

## **A Better You**

**A Sermon By Rev. Jessica C. Gregory**

**Psalm 51, Luke 23: 33-34**

**July 21, 2019**

*Create in me a clean heart, O God.*

*And renew a right spirit within me.*

This song was always one of my camp favorites. As I sang it, looking into the flames of the bonfire, I felt my weariness melt away and my spirit lifted in the warmth of the moment. The fire, the music, the buzz and chirps of nature heightened my awareness of God's presence within me and all around, renewing me for another day. Hope replaced my feelings of not being enough for my campers, and I trusted that God's right spirit within me would guide me well.

As a counselor, I was called on often to settle camper disagreements, to reprimand participants when necessary and to be a shoulder for the girls to cry on.

As a summer job, it was fabulous, and it was exhausting. It was far easier for me to trust God to clean my heart, to rid it of all the frustrations, grudges and hurts that found a home there the day before, than to doubt God and go forward alone.

In Psalm 51, the psalmist tells us that it is possible that we might have a clean heart and have a right, good spirit within us! We needn't hold onto all those feelings of darkness and shame. God is able and willing to take them from us, leaving our hearts light and open to experiencing the gifts of the day. How wonderful is that?!

Psalm 51 is considered one of seven penitential psalms. In it, the composer asks for help and forgiveness.

He acknowledges that he messed up. He made some big mistakes that have not only hurt his relationship with others, but they have hurt his relationship with God. It is this relationship that he seeks to mend, knowing of God's divine character of grace and mercy; knowing that strengthening this relationship will enable him to be a better person.

Though often attributed to King David, who is said to have written it after having had an affair with his soldier's wife Bathsheba, this label was given by the scribes compiling the Bible to the psalm years after it was written. The scribe's intent was that readers might ask for forgiveness for their sins as David did after his wrongful act. Yet, the words composed are universal; in no way specific to David or anyone else.

The psalmist pleads: "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me (Psalm 51: 2-3)." Acknowledging one's need for forgiveness and asking for it is necessary to repair one's relationship with God. Until you confess and ask forgiveness for your sins, they act as an abyss between you and God, cutting off the relationship. When you confess and ask, those same sins can become a bridge.

(1973 Buechner 15). A bridge to a better you.

Friends, the most important key to a better you is being in relationship with the God who created you. The God who created you, loves you more than you can imagine, and the God who wants the best for you.

And that relationship can only stay strong if you build the bridge over the mistakes by telling God you are sorry and asking forgiveness. Just like a relationship with another person can only remain if, when you make a mistake, you say you are sorry and ask for forgiveness.

To take it one step further, to become a better you, you also need to forgive others when they mess up, even if they don't ask for your forgiveness. Even when what they did was wrong, and you suffered. Even when your heart is filled with righteous anger, knowing that you were right and what happened wasn't fair. We do not become better when we try to get the person back for what they have done.

Shylock, Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, disagrees with this idea of not getting the person back, suggesting that revenge is part of being human: "If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?" (Act 3, scene 1).

But the Bible makes it abundantly clear that we are not to take revenge; as commanded in Leviticus, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your neighbor, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (19:18). The first part of this Golden Rule often gets forgotten, but doing it is what makes loving your neighbor possible. One can't love if one is bearing a grudge - even if one is right to carry that grudge.

In his book *Nine Essential Things I've Learned About Life*, Rabbi Harold S. Kushner describes a conversation he had with a congregant after a Yom Kippur service in which he talked about forgiveness. She stormed into his office, clearly upset that he suggested in his sermon that she forgive her ex-husband, who ended their marriage for a younger woman and left her to raise two kids as a single mom. He did not deserve her forgiveness.

Yet, the Rabbi responded: "I want you to forgive him. Not to excuse him, not to say that what he did was acceptable....But I want you to forgive him for your sake, not for his."

He continued: "Why are you giving him the power to define you as a victim? Why are you giving him the power to define you in terms of what you don't have, a husband and an adequate income, instead of what you do have, a warm and loving home and two beautiful children?....Think of it this way: If he is no longer living in your house, why are you letting him live rent-free in your head? He doesn't deserve that. He doesn't deserve the energy you waste being angry at him. You can evict him any time you choose to. You can take away his power to push your buttons and make you feel sorry for yourself" (2015 Kushner 60-61).

Friends, by forgiving others of wrongs they committed against us, we are made free of the power they wield over us. We are restored and our hearts are made clean.

Jesus understood this, and taught it even during his final hours, as he hung on a cross. "Father, forgive them, he implored, for they do not know what they are doing."

Jesus chose the divine response of forgiveness rather than the human response of anger and spite. So, too, did a little girl named Ruby.

I shared Ruby's story on Good Friday, and I apologize to any of you who were there and are hearing it for a second time. However, I think it is a story worthy of repeating. It is a rare example of holy forgiveness that can be a lesson for us all.

On November 14, 1960 while walking into school to her first-grade class, an earnest six-year-old, Ruby Bridges, endured screams, anger and hate as she approached the front doors of the building.

Ruby was one of six black students who tested well enough to attend a public elementary school in New Orleans reserved for white students. Six years after *Brown vs. Board of Education* established racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional, some schools in the south were still segregated.

Ruby was the lone black student assigned to William Franz Elementary School. And so, she made the long walk into the building by herself.

The city and state police did not offer assistance in protecting her and monitoring the riots, leading the President of the United States to assign US Marshals to keep order. Order that was difficult to keep. As she made the walk the second day of school, a woman threatened to poison Ruby, and another day a woman brought to the protests a small coffin with a black doll lying inside.

While the parents protested and showered hate at Ruby from outside, they also kept their children home from school - particularly all of the other first graders. For an entire year Ruby and her teacher Mrs. Henry sat side by side in an empty classroom teaching and learning together. Mrs. Henry was Ruby's only connection at school for that first year.

Ruby was not allowed to go to the cafeteria, eat any school food, or go out to recess with the children in the other grades. She was ostracized from the community in every way. Day after day, week after week, month after month.

Incredibly, at the beginning and end of each of those days, first grader Ruby Bridges would pray for those protesting against her presence; those spewing hate and anger toward her:

Please, God, try to forgive those people. Because even if they say those bad things, they don't know what they're doing. So you could forgive them, just like you did those folks a long time ago when they said terrible things about you.

Ruby forgives the people whom she should despise.

Ruby remembered, Jesus' words "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

As no other king before or since, Jesus forgives the people who secure his death.

Courageously, Ruby follows Jesus' example to respond to evil not with more evil but with the goodness of God in whom she trusts. Though the white adults swarming in front of the school doors see not a girl but a black threat, Ruby never loses sight of her accusers' humanity and the spark of divine that is within all of us that brings forth love, light and life. Ruby does not bear a grudge but instead loves her neighbors as herself, even when they show her hate.

In this act of forgiveness, Ruby's heart is made clean and she is a better person.

Friends, forgiveness is the secret to the better you. This is why we pray; so that our relationship with God is not one unreachable by an abyss of sin but rather one connected by a sturdy bridge that brings us together. We are not perfect, we are human, and God created us this way. We are created to mess up; but we are also created to make amends. Such work is easier said than done, I realize. But it is possible. And it makes us better. Through God's gracing love, we are given new hearts.

*Create in me a clean heart, O God.*

*And renew a right spirit within me.*

May this be each of our prayers, this day and every day. Amen.

#### Works Cited

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