off with the young lady*. I have yet to see any evidence of repentance. Now he tends to rationalise his decision as a way of escaping an unhappy marriage. He has rejected most of his Christian friends – “Too narrow-minded”, he says – and looks instead for people who celebrate his new found liberation.

To me, though, Daniel does not seem very liberated. The

price of his 'freedom' has meant turning his back on those who cared about him most. He also tells me *that* God is not a part of his life right now. "Maybe later", he says (*What's So Amazing*, p. 179-180; cf. *On Being*, March '94, p.9)

Conclusion:

The psalm writer, in this psalm, turns to God in repentance and says:

**You do not want sacrifices,
or I would offer them;
you are not pleased with burnt-offerings.
My sacrifice is a humble spirit, O God;
you will not reject a humble and repentant heart
(or as another translation puts it:
a heart that is broken and crushed, you would not
despise, O God)**

No, God will certainly not reject "a humble and repentant heart". He certainly won't reject broken people, people who in remorse for what they've done or failed to do, cry out to Him for mercy and for forgiveness. He forgives us for Jesus' sake, who on the cross took all the punishment that we deserve for our sins.