

Create in Me a Clean Heart

Psalm 51:1-12

March 17, 2024 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

I wonder if you remember A. Whitney Brown, a cast member from Saturday Night Live, back in the 1980s. These days I can't stay awake late enough to watch SNL, but back in the 80s I could still manage a late night sometimes, if my children went to bed on time. Anyway, back then, A. Whitney Brown said this: "Any good history book is mainly just a long list of mistakes, complete with names and dates. It's very embarrassing!"

A long list of mistakes, with names and dates.

I wonder if that is what God sees, when God looks at us. As much as I wish it were not so, I know it would be hard to miss some of my mistakes, if God is looking closely at my life. I can certainly remember them. There was that time back in the fourth grade when I drew a picture of a villain in art class, and I labeled it "V I L L I A N," Villian. The boy on the front row pointed at me and laughed. I can still feel my cheeks burning.

Or the time in maybe sixth grade when I was playing right field in softball and was so proud of myself that I caught the ball on the third bounce. I didn't know I had to throw it back to the infield to get the out. My teammates were screaming at me, but I couldn't hear what they were saying, all the way out there in the outfield. I was so embarrassed that I quit playing softball after that. Or any sport. Ever.

I have made some pretty big mistakes as an adult, too – some whoppers, actually, though I won't go into details here this morning. My whole life, a long list of mistakes, with names and dates. Is that how God sees us?

Certainly, the psalmist thinks so. This psalm is traditionally attributed to King David, written after he commits rape and murder. He thinks he has gotten away with all that, until the prophet Nathan confronts him with a story of a man who had many sheep and cattle of his own but still stole a perfect lamb, the only lamb the neighbor possessed. David is incensed. "As surely as the Lord lives," says David, "this man must die." "You are the man," Nathan replies. And suddenly, David sees himself through God's eyes. Rape and murder - those are really big mistakes, Capital S Sins, in need of a different order of forgiveness than most of us require.

But none of us is without the need of God's healing at some point, even for big mistakes – hurts we have inflicted on others, commitments we have failed to keep, hearts that are sometimes two sizes too small. We are all in need of God's grace. We all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Fortunately for us, this psalm is not so much about who we are, about our need for forgiveness and grace. It is much more about who God is. It begins, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin." Did you catch that description of God? God is the one who shows steadfast love and mercy, the one who washes us clean.

And what does God require of us for this forgiveness? The psalm says God desires truth in our inward being and a broken and contrite heart. There is no cheap grace here. We cannot order up forgiveness in

the drive-through lane, along with our burger and fries. No, the scripture says that we have to do the hard work of confronting ourselves honestly and admitting what we have done wrong. That could be a long list of mistakes, with names and dates. It will be embarrassing. But that is what God requires of us. The fresh start, the transformed life, the new creation that God offers requires an honest accounting of the past and willingness to take ownership of all the ways that we are in need of God's grace.

This Lenten season is the perfect time for that accounting. As we approach the cross, and the great good news of new and renewed life on Easter morning, we need to come with clean hearts and to know that we have been washed clean of all that is past.

I asked earlier if God looks at our lives and sees just a long list of embarrassing mistakes, one after another. Certainly, God can see all of them. But the Bible tells us that God looks at us with eyes of love, willing us toward transformed lives, toward whole and holy lives, worthy of our calling as children of God.

I would guess that for most of us this morning, this sermon has caused an uncomfortable memory or two to bubble up, something we have tried to keep tamped down, a mistake from our past that we would rather just forget. That is the memory that needs God's grace the most. We always try to put our best foot forward, but it is the other one that needs washing.

So let us come now before Almighty God, offering our confession silently, trusting in God's grace.

*[long silence]*

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Friends, hear and believe the good news: We are forgiven!

Thanks be to God!