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The National Presbyterian Church

## Relationship Repair 101

Psalms 51; Matthew 5:21-26

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In our summer sermons we're looking together at a small selection of Psalms that come from the 150 Psalms that are contained in the book of Psalms in the Bible. The book of Psalms is a compilation of poems and of hymns and of prayers that come from the faith, the liturgical worship life, of ancient Israel.

Some of those Psalms are joyful and vibrant and they lift up our soul so that we bless the Lord in every aspect of our being. We looked a couple of weeks ago for example at Psalm 8 and then at Psalm 19 and these are Psalms that lift us up to Heaven to explore, to think about, to worship the majesty of God our creator – the creator of the heavens and the earth. This magnificent God who nevertheless despite His glory has time for us.

Greater than all the miracles I believe is this miracle, that God has time for us, and indeed cannot get us out of his mind. And, further, that he has so created the universe that the universe itself speaks to us; has so revealed Himself that His word can be written down on pages in Holy Scripture that you and I might hear a word from God and respond and enter into a relationship with God – a conversational back and forth relationship with Almighty God our creator. So the Psalms speak, many of them, of this glorious God and his passion to be in intimate relationship with us.

But many of the Psalms are not like that. Many of the Psalms are sad. In fact one third of the Psalms are what scholars would call laments. They're sad songs. That's over 60 of the 150. The Psalmist who wrote Psalm 42 that we looked at together last Sunday is one of those who laments, who describes in his Psalm not what's going right in the world but what's going wrong in the world. He tells us that his experience of God and his experience of life is at the very least disappointing. In fact he's mad with God. He's perplexed by God. He just doesn't understand or get God. Not that he doesn't believe – he does. But it's hard to believe. He deliberately has to exercise faith. He deliberately has to exercise his memory to believe that God is still, well, God"; to believe that God is a rock, to believe that God is love, that God's love is steadfast. It is hard to believe that God holds the future in the palm of His hands, or that as Jesus

would say, God is the good shepherd. Hard to believe that, because the dark valleys, the valley of the shadow of death just doesn't seem to end. Hard to believe that God is a father who gives to us everything that we need: not what we want, but what we need.

Sometimes I think we get the idea as Christians and I think we get it sometimes from Christian radio or television or books that we read, that when our faith is real, when our faith in Christ is real and God's Spirit is at work, sometimes we have this idea that Christian virtues like faithfulness and joy and love, well, they will just flow spontaneously, pretty much always, into our lives and through our lives to others. Faithfulness, joy, love all of these virtues – easily, effortlessly. And sometimes that's the case. I know some people for whom it does seem to be effortless, for whatever reason. It's so natural it just flows. Sometimes that's the case. But sometimes it's not. And what the book of Psalms teaches us and gives us permission to say, indeed, admonishes us to say, is that for some people even though you have faith it's not always going to be like that. Whether it's because of our personality or our temperament, or of our background of setbacks that we've faced, or our particular calling in life (the task that God has given us to do), for some of us faith is going to be a struggle from here on in until the end and we see God face-to-face.

And while for some of us that may not sound like good news at all (it may actually sound rather miserable!) for others of us that's actually the very, very best news we could hear.

- *Because it means that we might just be okay with God!*
- *That our faith, scrambling all the time, may just about be okay with God.*
- *That we may not be second class Christians after all compared to all these other people.*
- *Or that maybe God really is at work even through our lives, as with others.*

So keep in mind that God was at work in, and preserved in Holy Scripture for eternity, the words of those Psalmists who cried out in lament before God, for you and me, so that we would know that they, and we with them, are of importance, have a critical place in the household of faith.

As Pastor Bruce Milne once put it (in his book, *"We Belong Together"*), *"The plain truth is that the Bible represents the life of faith as a generally hard and even painful experience. Jesus spoke of it in terms of a cross."* Pick up your cross daily says Jesus. If you don't pick up your cross and follow me you cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:27). And a cross is not just a pain in the neck. A cross is a pain all over. It's trouble. It's difficult. It's hard. It's quite literally tortuous at times. "Follow me," says Jesus, "I will give you the best life no question about that; I will lead you to glory no doubt about that. But in the middle, there may well be a great deal of trouble and difficulty and struggle."

