**Psalm 51:10-17,19** May 31, 2020

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Pentecost Sunday

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Renew My Spirit, O Holy Spirit!**

I’m not very good at riddles. I just can’t figure them out. I am so bad at riddles that 40 years later I can clearly remember one of the only times I figured one out. It was a Saturday morning watching the *Superfriends* cartoon. You know, in the living room in my pajamas with my eight-year-old brother. The Riddler had three riddles for Batman and Robin or else the world would fall under the rule of the Legion of Doom. Batman and Robin figured out the first two riddles. But the third one—they just couldn’t crack it. But I figured it out. I had it figured out before Batman did. I could have saved the world faster than the Superfriends! I was pretty happy about that.

Whether you solve riddles or not, thinking about riddles makes you see things in different ways. You realize new truths. Our Bible reading today has a divine riddle. When you put verses 16 and 19 of our reading side by side, they just don’t make sense. They are a riddle. ***“16You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings… 19Then there will be righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight you.”*** Did you get the contradiction, the riddle? The believer says to God, “You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it,” then he says, “There will be… offerings to delight you.” So, does God want sacrifices or not?

In matters of doctrine, right biblical teaching, Psalm 51 is one of the most important psalms. It covers the core issues of our faith. It addresses sin’s filth, God’s free forgiveness and our joyful response to God. The Holy Spirit prompted King David to write this psalm at an especially teachable moment in his life.

King David had recently been through an adulterous affair. And like most philanderers who have at least a little bit of a conscience, King David tried to cover it up. In the process of the coverup, he piled up one sin after another. How could he get away with it? Well, after David killed off the woman’s husband, everyone just kind of looked the other way. Finally, after about a year, God sent a prophet to knock on David’s door. Pointing at the king the prophet said, *“You are the man! This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says… ‘The sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me’”* (1 Samuel 12:1-10).

Then David—You know what people with power are like, right?—then King David did something which perhaps no other king in the entire history of the world has done. Without threats, without protest, without excuse, David meekly said, *“I have sinned against the Lord.”* You know what the prophet said? *“The Lord has taken away your sin.”*

That whole cycle of sin, covering up, guilt, shame, sorrow over sin, forgiveness and a calling to a new life, that is the occasion for, and it is all wrapped up in this Fifty-First Psalm. In here-and-now terms it is what you feel when the best friend whom you have betrayed, looks at you and says, “I forgive you” and she gives you a great big hug and you both start crying. Or if you are guys, you just shake hands, can’t quite look each other in the eye, and start talking sports.

David has gone through an emotional washing machine on spin cycle. He has felt the frantic worry of a cover up, the depression of living a lie, the oppression of a guilty conscience, the resignation of being found out. And then he felt the unexpected: the joy of acceptance by a forgiving God.

That place of joy, that’s where our reading starts today in verse 10:

***[Read the text]***

In his now forgiven soul, David is sick of his sinfulness. He is just sick of it. Earlier in the psalm he declared something we repeat at the baptism of every infant, *“Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”* He knows about himself what no one wants to say about humanity: No, we are not basically good. No one. Not me, not you, not anyone. We’re not even morally neutral. We are *“sinful from birth!”* (5). On the other hand, David knows what God wants: *“You desire truth in the inner parts”* (6). God wants not just someone who toes the line, but someone so pure that he doesn’t even *think* bad *thoughts*. *“You desire truth in the inner parts.”* It is a hopeless situation.

You have felt that hopelessness. I don’t know what it is for you, but each of us has a weakness, a sin we are nearly powerless against. The sort of temptation that I fall into and then afterwards I kick myself saying, “That was dumb. That was really, really dumb. I shouldn’t have done it.” I hate it so much I am angry with myself and clench my first in determination to not fall for Satan’s bait next time. Pretty soon I find myself again flirting with temptation, imagining that this time I am wiser and stronger and won’t be so stupid—only I am. And the whole cycle continues. If you imagine that you don’t have such a weakness, there is a biblical proverb for you, *“Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him”* (Proverbs 26:12). And David knew it. He, king of Israel, realized that on his own he was powerless before sin.

