

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
March 5, 2014
Lee Hanssen
Ash Wednesday Meditation
Psalm 51**

Good evening, everybody. My name is Lee Hanssen and I serve on staff here as the Director of Student Ministries. It's been a big year for me, like a *really* big year. I knew it was a big year and so I wanted to sit down and think about it in an intentional way. I took out a pen and a piece of paper and wrote down all the things that have happened to me or that I've walked through in the past 12 months and I want to share a few of them with you. I got married. I officiated my grandpa's funeral. I got promoted. I've continued to pursue my master's in grad school. I built a house. I've had three different bosses. I've tried to learn to be a good husband, all on top of working my regular job. You might imagine that I'm a little on edge.

I was talking with my wife the other day and she asked me what I was going to give up for Lent. When I thought about it, I thought, I'm going to give up being such a jerk for Lent. I don't know if you're like me, but does anyone else in the room totally lose themselves and get violently angry with customer service people on the phone? Anybody, or am I alone? There are a couple of you. Thank you for being brave. I don't know what it is. Maybe it's because they don't know I'm a pastor. They can't tell Crosby on me.

Well, it kind of backfired a couple of days ago. I got a call from my cable company. I had moved. I told you I built a house and lucky me, I get to pay rent on the lease on the other apartment while we're living in our new house, and Comcast called and told me I had to return my cable box. This set me off. I'm thinking, "I paid you \$200 to come to my house and set it up. Then I paid you \$200 a month so I could watch TV and be on the internet, and you want me to drive to Eagan - who lives in Eagan - to drop off my cable box?" And so I told her, "I'm not doing it. You can bill me or you're going to need to come and pick this thing up." I don't think she had ever really had that response before because she said, "I need to call you back."

A couple of days later, my phone rings and I get a call from this gentleman named Dave. Dave was very kind, very gentle, very humble as I explained my predicament. I said, "You're going to need to pick this thing up." He said, "Well, where do you live?" I told him where I lived and he said, "You know, I happen to drive by there all the time, so why don't you bring it to your house and I'll swing by and pick it up." I said, "Great, not a problem."

So I was supposed to leave it there at my house this morning for Dave to pick up, and I get in my car and what's still in my back seat as I pull into Starbuck's? My cable box. So I call Dave and say, "Dave, I'm so sorry. I totally blew it. I forgot and my cable box is in my back seat." Once again Dave very graciously says, "Well, Lee, where do you work?" I said, "Christ Presbyterian Church" and he said, "No kidding!" I said, "Yeah, no kidding." He said, "Well, it's funny because I have driven by that place 100 times and I've always wanted to come in and never have." I said,

“Well, Dave, today happens to be Ash Wednesday and I’m actually preaching. Would you like to come?” So Dave came to the noon service. He picked up my cable box, and God continues to humble me and redeem the ugly, broken areas of my life and for that I’m so grateful. This is a true story.

But, really, as I think about the whole of what this last year has looked like and the way I’ve spent my time and the things I’ve given my energy to, my heart is a little sad because as my schedule has gotten busier and busier, I’ve started to sleep in a little bit longer and pray a little bit less. The time I used to spend sitting with Jesus and fellowshiping in the Word with the God I love and serve has been replaced with answering a few more emails and reading a few more pages in my textbooks. I remember seasons of my life where I have had this deep dependence on Jesus, but this past year hasn’t really been one of those seasons. Decision by decision, I slowly took Jesus off the throne of my heart and replaced Him with my own competency, my own capacity, my own abilities, and the gifts that He gave me.

Just yesterday I kind of fell apart. I ended up in John Mitchell’s office, he is one of my bosses, and I was literally in tears, waving my white flag, going, “John, I can’t do this any more. I can’t keep up with all these things. I’m tired of trying so hard. I can’t do it.” Just yesterday my humanity stared me right back in the face and I was reminded of how broken I am and how lost I’ve gotten. It didn’t happen all at once and I didn’t do it on purpose and I didn’t even know I was doing it, but over this past year, what I’ve been telling God by the way I spend my time is, “I know better than You.” By my lack of prayer I’ve been suggesting to God, “I don’t really need You. I’ve got this!” My desire to achieve and perform and my deep need for perfection continues to reveal how little I understand of what it means that God is fully pleased in the simple fact that I am His beloved son.