And almost nothing, almost nothing is more difficult, almost nothing causes us

more struggle than the topic of today's Psalm, Psalm 51 with the related passage that I chose from Matthew Chapter 5.

Psalm 51 is a Psalm about healing and repairing and maintaining our relationship with God and with one another. Relationships with God and one another that have been broken and that are fragile and that could easily be broken again. This is a topic, the healing, maintaining, and repairing of relationships, which for me lies close to the very heart and center of Biblical faith, God's purpose and Christ's mission.

Hear these opening words from Psalm 51.

*Have mercy on me, O God, According to Thy steadfast love.*

*According to Thy abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions.*

*Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.*

*For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me.*

Perhaps you as you read this Psalm, like many people, you would say "Well wait a minute. This Psalm is not about the healing of relationships. It's not about the maintaining of relationships or the repair of relationships. It's all about sin. I mean it's sin, sin, transgression, iniquity, sin from the beginning all the way through to the end." To which I'd respond "Well, yes it is! But what is sin? What is sin?"

When you look in the pages of scripture you find that sin is not merely a defect in our character (and often in our individualistic world we think of sin that way. Things that are wrong with me, highly personal, highly individual). When you turn to the pages of scripture what you discover is that sin, while it does have to do with defects in my life has far more to do with defects in my relationships with others than with anything else: ***Sin is 'sinful', sin is trouble, because it breaks relationships between us and God and between us and other people.*** That's the problem with sin. That's why it's a big deal. It is foundationally about relationships. And you see this most clearly in a place in Scripture which provides for us our original definition of sin: the Ten Commandments in the 20th Chapter of Exodus.

Want to know what sin is about that this Psalmist speaks about? Let's go to the Ten Commandments! So what do you find in the Ten Commandments? Well, you find that the commandments given by God to Moses and to Israel are foundationally about the kinds of behaviors that we need to pursue in order to maintain a relationship with God and to maintain a relationship with others that is right and healthy. That's what they're about. And when we forget the commandments or break the commandments the consequence is "broken relationships all the way around." Broken relationships all the way around! So we start with God. The commandments force us to look up to God first of all. And the commandments say . .

- (1) "You shall have no other God before me. Why? Because that's the truth there is no one greater than God. Take that away from God and you destroy your relationship with the real living God.
- (2) "Make no graven images": you don't get to decide, I don't get to decide what God is like; God decides what God is like, and our job is to listen to God's revelation of who he is. When we make images of God we're telling God who we would like God to be. But what good is that? All that does is create a relationship that is imaginary, unreal. When somebody tries to make you in their image how do you feel about that? Does that lead to a healthy relationship? No! We want to share with others who we are, and so does God!
- (3) "Don't take my name in vain." It's more than just a matter of swearing here or there, using God's name lightly on our lips. To "take God's name" is to be married to God, it is to say I belong to God's family; God is my friend, my Lord, my Savior, I belong to Him, I am Christ's – I take his name. I am God's. When we don't live up to that, at the very least, as in a family, we embarrass God. It breaks the relationship when we take God's name in vain.
- (4) So, too, the Sabbath commandment, the next commandment. "Make time for God!" If you don't make time for God it's no different from not making time for your relationships: what happens? Well, they wither away and die. "Make time for others!" The Sabbath Day goes both ways. It leads us to God, it leads us to others. Make time for your relationships with others. And the commandments go on.
- (5) The fifth commandment calls us to "honor your father and mother." If you don't do that, then your relationships in your family are all going to be at sea.
- (6) "Commit murder"? Well there's a good one. That breaks a relationship right there and then doesn't it?
- (7) "Adultery" – Well that clearly breaks up a covenant relationship.
- (8) "Stealing" – take from somebody else which is not yours that belongs to them? That'll destroy any society if that keeps on going,
- (9) and the same is true with "false witness". This was a commandment given especially in the context of the law and justice. So that when you bear false witness you are expressing no concern that justice be given to another: the relationship ruptured right there and then.
- (10) And even "covetousness," which seems like an internal sin, a mere personality defect, has a massive ramification for our relationship with God and our relationship with others. Allow covetousness to seep into your life, says the New Testament and you become an idolater! What you're really saying to yourself is that what God has given you isn't enough. And what you need in order to fix the situation is to grab from somebody else and to make it yours.

