



CITIZENS *for* PUBLIC JUSTICE

Living Justice and the Psalms: a Lenten Bible study

Week 1 (*Ash Wednesday*): Emotional Poverty

*[Have someone share the **definition of Emotional Poverty**]:*

“Vulnerability, isolation, and intense emotional suffering. Emotional poverty is not the exclusive domain of “the poor.” Anyone can fall victim to its brokenness. God invites us to acknowledge our own weaknesses, as doing so allows us to both experience God's tremendous grace, and to respond faithfully to the physical and emotional needs of others.” (p. 27, *Living Justice*)

*[Invite members to be silent before saying this or another **opening prayer**]:*

Almighty and ever-living God, you hate nothing you have made, and you forgive the sins of all who are penitent. Create in us new and honest hearts, so that, truly repenting of our sins, we may receive from you, the God of all mercy, full pardon and forgiveness through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, on God, now and forever.
Amen.

(Evangelical Lutheran Worship p. 26)

*[Ask a member to **read this passage of Scripture** aloud]:*

Psalm 51: 1-17 (NRSV)

- 1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.
- 2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.
- 3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.
- 4 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 judgement.
- 5 Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.
- 6 You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
- 7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- 8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
- 9 Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.
- 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a steadfast spirit within me.
- 11 Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

12Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

13Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

14Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

15O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

16For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.

17The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

*[Allow each person a few moments to **respond to this question**]:*

What stands out to you about this passage?

*[Allow for some silence and then ask a member to **read the discussion aloud**]:*

Psalm 51 is written as David's confession to the Lord after he is confronted by the Prophet Nathan about his affair with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12). 2 Samuel 11 tells the story of David, who upon seeing her bathing and being struck by her beauty, has Bathsheba brought to the palace where the two have an affair and she becomes pregnant. When Bathsheba's husband Uriah returns to Jerusalem from the battlefield, David attempts to cover up his indiscretion by instructing Uriah to go home to the company of his wife so it will appear that he fathered the child. When Uriah refuses, David has him sent into the heart of the battle where he is killed. With Uriah out of the way, David makes Bathsheba his wife. These actions displease God who sends the prophet Nathan to confront David about his actions (2 Samuel 12).

It is not known exactly when this psalm is composed, but it clearly has a strong confessional tone. It is often used by both Christians and Jews as a psalm of penitence. The troubles addressed in Psalm 51 are with the self, not with others or God. These are inward personal struggles, focused on David's shortcomings, vulnerability and emotional suffering. While Psalm 51 can be thought of as an expression of David's individual experience and penitence it is most often used as a form of corporate confession.

There are two clear focuses in this text: confession of sin and request for God's gracious renewal. Biblical scholar James L. Mays says, "The psalm itself is the liturgy of the broken heart."¹ It begins with the clear confession of God's love and mercy. The act of confession then comes in response to the grace that God has already fully extended. Yet it is more than just a confession of David's specific actions; it is a confession of how human beings act in the world against themselves, others and God. In this sense, we are all impoverished; we all have need for God's renewal.

1 Mayes, James L. *Interpretation A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching Psalms*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. P. 203.

Psalm 51 clearly states that God is the great renewer and source of forgiveness. This is particularly visible in verse 10: "Create a clean heart for me, O God, and put a steadfast spirit within me." God, the source of creation, has the ability to make something from nothing, like in Genesis 1-2. The use of ritual verbs like wash, cleanse, purge, also highlight God as the one to create or renew the change that is being asked for in this confession.

When, like David, we humble ourselves and admit our own brokenness to God, we can be assured that God extends both forgiveness and renewal. This is not about being crushed or broken by our sin and emotional poverty, but living in the freedom of God's grace. God is the one with the power to make anew the human being, and in recognizing our own emotional poverty, submitting ourselves to God is what opens the door to that process of renewal. It is in the renewed being that a person can look beyond themselves towards acting in the world for others.

*[Have someone **read aloud from Living Justice**: "Drawing Near to Weakness" by Rebecca Warren p. 36-37]*

*[Spend a few moments allowing everyone to **respond to the following discussion questions**]:*

1. When, from a place of emotional poverty, have you experienced God's grace?
2. In your experience, how has being open and honest about your vulnerability allowed you to deepen your relationships with God and others?
3. What is the connection between confession and renewal? How can you see this in your own life?
4. How does a better understanding of our own emotional poverty affect how we can support others' physical and emotional needs?

*[Try one of the three **suggested activities** on p. 38-39 of Living Justice]*

*[Close with **another reading** of Psalm 51 and the **prayer** by Richard Schwass on p. 40 in Living Justice]*