So, in the joy of forgiveness for past sins, instead of trusting himself to do better this next time David prays, ***“Create in me a pure heart, O God.”*** The Hebrew word there for “create” is a special word. This Hebrew word is a word for things that only God can do. ***“Create in me a pure heart, O God”*** means, “I don’t have a pure heart, and I can’t make myself have one. I might be able to stabilize my blood sugar levels by healthy eating and exercise. But I can’t make this sinful corrupted human heart into a pure heart.” This isn’t a “God and me” thing. This is a “God alone” thing. ***“Create in me a pure heart, O God. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.’”***

At this point in the psalm and on this day of Pentecost we are reminded that heart matters are the territory of God the Holy Spirit. God has revealed himself to us in the Bible as One God in Three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (If someone says that this doesn’t make sense, I agree. But that is how God has revealed himself, and since the Creator of the universe just might be a little bigger than the space between my ears, I am going to listen to what he says.)

Anyway, in speaking of the three persons of the Trinity, our confirmands have had it drilled into their heads that the special work of God the Father is Creation, the special work of God the Son is Redemption (buying us back from sin), and the special work of the Holy Spirit is Sanctification (that is, making our hearts holy). The Holy Spirit’s work of making our hearts holy breaks up into two parts—bringing us to saving faith, and then after giving us saving faith he gives us a heart that wants to do what God wants.

The first part of the Holy Spirit’s work was on display in our reading from Acts. When those unschooled disciples spoke all kinds of languages and the awe-struck crowd said, *“We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”* the Holy Spirit was at work. The important part wasn’t that the disciples were talking in other languages. (This is where some Christians go off the deep end.) The important part is that they were *“declaring the wonders of God.”* If they had been talking philosophy in perfect Greek or military genius in fluent Latin, those miraculously given languages wouldn’t have saved anyone. The Holy Spirit gave those languages so that they could share the message of Jesus. On that day, 3,000 believed. As a Bible passage that the confirmands will soon recite states, *“No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit”* (1 Cor 12:3). That’s the Holy Spirit’s work of sanctification.

When the Holy Spirit creates saving faith in Jesus as our Savior from sin, our completely filthy hearts are invaded by the light of God. Yet the Holy Spirit did not only airdrop in to blow the doors off our spiritual prison cells. He reached into those cells and grabbed us by the hand to guide us on the long road to our spiritual homeland. As long as we live in this world, our sinful nature persists, doing battle with the Holy Spirit’s new creation in us. So the Holy Spirit teaches us so that we remain in the faith. He strengthens us with God’s Word and the sacrament. He energizes us to do what God wants.

When we pray to God the Holy Spirit to create a pure heart in us, he creates right desires within us. We have the ***“joy of salvation.”*** We have ***“a willing spirit”*** within us. Our mouths ***“declare [God’s] praise”*** and ***“teach transgressors [God’s] ways, [so that] sinners will turn back [to God].”***

This solves the riddle of our text. Remember the riddle about the sacrifices? ***“You do not delight in sacrifice… Then there will be whole burnt offerings to delight you.”*** The answer is: “It’s not about the offerings. It’s about the heart.” When the Holy Spirit has worked in the heart to do what God wants out of a joyful thankfulness, then any and every offering is pleasing to God, whether a briefcase full of cash or an impoverished widow’s two pence. Without a right and humble heart, anything we do is worthless. The verse that I left out of the riddle makes that clear, ***“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise”*** (17). When have walked the path that David trod, through sin and sorrow, faith and forgiveness, we have that broken and contrite heart.

One of the most moving uses of this psalm happened in the reign of another king. It was King Henry VIII of England. King Henry’s chancellor, Sir Thomas More, had a falling out with King Henry. (And if you know anything about Henry VIII, falling out with him could be very bad for your health.) Sir Thomas wouldn’t approve of the king’s wife shopping and all the fallout from it. Finally, the king sentenced Sir Thomas to execution by decapitation. After a year in prison, a weakened Sir Thomas ascended the scaffold. He knelt and recited the *Miserere,* this Fifty-First Psalm: “Have mercy on me, O God… Wash me and I will be whiter than snow… Create in me a pure heart, O God… Take [not] your Holy Spirit from me… Restore to me the joy of your salvation.” When he finished, the executioner begged Sir Thomas’ pardon, then More rose up merrily, kissed the executioner and gave him forgiveness. Then he knelt down again, and his life was over. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\_More)

That is the sort of thing you have to digest. But to pray it and live at your moment of execution? It does make me want to pray to the Holy Spirit for a pure heart. When I think about all the little things that discourage me, my frivolous reasons for complaint, my petty excuses for sin, all the things in my life that are not worthy of my Savior, it makes me pray as we shall soon sing, ***“Create in me a pure heart, O God… take [not] your Holy Spirit from me.”*** Amen.