So every one of those commandments has to do with maintaining or breaking relationships. These are the boundaries, these are the behaviors, these are the

principles that God gave to his ancient people Israel *so they would know how to live with each other and with God, and not merely be a rabble of isolated individuals.*

To break the commandment is sin in that relationships are ruptured . . . and God's passion is not merely to forgive this sin (though it is) but that those ruptured relationships be restored and reconciled. God's passion is that we have and maintain healthy relationships; and that when they are broken, that those relationships are restored.

None of this is easy. In fact it's downright hard. And for fallible human beings it's virtually impossible. We have different temperaments and different personalities. We come even in this congregation from different nations. We certainly come from different families. God made us male and female. We are black and we are white. We are young and we are old. We are rich and we are poor. We are different from each other! Indeed, there are millions of people in this world who are different from us and it's hard to have a relationship that is substantial with many of these people because these differences are significant. But even if we were alike, it would still at times be hard to like each other. Even if we are similar it's hard to get on. And sometimes things go wrong in our relationships, well, because we are almost too similar.

Think of family squabbles, especially between parent and child. How many times have you heard this said, either when you've been involved or when you've watched somebody else, another parent, another child: they're fighting with each other and it dawns on you that they are fighting not because they are so different from each other but because they were cut off the same piece of cloth! "Why do you fight? Because you're just so alike."

Heard that or felt that? So whether we're different or whether we're the same, those relationships are hard.

Some years ago now Joyce Landorff Heatherly wrote a book that I've read many times and that I've passed on to many people, called *Irregular People* (like "irregular" garments). She wrote this book in order to share her discovery that if our lives seem to be lived in the middle of relationships that are broken or messed up, especially in our families, then we are not alone. She wrote it so that people would not feel alone. The preface of the book begins like this:

*Fifteen years have gone by since my mother died. Now as I look back I see clearly that for most of these intervening years I've had to face, cope with and deal with two common yet emotionally formidable burdens. On one hand I experience the immediate devastating sense of grief and loss. Well you would expect that. On the other hand, she says, my mother's death produced a sharpening of focus in another area. Gradually I was made acutely aware of a complicated relationship within our family. It was an unseen knowing type of enigma, which while my mother was alive, had stayed submerged fairly well below the surface. [That is, while her mother was alive it was as if she kept it under control, beneath the surface, out of sight; but when she was gone, well, it bubbled up. She goes on to*

say:] Recently I watched Katherine Hepburn in the movie "On Golden Pond." I caught a glimpse of my own growing up years. As the story unfolded I realized that my own mother had behaved and spoken in many of the same ways. I loved the moment when Miss Hepburn tells her husband played by Henry Fonda that their daughter is coming to visit them and then gently puts the question to him – wouldn't it be nice if we could all get along this time?

Wouldn't it be nice if we could all get along this time? And I would guess that many of us have said the same thing. Or to put it more positively, *if we have been with a group of people, family or friends, and we actually HAVE "got along,"* isn't there a sense that something miraculous and wonderful has happened? and that that period of time is somehow holy and eternal? And don't we say, "I don't want this to end, we are having such a good time with each other"? This is marvelous. This is as close to heaven as you can get.

The healing, the maintaining of relationships when it's there it is simply magnificent. But when it's not, it's pretty close to hell. And when it's not the question is this: what in the world are we going to do? So that as Christians we not only need to learn from God through Jesus Christ "how to get along," but what we need to learn as well, in a world in which at times we do not get along, when relationships don't work, or break, is "what in the world we do then"?

And our passages of scripture are precisely about that. Psalm 51 and Matthew 5.

What do we do to live as followers of Jesus Christ not only when relationships work, but when they don't work? . . . when the relationship with God and with others is ruptured in one way or another?