Sin is a weird and twisted thing and as I thought about it, I realized that there are two types of sinners. There are those who think they are really not all that bad. You don’t swear. You don’t chew. You don’t hang out with people who do. You’ve got a squeaky clean résumé. You’ve probably never been in jail but your thought process is tainted with judgment and pride and arrogance. Then there is the other type of sinner. Those of us who know we are sinners because we can’t hide it and our lives look a little bit messier than everybody else’s. Our grades are tanking. Our families are falling apart. Some of us wear our sin on our sleeves.

I think it’s really easy when you are on either side to point a finger at the other and label them the sinner, isn’t it? But if you think about it, it really makes no difference whether you wear it on your sleeve or you carefully manage your life so that no one can see it, because whether you spend your time in holy huddles or you hang out with the drunks and prostitutes, each and every single one of us is left in the same human condition. We are broken, messy, sinful people and each and every single one of us, deeply and desperately needs to experience redemption that comes through knowing Jesus Christ. I want you to sit with that for a minute, really let that in. This isn’t about him or her or the one sitting next to you or the person you are thinking about you wish was here. This is for you and this is for me. This is for us. We are all on a level playing field when it comes to sin.

One of my favorite spiritual authors, Brennan Manning, says this. He says, “At Sunday worship, as in every dimension of our existence, many of us pretend to believe we are sinners. Consequently, all we can do is pretend we have been forgiven. As a result, our whole spiritual life is pseudo-repentance and pseudo-bliss.” Another one of my favorite authors, Ruth Haley

Barton, says this about Lent and Ash Wednesday and the season we are walking into. She says, "The Lenten season often gets reduced to the question, 'What are you giving up for Lent?' This is a fine question but it can only take us so far. The real question of the Lenten season is, 'How will I repent and return to God with all my heart?'" Not, what am I going to give up but how am I going to repent and return to God with all of my heart?

My friends, in order for us to repent, we have to first, grasp, internalize, and accept the reality that we are sinful, broken people who deeply need Jesus. It is funny to me how much energy and time I spend hiding and managing my sin. I love this day and I love this service because today we all agree that we are messed up. Today, even if it is just for one day as we bear a cross of ashes on our foreheads, our outsides will match our insides as we collectively come together to identify our humanity and our need to return to God and allow Jesus to reclaim His rightful place on the throne of our hearts.

There is a guy in the Bible whom I love to talk about. His name is David. Many of you know him. The Bible describes him as a man after God's own heart. I love David because he reminds me a lot of myself. He does a lot of really stupid stuff but he really, genuinely loves Jesus and loves God with all of his heart. David got pretty messed up and he got pretty far off. He slowly put himself on the throne of his heart and took God off. He found himself in a desperate place and wrote one of the most beautiful Psalms, one of the most beautiful cries to God that comes from such a deep and earnest place in his soul. I'm going to read it to you today. It's Psalm 51. David says this.

1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. **2** Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! **3** For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. **4** Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment. **5** Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. **6** Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart. **7** Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow . . . **10** Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. **11** Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. **12** Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. **13** Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

Some of you know that the Book of Psalms is actually a book of songs to be sung back to the Lord. That's how they have been traditionally practiced. Maybe, like me, you sometimes sing songs and don't really think about the words or know what they mean. For years there was a hymn I sang that all of you know and I had no idea what the origin was. The hymn is *It is Well with My Soul*. When you understand what led to that beautiful song, it changes everything. It takes it to a whole other place in our hearts. The guy who wrote that song, Horatio Spafford, was suffering horribly. He was in terrible financial ruin. He had just lost his four daughters in a horrible accident when their ship sank and they went down in it. He received a telegram from his wife that said, "Saved alone." Horatio boarded a ship to meet his grieving wife and as it was passing the area where the ship had sunk and his daughters had died, the captain let him know and he penned the words of that song. In his grief, out of his pain and his misery, he was able to say these words about death.

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

I don't know what it takes to write something like that and the pain that goes into penning those words and ascribing to God that "it is well with my soul" in the midst of the deepest, darkest hour, but when we understand all that led up to that hymn, it changes things. David's Psalm is beautiful in and of itself, David's cry for mercy and his honesty before God is a beautiful thing but in the same way, if we don't understand the story that leads up to David writing it, it doesn't go quite to the place I think it should.

