

For the last couple of weeks we have been talking about tiny things, simply taking the next right step, micro-movements of faith that get us closer and closer to God. Maybe you remember the line in the song from the band Cody, “A million tiny raindrops make the river high.” This Lent, rather than focusing on what can be known as the “big black trash bag energy”, which is the temptation we have to try and make big bulky moves in life, just throw out things and start over, like the diets and exercise routines we superficially commit to at Lent, we have been encouraged to try to count our blessings and give our energy to the small things that bring us into a more faithful relationship with God.

As Lent is often a season about facing our mortality and sinful nature, we began with the charge to repent, highlighting that repentance is a necessary micro-movement toward wholeness. Last week then we took a deeper look at why repentance is necessary, identifying the truth of our sinful nature, and how repentance is possible, identifying the truth that we are God’s and God wants us to be whole. Don’t get me wrong, repentance and truth are both big topics of faith, with big implications, but in the spirit of our call to be in faithful relationship with God, they are really micro-movements of faith that help create a sturdy life of discipleship.

Today, we encounter another micro-movement of faith, acceptance. Acceptance of the truth of our sinful nature and that we are God’s opens the door to courage for us to be honest with God and repent for our turning away from God and God’s way. We can know the truth and we can know that we are to repent, but knowing is not all that is required of us. We must accept, come to grips with, come to terms with, the truth, and accept it with an honest and genuine heart.

Psalm 51:1-12 gives us a good example of David’s acceptance...

Did you hear the micro-movements of faith shared by David in this Psalm? They were micro-movements of acceptance. Acceptance of what? Acceptance of the truth of his sins (past, present, and future), the truth of being loved by God (which gives him the courage and confidence to turn to God for wholeness), and the need for him to repent and honestly admit his fall and shortcomings.

David fully accepts that sin has a grip on his life and that he needs to be rescued. So much so that an image depicted of David in these prayers is him on his knees humbly bowing before God with his head tilted toward the sky, chest bowed out, arms outstretched, hands open, completely vulnerable, crying out to God for mercy. Honest. Genuine. In his brokenness sure, but also in his hope and faith that God can and will do something about it. How about you/us? Can we accept the truth like David?

Thomas Long challenged me and maybe his words challenge you too, “We fancy ourselves as the kind of people who are eager to show forth righteousness, to seek justice, to combat racism, to address poverty, to be a prophetic community in society. Having taken the moral high ground, we are able, perhaps, to acknowledge that we are technically sinners, but we are often quite unable to admit that sin has us in its grip and that we need to be rescued.

Like the rich ruler who came to Jesus, we have arrived at our moral standing through virtue, and if there is anything we still lack, we will work our way out of it on our own steam, thank you very much. Entranced by the old gnostic deception that the human plight is not one of captivity to sin but of a lack of enlightenment, we polite, deeply responsible, socially conscious Christians are often quick to tell ourselves that we are the righteous ones in this world.”

Could this really be us? If so, have we accepted the truth? Do we know intellectually about the truth or maybe are familiar with the practice of repentance as a ritual, but don't actually believe the truth or experience the freedom of repentance?

Again, Long challenges, “Are we a church that strives to practice a different kind of Christianity than the culturally bound churches around us? Are we simply proud of the fact that we resist being co-opted by the politics that passes for Christianity in our culture? When a church specializes in being just, it can so easily lose awareness of our participation in the human condition and the accompanying need for repentance. Our role, we say to ourselves, is to point out the sins of society, but, funny, it is always someone else's sin, never ours. When we get the nagging sense that our own righteousness might not be entirely pure, we soothe ourselves that we may have drifted into error here and there but that we can educate ourselves back into right relationship. If there is anything missing, we can study our way to get it.”

Could this really be us? If so, have we accepted the truth?

We know better. In our hearts, in our lives, don't we know better? We come back to David and Psalm 51 and find ourselves on our knees the way David was, confessing and repenting,

“For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.” (Psalm 51:3-4)

We also know better because of the gospel, that the gospel story is at its core a rescue story, a story of a world gone astray and lost, liberated by the love of God in Christ. Jesus' very name means “God saves.” Make no mistake, if you don't believe anything else at all today believe this, “God saves,” and this is good news worth our acceptance.

Don't get me wrong, “knowledge is power”, but maybe we can consider that knowledge sometimes leads not to power but to self-deception and finally to self-destruction? As we consider this with our call to repent, like in David's example, repentance requires that we stand naked and unprotected before God and others, admitting our lostness and culpability. But doesn't everything in us, at least our minds, resist such vulnerability? Who, in their right mind, we might say, does this?

True repentance requires that we tell the truth about ourselves, including accepting the very truth we cannot seem to bear, and this happens not only in our minds, but also our hearts and with our words and actions... and this happens not on our own, but with the help of the One who loves us and desires us to be whole again.

Maybe you have heard the saying before, or seen it over the doorway of a university, “you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.” Only one context makes these words true. In the context of the one who first spoke them, Jesus. In the context of the mercy and forgiveness of Christ, we as human beings can open our eyes wide (and our hearts and our minds) to the full truth about us, others, and the world.

This is an important note: “None of us can face the truth about ourselves without courage, and ironically, the source of that courage does not lie within. It is a courage that comes from without, a courage that comes not as a human achievement, but as a gift from God (a micro-movement of faith).”

What then does acceptance of the truth look like for us today?

Acceptance as a micro-movement of faith looks like us turning toward God with a repentant heart and spirit, honest about our sinful nature and yet evermore confident and hopeful of the love and mercy of God.

Rather than fight our vulnerability and shamefulness to stand naked in a public place and admit to God and others and ourselves that we are moral failures devoid of the good- which would be a complete obliteration of ourselves, and rather than hide from the presence of God among the trees of the garden, thinking we might just be able to outthink or outmaneuver God, we must turn toward God with Jesus by our side, filled with courage and hope. “To accept and admit one’s sin is to stand under the judgement of God, but... the one who repents also stands under the promise of God.”

Karl Barth taught, “In the light of the gospel, the repentant sinner is one who knows that the promise of God has already been given, the future of life in God has already been anticipated.”

Here is an interesting conundrum I have wrestled with. If I did not know I was forgiven, would I ever accept or confess my sin? Would I even be aware of the truth of my sin and my need to repent? Only one who already knows the truth of God’s forgiveness and promised restoration and reconciliation and peace can muster the courage to admit one’s failures.

Can we accept this? Does this help us then not to fear the Lord’s judgement, but instead revere the Lord’s power and love? In a big way then, acceptance of the truth of our sin and the truth of the gift of salvation God gives us, enables us the courage to repent as an act of moving towards something/ someone rather than just away from something.

With our celebration of baptism today, I thought I would share: *In the ancient baptismal service, those who were to be baptized would turn toward the West, toward the world, toward the darkness, and would spit on Satan and renounce all of his lies and empty promises. They would then turn toward the East, toward the brightness of the rising sun. They would “orient” - “re-orient” themselves. While they were facing the West, the priest would change into a resplendent white and golden robe, so that when the baptized turned around they would see a radiant symbol of the joyful kingdom toward which they were going. They had just performed an act of repentance, but one not provoked by shame but beckoned by the glory of the new land toward which they now traveled. By repenting, their old life had gone, and they became a new creation.*

“Repentance is not just looking into the dark abyss of our failure and naming it. True repentance is a turning: a turning away from sin and a turning toward the light of God. No one is motivated to true repentance by guilty shame. Accepting the truth of God’s love is the only motivation- the only micro-movement of faith able to bring complete wholeness.”