Think for a moment about Jesus' words in Matthew Chapter 5. They come straight from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is speaking and he says to his disciples this: *if you have a ruptured relationship in life don't come to worship.* If you have a ruptured relationship in life don't bother with worship until you've taken the first step to bring reconciliation. That's how important this business is to Jesus. The restoration after sin, not just the resolution of guilt, but the restoration of relationships broken by sin. That's how important it is. This is what he says in Verse 23: *when you are offering your gift at the altar, when you come to worship, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you leave your gift there before the altar and go first, first be reconciled to your brother or sister then come and offer your gift.*

That's how important it is. Now you need to know that this is a really hard thing for a pastor to say. To say it and mean it: "Don't come back to worship here next week until you have resolved your relationships with somebody with whom your relationship is broken." I'd guess there's somebody like that in almost all our lives. Don't come back, says Jesus, until you have done something about it – and I hope some of you will before next Sunday. But Jesus says this is that important and for a faithful Jewish person to say that, knowing that in those Ten Commandments that loving God is above loving neighbor, to say "Don't

worship God until you have sorted out your relationship with your neighbor” is a stunning thing for him to say. It’s an outrageous thing to say in the face of those Commandments. And it surely shook up those who heard it the first time. “Go, leave your gift behind and go, reconcile!”

Of course, there is no guarantee that we can affect reconciliation. We can’t manipulate or determine what’s going to happen to the person to whom we go. But that’s not our business. Our business is to take the first step whether it’s our fault or not; Jesus doesn’t say to us “only go if it’s your fault.” It doesn’t matter whose fault it is, the ball as Christians is always in our court and so he says to us “Go!” We don’t know what it will achieve, but this much we DO know, that if we don’t go we will achieve nothing.

On various occasions I’ve tried to follow Jesus in this way. Sometimes the results are wonderful, but sometimes nothing beneficial seems to happen at all. On one occasion when I went to see somebody, and apologized for what I’d done, this was clearly the case. I had not done my homework on the church schedule, and had double-scheduled an event. It was my fault, but it was too late to change. I went and apologized to the person involved in the second event, but there was no give, there was no sense of forgiveness . . . not then, nor in the years that followed. Indeed, it’s not impossible that that person is still upset with me to this very day.

But then there are other occasions when I’ve sought to follow Jesus on this, and I am so deeply grateful that I took that first step even though it meant eating some humble pie. It was not easy. The occasion I’d like to share with you was in fact one of the most critical in my life, because I saw the consequences of it so clearly. It occurred in my first church, about 30-35 years ago now.

The event occurred, the rupture in a relationship occurred, at a rehearsal for a children’s Christmas pageant at the church. It was a Saturday afternoon the day before the pageant. The rehearsal was going on and on ... and on ... far beyond the prescribed time for it to end. And I happened to be standing in the midst of parents who were getting antsy about the fact that the time was gone by. They were looking at their watches and saying “when is this going to end?” It certainly didn’t seem to be ending any time soon, and certainly wasn’t ending when they’d been told it was going to end. So I decided to go up to the Sunday School Superintendent who was running this particular event and just put a word in her ear and say to her “Paula, Paula this rehearsal’s really great. The program tomorrow is going to be wonderful. We’re about 15 minutes over and parents are getting a little upset here. Do you think we can bring this to an end?” Paula did not respond kindly to my comment at that particular time! In fact she responded loudly so that everybody could hear and told me basically to back off and leave her alone and let her get on with this the way she

wanted to do it. It was mortifying! Humiliating! And I was upset, and increasingly angry that this had taken place in front of all these people. I went home to work on my sermon (probably to speak about “love”!) for the next day in church. But I was seething inside, and I finally said to God, “Lord I can’t get up and preach feeling like this. This is just bothering me so much.”

So what did God say? He muttered something in my conscience like this: “Well do something about it. Go round and see her.

Phone her up. Sort this out.”

To which I replied: “I’m not going to do that. It wasn’t my fault; I was just trying to help out the parents!”

To which God responded: “Go around and see her!”

“But it’s 10:00 at night. I can’t go around at 10:00 at night.”

“Go around and see her. Sort it out.”

“I don’t want to do it. I don’t feel good about that.”