David was the king of all of Israel, over all of God's people. He had had a big year and so on this particular day he decided that instead of going out to war with his army, he was going to stay at home and get some rest. In the midst of that process, David got captivated by his lust and his sexual desire took over. He saw a woman and he sent for her. And because he was the king and he could, he forcefully slept with this woman. A couple of weeks later, probably not as David had planned, Bathsheba comes back and tells him she is pregnant. Now what? Instead of doing the right thing and stopping it right there, David's sin continued to tug at his heart and pull him deeper. One thing led to another and he thought, "Why don't I bring her husband home from the war?" So David brought Uriah, her husband, home and got him wasted, got him drunk, and tried to get him to have sex with his wife so that everyone would think it was *his* kid. But Uriah wouldn't have it. He said, "While my men and my brothers are out at war, I'm not going to come home and sleep with my wife." Things continued to not go like David wanted and instead of doing the right thing, David's sin continued to pull him deeper. He told the leaders, the generals of his army, "I want you to put Uriah on the front lines of the battle and let him die." David committed murder.

Fast forward a couple of weeks later after David continued to not listen time after time after time, God in His grace and mercy sent a prophet to speak a word into David's life. That is what brought David to write this Psalm. When we know how deep and dark the hour was that David was experiencing when he wrote this Psalm, it changes things.

The Psalms paint overarching theological themes and principles. They let us know big pictures of who God is and hold timeless truths, true back then, true today, and true for the rest of time. I want to suggest three of those truths today. First and foremost, I think in this Psalm, one of the things that sticks out to me is that **we so clearly see God's character** in this cry to the Lord. It was this confidence that David had about knowing and trusting God that allowed him, at rock bottom in the midst of a horribly tough time, to know and seek and claim God's complete and total forgiveness. Think about David's list: murderer, adulterer, liar. In the middle of that, David was able to come to God and say, "Cleanse me thoroughly. Wash me. Make me whiter than snow." What audacity!

What did David know about God's character that I don't because I'm not very good at that? Maybe you're like me and when I sin, especially when I blow it big time, I have this weird thing I do. It's kind of like I want to punish myself because I think if I walk around in guilt enough and if I'm hard enough on myself, then God will know that I'm really sorry. Like I can add to what Jesus has already finished on the cross! I think that's one of Satan's greatest tools about sin in our lives. He wants to heap on the shaming. He wants to heap on the guilt and keep us in

anxiety and fear and isolation, but that's not God's desire. God's desire is not that we would carelessly or recklessly come to Him without realizing and taking account what we have done. He wants us to come to Him with confidence that there is nothing, not one thing that we can do that He would not forgive if we come to a place of true repentance, not one thing. We cannot sin our way out of God's love. I love the picture of God's character in this Psalm. I don't want us to be half-alive believers, walking around in darkness, wallowing in our shame and guilt and pain. I want us to be people who have an accurate view of who God is because that affects how we relate to Him and how we relate to each other and the world. I want us to know enough about who God is to know that our loving Father will embrace us and accept us as we come to Him in our brokenness. David had an accurate picture of God's character.

The second thing I love about this Psalm is that I think **David models for us what it looks like to truly repent and take responsibility**. Listen to what David says.

4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight 5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.

David had a hard list to own, a really ugly list, but he fully owned it. Think about all that had happened in his life. Think about all the excuses that David could have come up with. "It is tough to be the King of Israel." "It was *her* fault." "You don't know what it's like to be me." He could have sung so many excuses. He could have pointed so many fingers but he didn't. He owned what he had done and accepted responsibility. I think about how little I do this. I think about when my sweet wife comes to me and gently calls me out when I've been a jerk and done something mean or rude or insensitive. She will say something like, "Lee, when you did this, it really hurt my feelings." And do you know what my response often is, my Godly mature response? "Yeah, well, *you* did this and you did this and this and this. And when you said this, that hurt me, too." How mean! And why is it our response to blame-shift and to point fingers? Who does that? I don't want to do that! But David doesn't do that in this Psalm. He accepts responsibility for what he did and he truly gets to a place of repentance.

