

Divine Liturgy of the Wretched Exiles

Psalm 32

¹Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

²Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

³While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.

⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah

⁵Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah

⁶Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.

⁷You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. Selah

⁸I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

⁹Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you.

¹⁰Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.

¹¹Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Introduction

'The Divine Liturgy of the Wretched Exiles'. I love this title. Let's go through the meaning of this phrase:

Divine = sacred, holy

Liturgy = form of public worship

Wretched = depraved, broken, miserable

Exiles = those banished from their native land

I love this title, but it's not mine. It's a worship album recorded by a group of Christians in Philadelphia who live, work, and play together in a community called the Simple Way. A few years ago a group of college students were made aware of a 'disturbance' in the city. You see, a few homeless families were found living inside an abandoned church, and the city was making plans to kick them out, or arrest them for trespassing. So these idealistic college kids thought about a Christian response to what was going on there. They studied the Scriptures. They consulted with their professors. And they decided to try and help the homeless families. After all, as one sign read on the front door of the church, 'how can we worship a homeless man on Sunday, and ignore him on Monday?'

This group eventually felt called to live amongst the poor and ostracized of the Kensington neighborhood and help name a movement which is now called the 'New Monastic' movement. These are intentional communities of people around the world who have decided to simply follow Jesus; rich and poor, young and old, people of all different colors and families—the **wretched** exiles.

And these 'wretched exiles' recorded some of their worship music to share with the world; much of this music would not be considered 'suitable' for good righteous and proper churches. The songs do not lift up beautiful images of peace and tranquility that we so often associate Christianity with. Instead, the music chooses to use some other images and words that we often gloss over...those of the psalms.

A man by the name of Shane Claiborne is one of the members of the Simple Way Community. In his book, 'The Irresistible Revolution,' he writes about this conflict within Christianity between wanting to be **beautiful**, and on the other side **admitting our wretchedness**:

The gospel is good news for sick people and is disturbing for those who think they've got it all together. Some of us have been told our whole lives that we are wretched, but the gospel reminds us that we are beautiful. Others of us have been told our whole lives that we are beautiful, but the gospel reminds us that we are also wretched. The church is a place where we can stand up and say we are wretched, and everyone will nod and agree and remind us that we are also beautiful.

One thing I've learned from believers and from activists alike is that community can be built around a common self-righteousness or around a common brokenness. Both are magnetic. People are drawn toward folks who have it all together, or who look like they do. People are also drawn toward folks who **know they don't** have it all together and are not willing to fake it.

Christianity can be built around isolating ourselves from evildoers and sinners, creating a community of religious piety and moral purity. That's the Christianity I grew up with.

Christianity can also be built around joining with the broken sinners and evildoers of our world crying out to God, groaning for grace. That's the Christianity I have fallen in love with.

(pause)

And it is with this understanding that we begin the Lenten journey to the cross this morning.

We begin this journey with Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, and we begin with the words of the psalmist, or the ancient songwriter, confessing his brokenness, and in effect our brokenness, to God in prayer.

How many of us pray? I want us to think about our prayer life today as we meditate upon this text. How many of us have GREAT prayer lives? How many of us would classify our prayers as 'average'? And how many of us pray like we were taught in Sunday School some years ago, and really struggle with the whole idea of prayer? Well you're not alone.

It's hard to pray. Or at least we make it out to sound like it should be hard. In church we often hear these long, eloquent, theologically and scripturally grounded prayers. Often times in worship we leave these sorts of things to the seminary trained pastors. Or maybe if in a pinch, we rely on the elders to 'deliver' the prayer...as if it is some mysterious package that only a few are able to deliver to God.

Praying seems tough!

And to make things even tougher, we begin the season of Lent where we are called to 'draw close' to God in prayer, in study, in sacrifice and penance, or confession. The problem and question for most people, however, is 'how do I do this?' And instead, we find most people taking on the historical tradition of giving something up for Lent...which may last a few days. At least we can understand the idea of giving something up. But the question remains: how does this draw one closer to God this season?

We can't seem to win. We want to follow God in our lives, but we just don't know where or how to start. **We are the wretched.** We are the broken people.

Scripture

The psalmist understood this wretchedness. And he writes about it.

Psalms 32 is about sin. It's about brokenness. And at the very beginning it talks about being...happy? Now, I'm not sure about you, but the idea of sin was never anything that brought emotions of happiness about.

But this is the difference between the psalmist and how we view Christianity today which Shane Claiborne mentioned earlier. While many times in our lives we are so fearful of admitting our brokenness, of admitting we don't have all the answers, the psalmist embraces this brokenness as a way to draw closer to God.

⁵Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,” and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah

You notice the word ‘Selah’ at the end of the verse. This was meant to be a pause, or a breath, in the ancient song. And it fits so well in this circumstance. Here we are, acknowledging our sins to God. Then by God’s grace we are forgiven—and we can breathe deeply once again.

Response

When we acknowledge our wretchedness to God, we tear down the walls of piety, of righteousness, or purity, and we can only then begin an honest relationship with our Lord.

There is a method of teaching called catechism within the church. How many of us remember such things? The idea is that we learn the basic teachings of Christianity through question and answer formats. This is the **SECOND** question within the Heidelberg Catechism, written in 1562.

The first one is about our identity as belonging to God. The second question is this:

Q. 2. How many things must you know that you may live and die in the blessedness of this comfort?

A. Three. First, the greatness of my sin and wretchedness. Second, how I am freed from all my sins and their wretched consequences. Third, what gratitude I owe to God for such redemption.

You see how even at a young age back then those wanting to follow Jesus were taught to embrace their brokenness, their wretchedness, and from it open their lives to the grace of God's saving love in Christ.

Celebration

We are going to encounter challenges in this world. There will be times when life is just tough. This Lent we are asked to explore these parts of our lives where life is really tough. But just as in Matthew 4, where we see an example through Jesus of how we are to rely on the Word of God to get us through the wilderness experience, we need to rely on God's word in our own daily lives. We need to be led by the Spirit. We need to draw close. We need to acknowledge our wretchedness, and open our hearts to God's forgiveness, to God's saving love.

The Apostle Paul also shares in this realization in his letter to the Romans: "Wretched man that I am; Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord;"

It's when we embrace our brokenness, our wretchedness, that we can breathe in God's mercy, and it's then that we can exhale, and begin to pray honestly, getting beyond the false expectations that we and the world impose on ourselves, and simply open our hearts to God. This is the Christianity that I have come to love; wretched exile that I am.