But, in the end I did. Whatever happened, it was enough of a prod on my conscience that I did. And I’m so deeply grateful that I did. She was caught by surprise. Her husband fortunately was there at the time, hadn’t gone to bed. We talked and things came together.

The pageant was wonderful. But the next few years were even more wonderful. Together Paula and I developed a wonderful relationship in which we worked together on all kinds of Sunday School matters. And that Sunday School grew to a hundred children every week in a church with no more than 70 adult members. A hundred children every week! [In our church by the way that would mean there would be 2000 children running around here every Sunday. That would get us moving and fill us with life.]

Jesus says to us, Jesus commands us to “Go!” – to make it our priority. It is more important than worship.

And the Psalmist in Psalm 51 adds this. That it’s not just a matter of not coming to worship. BUT when we go, when we seek to heal relationships, when our hearts are broken enough to be reconcilers with others, then we are in fact worshipping! This is our spiritual worship.

The *sacrifice* acceptable to God (Ps.51:17), in other words, the worship that is acceptable to God, that God is looking for, is a broken and a contrite heart (a heart that does not stand on its pride but eats some humble pie and does what it takes to heal broken relationships with others and with God).

This is our call. This is what Christ calls us to do because he is passionate that we follow him to bring healing in our relationships with one another and in our relationship with God: healing and reconciliation both horizontally with others and vertically with God.

Many people don’t think that their relationship with God is that broken or defective. It may not be perfect we say, but it’s not *that* bad. We compare



ourselves to others and overall we think that we're doing pretty well. But the cross of Jesus which stands above us every Sunday and the word of God that we read in Psalm 51 tells another story. They tell us that we've messed up more than we usually at first sight are willing to admit. They tell us that our sins – our choices to break relationships or not fulfill those relationships faithfully, relationships with God and others – our sins have the power to separate us from others and from God forever (Isaiah 59:2). Forever. And that separation in the scripture is death: to be alienated from God in a ruptured relationship with God forever is death. Your sins and mine are *that* serious. Indeed, they cannot be forgiven and the relationship restored until the sinless Son of God takes the first step . . . until he descends into our lives and eats humble pie and faces death (that is, separation from God) on your behalf and on mine, bears it in his body and throws it into the depth of the sea so that nothing can any longer stand between us and the love of God, forever.

But it is *that* serious, that this had to happen before our sins could be forgiven. And it is *that* serious that in response to the grace of God made known in Jesus Christ we are called to confess our sin without reservation before God. Not to hide it, not to sugar coat it, not to make excuses for it, not to see it in comparison with other people around about us, but to be brutally honest before God. Not to make us merely feel bad, but so that all of that clutter, all of the destructive patterns of behavior that separate us from God and others can be taken away, and our relationship healed. Psalm 51 is brutally honest, no excuses, no defense. Like the honesty of an alcoholic before healing can take place. And we are called to pray that prayer in our hearts, in our lives, individually and together in response to God's grace made known in Jesus Christ.

*Have mercy on me God according to Your steadfast love. According to Your abundant mercy blot out my transgression [DR: everything that separates me from You.] Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin for I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before You. Against You, You alone have I sinned [DR: Even when I sin against others, when I rupture those relationships that cause You pain I sin against You. And God becomes far away.]... Hide your face from my sins. Blot out all my iniquities. Do not cast me away from Your presence. Do not take Your Holy Spirit from me but restore to me the joy of Your salvation and sustain me in a willing spirit. [Bring me back into fellowship with You, a fellowship that nothing and no-one can break. And with others that is a foretaste of Heaven]. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit. A broken and contrite heart of God, You will not despise.*

God wants to break us so that he can remake us and restore the relationship for which we were made with God, and the relationships for which we were made with others, so that we might know, here on earth, a little taste of Heaven. This is his passion. It is not easy. It is tough. But Christ did it for us first and says as always, "Follow me!"

Let us bow before God in prayer.

Holy God, we come before you asking that you would give us a sense of that grace made known to us in Jesus Christ which is passionate to restore us into fellowship with you and passionate for us to find fellowship with one another. Help us to be Your ambassadors in this. Even as we name the most painful relationships in our lives before you, give us grace to know what steps to take to bring your healing. Amen.

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