I love that David repents for the right reasons. I love how he says, "God, against You and You only have I sinned." What broke David's heart was getting to a place where he knew he broke God's heart. I love that picture. "God, against you and you only have I sinned." So often I'm sorry because I don't like how I feel or I'm sorry because I want the situation to change or I want the circumstance to look a little bit different. Rarely do I repent and rarely am I sorry because I've grieved God's heart, but I think that's genuine repentance and that's the type of repentance that leads to obedience and fellowship. David truly repented and accepted responsibility.

The last thing I love about this Psalm is that **we see a beautiful picture of God's gracious gift to us**. In the midst of hard times, in the midst of sin when we turn our backs, God continues to move toward us. When you know the story, you see how many opportunities, time after time after time, David had to do the right thing. You see how he cried out for help and how many opportunities he had to turn back to God and again and again and again, he chose not to. Yet God in His grace and His steadfast love and abundant mercy sends David a prophet to speak into his life, to bring him back into reconciliation and fellowship and a right relationship with Himself. What a gracious gift!

A couple of weeks ago one of my favorite musicians Matt Redman tweeted, "God never grows tired of extending His mercy. We grow weary of seeking it." There is this Hebrew idea, this

Hebrew phrase, *qal wahomer*. It is a type of argument that literally means *lesser to greater*, but an easier way to understand it is the idea of *how much more?* Jesus used this form of argument all the time when He was trying to help people understand what God is like, when He wanted to clarify God's character as a heavenly Father to His people. There are numerous examples of it in the New Testament. Here are a couple.

11 If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! [Matthew 7:11]

If you in your wickedness and brokenness, in your sin, can give your child a good gift, how much more must your Father in heaven be able to bless you with good gifts.

26 Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? [Matthew 6:26]

If you see how the birds and the sparrows in the field are provided for, how much more must God the Father love and provide for you. This idea that Jesus used to describe God's character took a place in my heart a couple of years ago as I was watching my nephews. I've got three five-year-old nephews and they are everything that little boys should be. They are naughty and funny and loud and obnoxious and I love them. One time one of my nephews went into my bathroom and thought it would be a really good idea to take all of my toiletries, everything from my toothbrush to my deodorant and everything in between, and fill my toilet with them. It didn't turn out well. We had to call the plumber and it cost hundreds of dollars. It was not a good thing, but I will never forget when my little nephew came to me. He wouldn't look me in the eyes and hung his head and mumbled under his breath, "I'm sowwy." My heart sank in that moment and I grabbed his face and looked at him said, "Ayden, what you did was wrong but I love you and I forgive you. You don't have to hang your head or hide from me. You can look me in the face." My heart just went out to him.

I wanted him to know that I loved him and assure him that what he did was wrong but it didn't change the way I viewed him. If I in my sin and my humanity am able to move toward a nephew like that, how much more must the God of infinite mercy and abundant steadfast love be able to forgive us and desire to move toward us as we come to Him, broken and full of repentance, yearning to be restored in fellowship with Him? In that moment, I experienced this idea of *qal wahomer*, how much more?

I love how David ends Psalm 51. He says,

12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. **13** Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

The good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that God doesn't look at our messiness and wash His hands of us. He doesn't turn His back to us. Instead He offers the world the most costly sacrifice we will ever know in the death of Jesus, who through the power of His resurrection defeated death and paid for our sin. My hope for us this Lenten season is that we can cling to that and that we sinners would repent and believe that God is not done with us yet

We created a devotional that we'll be passing out as you leave today. I would love for you to walk through it these next 40-some days to get in touch with where our lives intersect with the Gospel, taking God's simple truths and applying them deeper in our lives. As we do, we can allow God to paint an accurate picture of who He is and what His character is like. The more we grow in our relationship with God, the easier it becomes to turn back to Him when we wander and stray. Please pick one up as you leave today.

Let me pray.

God, would You do this Psalm in us? Would You do this Psalm amongst us? As we enter into an intentional season of examining ourselves and partnering with Your Spirit, fully restore our relationship with You, God. Would You meet us where we're at? Thanks, God, that You really are gracious and full of steadfast love and mercy. We cling to that as we come to You. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.