

“The World Ahead: Alignment and Repentance”
Psalm 51 & Romans 7:15

There are many mishaps in life. We intend to walk carefully and yet we find ourselves falling. We intend to be kind to others, especially to those close to us, and yet conflict happens. We desire the wellbeing of our planet, and yet we find ourselves overconsuming and hurting the very source of our lives. Even when we don't make mistakes, others seem to wrong us. We seem to be out of alignment with what sustains us and gives us joy. The words of the apostle Paul in Romans 7:15 ring true to much of our human experience, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”

One example comes from the movie “Soul.” It is the story of a man by the name of Joe Gardner, a part-time music teacher who wanted to become a professional jazz artist. He had aspirations to become famous and to perform on important stages. He felt that teaching children was beneath his talent. When he finally gets the chance to play with a famous jazz singer, he falls and ends up on the other side of eternity. He finds himself in the Great Before, where souls have not been born yet. These new souls need to find their spark. That is where Joe meets a disembodied soul named 22 who had no interest in life on earth because she believed that life on earth had no purpose and was not magnificent at all. That is when the two become friends and work together to find 22's spark. They go into life on earth, but the unfortunate thing that happens is that Joe ends up in the body of a cat, while 22 ends up in Joe's human body (scene: https://youtu.be/P75MNJXXk_Q). Through this misalignment or mishap, Joe finally gets his life aligned with the right values. Living in Joe's body, 22 got to enjoy all the small things of life. But Joe was so mad at his friend 22 for not taking life seriously and for not helping him get to his big goal. Yet, when Joe finally gets his dream fulfilled of playing in a big show, he realizes that it was never about the big accomplishments. It didn't feel like what he had expected. That is when he looked at all the stuff which his friend 22 had appreciated. It was the small stuff of life, like enjoying a slice of pizza, being overjoyed over seeing leaves fall, and the sensation of water on our human bodies. Here is the scene that is called “Regular Old Living”: https://youtu.be/5i_DKxZu0aI.

When we return to the simple things of life, we learn to appreciate the miracle of life. We are then able to allow God to heal us and to guide us into the future with grace. Last week we spoke about letting go of control to focus on faith and the kingdom of God. This week, we are invited to move forward by allowing that alignment with the kingdom of God to help us live fully and authentically. Alignment is about flowing with one's divine spark and purpose. Then when we forget or get out of alignment, the invitation is to return to our sense of wholeness. This process is often referred to as a conversion experience or a repentance experience. The first one happens to us despite our resistance. The second one is something we do on a regular basis to stay open and aligned.

One of the great gifts of our faith is the book of Psalms. It is filled with prayers that express our human struggles and joys in faith and life. Today's scripture is from Psalm 51. This is a psalm that is a humble prayer of return after losing one's way. Psalm 51 is about renewal

and repentance. Unfortunately, repentance has a bad reputation in many contexts. It has often been reduced to a sense of deep guilt that we lug around all the time with us so that we may never forget how "awful" we are as human beings. Guilt is often associated with repentance. Yet guilt does not always translate into changed behavior. One of the best ways to think of repentance is from Thomas Keating who said that "repentance is changing the direction in which you look for happiness." When we get stuck searching for happiness in things that do not nurture our souls, we lose our way. That is when changing our direction with the help of God is needed on a regular basis.

Psalm 51 most likely was used by the people of Israel after their return from the Exile. After they were taken over by the Babylonians and had to leave their homes, when they returned in 536 BCE, they were still carrying a lot of the pain of their experience in Exile. This psalm speaks of rebuilding Jerusalem (v. 18), so we know that it was written during, or shortly after, the Exile. The people knew that they had a second chance, but they needed to let go of the pain and brokenness they were carrying. They could not move forward or experience renewal until they were able to release whatever was holding them back. The focal point of this psalm is not the sin of the psalm writer, but the goodness of God. It is not about all the guilt they were carrying. It is about the new opportunities for renewal that God was offering them. Repentance was about a change in the way they were moving forward. Instead of moving forward with heavy burdens of pain, repentance offered them a way to let go and to realign their lives with God. They knew that their chance for success as a country was not going to come from fixing the wall of their city. It had to come from deep within them. A new heart and a new commitment to God's love were at the center of their transformation.

The image of hyssop is invoked here to emphasize the importance of God's commitment to the people of Israel and God's love for them. Hyssop is mentioned several times in the Bible in association with God's covenant with the people of Israel. The use of a bunch of hyssop as a brush for daubing the lintels of the Hebrew homes with blood from the sacrificed lamb at the first Passover (Exodus 12:22) seems to have established the tradition for most other references.

Hyssop is a reminder that the focus is on the covenant, God's commitment to love us. The mention of hyssop reminds us that this is not a Psalm about guilt! It is about opening to God's renewing and healing presence. Renewal and healing are gifts to us from God. Our work is to receive them. Repentance is about that work of opening, releasing, and receiving. We truly don't know what the world will look like into the future, but to find our way through, we have to remember the practice of repentance, changing directions when we lose our way.

Quaker writer and teacher, Parker Palmer gives us three ideas to help us with a life that is open to repentance, healing, and transformation when life is hard, "First, in a culture where the answer to the question 'How are you?' is supposed to be 'Just fine' even when we are not, we must learn to acknowledge and name our suffering honestly and openly to ourselves and to others. This is called 'becoming vulnerable'- a hard thing to do in a culture that does not respect the shadow, where even among friends we are at constant

risk of someone trying to 'fix us up,' an act that drives the suffering soul back into hiding no matter how well-intended... Second, once we have named and claimed our suffering, we must move directly to the heart of it, allowing ourselves to feel the pain fully, rather than doing what our culture teaches- numbing it with anesthetics, fleeing from it with distractions, or fighting it off by blaming and attacking the external source... Third, if we are to learn from our suffering, we must create a micro-climate of quietude around ourselves, allowing the turmoil to settle and an inner quietude to emerge, so 'that of God within us' can help us find our way through. Nurtured by silence, we can stop taking our leads from the voices of ego and world and start listening instead to the still, small voice of all that is Holy."

This is the invitation of Psalm 51 for us for renewal and change. It is a prayer for all of us for a new heart and a new and right spirit within us. All of us have experienced massive trauma during the pandemic and in order to find our way into the future, the ancient practice of naming our pain and holding it in God's grace, can help us realign our lives. Instead of living out of our narratives of fear, we can find a way forward that is grace based.

I am going to invite you to pray a prayer of repentance and healing. Begin by breathing deeply to center yourself. If there is something that is in need of healing in your life right now, bring it before God. Smell the herb and allow it to be a reminder of God's love for you in this moment and in this place of brokenness. Now listen to the words of Psalm 51 and allow them to be your prayer of repentance before God.

Psalm 51 by Nan Merrill: You have placed your truth in the inner being; therefore, teach me the wisdom of the heart. Forgive all that binds me in fear, that I might radiate love; cleanse me that your light might shine in me. Fill me with gladness; help me to transform weakness into strength. Look not on my past mistakes but on the aspirations of my heart. Create in me a clean heart, O Gracious One, and put a new and right spirit within me. Enfold me in the arms of love, and fill me with your Holy Spirit. Restore in me the joy of your saving grace, and encourage me with a new spirit. Amen.