

A Leader Says, “I Am Not Okay”

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, January 16, 2022, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Psalm 51:1-17](#)

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With everything else that’s going on in the world, you may have missed the news that Maya Angelou is among twenty women to be honored over the next four years on quarters issued by the U.S. Mint. This news actually broke a year ago. What happened this week to bring this back into the news cycle is that the Angelou quarter has started circulating. I was pleased to hear this news. Angelou is certainly deserving of this honor. I’m not sure how they could limit this series to twenty women. How do you decide which twenty women will be officially honored as “remarkable”? Still, I was rejoicing that Angelou is on the list.

And then I saw a tweet about the coin’s release. The tweet noted that while Angelou would be on the back of the quarter, the front of the coin will continue to depict a slaveholder. That tweet stopped me. It made me ponder. It made me think about all the great things George Washington did, including creating the American presidency. And it made me think about the fact that, nonetheless, he enslaved people.

As I thought about these things, my mind came back to a truth that is simultaneously simple and complex: none of us is the worst thing we ever did. The worst thing you ever did no more defines who you are than the worst thing I ever did defines who I am. We are each much more than any single moment, bad or good. We are each much more than one choice or even a series of choices that took us down a road of sin, or even a road of glory.

We have a clear example of this in the stories about King David. The David saga takes the second half of 1 Samuel and all of 2 Samuel to tell. It’s good literature and I encourage you to read it if you haven’t (or haven’t recently). The fact that the David saga takes one-and-a-half books to tell made me wonder, could part of the reason the people of Israel started seeing David as larger than life, as the great king of Israel, be that David had a good PR team? Even though he wasn’t the first king, nor the purest king, he has been viewed as the greatest king. And it is from *his* lineage that the Messiah was expected to come.

There’s one particular story in the David saga that I want to remind you of. It’s told in 2 Samuel 11 and 12. It’s the story of David, Bathsheba, and Uriah. In the story, we read about David spotting Bathsheba bathing. He sends for her, has sexual intercourse with her, and she becomes pregnant. Once David learns that Bathsheba’s pregnant, he sends for her husband, Uriah, who is an officer in Israel’s army, off fighting in a war. David tries to convince Uriah to relax for a few days – if you know what I mean – in an attempt to cover up the adultery (which, to be honest, I see as more like a rape). Uriah refuses to relax in all the comforts of home while his men are facing the hardships of war, so David has Uriah and his men sent on a suicide mission so Uriah will be killed in battle. With Uriah dead, David

brings Bathsheba into his home and marries her. Chapter 11 ends with this understatement: “The thing David had done displeased the Lord.”¹

In 2 Samuel 12, the prophet Nathan confronts David with his sins – the adultery and the murder. It is perhaps worth noting that these two sins are among the big 10 listed in the Ten Commandments. Confronted by the truth that Nathan speaks, David acknowledges his sin and repents. In essence, this leader says, “I am not okay.”

At some point, Psalm 51 (today’s scripture reading) got connected to this episode in David’s life. If you look through the book of Psalms in a reliably translated Bible, you’ll notice that some of the psalms have titles or superscriptions. They are frequently musical direction – “To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments.” Sometimes they appear to be attributions of authorship. (The idea that David wrote all the Psalms comes much later than the book itself.)² Some of them might be references to the tune to which a particular psalm is to be sung.

The superscription for Psalm 51 says, “To the leader. A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him after he had gone in to Bathsheba.” While the superscriptions were likely added to the psalms over the decades or centuries by various scribes, it is not surprising that this psalm was associated with the David-Bathsheba-Uriah story. These are the sort of words I would hope a leader would pray when they realize that they are not okay, and largely because of the choices they themselves made.

The truth of the matter is that these words could (and probably should) be prayed by any of us when we realize that we are not okay largely because of the choices we have made. Now, I know that *sin* isn’t a word we use very often in this congregation.

I think that’s because it’s such a loaded word, because it comes with so much baggage. I think most of us associate *sin* with *shame*, and who wants to feel shame? Feeling embarrassment is bad enough. No, we resist feeling shame – or at least we resist acknowledging that we feel shame. So, we resist calling *sin* “sin.”

And I think that’s too bad, because sin is a theological concept. Crime and injury are legal and medical concepts. Sin is a description of our relationship with the divine. It is a theological description. To be aware of one’s sin is to be aware of the brokenness of one’s relationship with God. And to feel guilty about one’s sin is to allow oneself to be accountable to God.

That accountability need not make one feel shame. *Guilt* and *shame* are different. *Guilt* tells us that we *did* something bad. *Shame* tells us that we *are* bad. *Guilt* tells the truth. *Shame* lies. So go ahead and resist feeling shame. But don’t do so at the expense of feeling guilt. Because guilt can be a gift. Guilt tells us that we need healing. Guilt tells us that we need a change of direction. Guilt tells us that we need accountability to God.

In fact, I think we can look at Psalm 51 as a model of the path guilt can take us on to bring healing. Call it a positive guilt trip. The poem starts with a statement of belief. It may

¹ 2 Samuel 11:27b, *New Revised Standard Version*.

² See, for instance, the introduction to the Book of Psalms in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, *New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, 1994), 674.

sound heart-felt to you. I hear it as head-thought. “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love.” This is something the poet believes and states to harness the courage to take this journey. Still in the head, the poet says, “I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.”

Then the poet acknowledges the need for a change: “You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.” This is the bridge from the head to the heart. This is where I hear the poet feeling what have been thoughts until now. “Put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence.” Transform me so much that I can teach transgressors your ways. Because this is the broken openness what you want, God. “The sacrifice acceptable to God is ... a broken and contrite heart,” a heart that will be transformed by God’s love.

The poem starts in the head, saying out loud (perhaps more to the poet than to God) a statement of God’s steadfast love. With the poet, we can believe that God is love. We can believe in God’s mercy. That will allow us to examine our transgressions and to name our sin. Then, in that honesty, we will open our hearts to God and ask that our hearts be transformed. A broken and contrite heart, a heart that can be healed, that can be transformed by God’s love, is the heart that *will* be transformed by God’s love.

I’ve read that neither dogs nor cats truly repent. Imagine discovering that your dog or your cat has just finished eating a piece of beef tenderloin that you left out on the kitchen counter. “When you discover the sin of your pets, you will be presented with dog repentance in the form of Fido approaching you with tail wagging, pleading, ‘love me, love me, love me.’ Socks, on the other hand, will keep licking her paws and looking up occasionally as if to say, ‘Do we have a problem here?’ Neither dog nor cat really repents. And humans emulate them on a regular basis. Both dog and cat are attempting to restore good feelings to a relationship without addressing the real brokenness that has occurred.”³

Our task, when we are not okay because of sin, is to address the real brokenness that has occurred. And to give us the courage to do this work, let me conclude with these four reminders:

1. One: No one, including you and me, is the worst thing we ever did.
2. Two: “... our brokenness is no match for God’s grace. In fact it seems that acknowledging our helplessness is the very path to God’s mercy.”⁴
3. Three: “Grace does not come without grief. For our hearts to heal, we must first be honest about their brokenness.”⁵
4. And four: If there ever was a place for us to be honest about our own brokenness it is the church.

Amen.

³ Geoffrey M. St. J. Moare, “Pastoral Perspective: Psalm 51:1-17,” *Feasting on the Word, Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 8-10.

⁴ Brian Erickson, “Homiletical Perspective: Psalm 51:1-17,” *Feasting on the Word, Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*