

“When God’s hand is heavy upon us”

October 31, 2010

Text: Psalm 32:1-7, Luke 19:1-10

I.

Like many of you, I’m a big fan of the Dalai Lama. In a conversation on the inborn ***hunger for happiness*** that drives us all, he observed:

The more I see of the world, the clearer it becomes that no matter what our situation ... rich or poor, educated or not, whatever our race, gender, religion, we all desire to be happy. It’s in our nature.

He goes on to talk about how everything we do, within the context of our circumstances, is a response to this great concern: *How am I to be happy?*

Psalm 32 is one of my favorite Psalms. I love the depth of its insight into the human situation. In Psalm 32, happiness comes from being forgiven. It comes from being forgiven, understood and accepted.

In fact, when we’re not fully at peace with ourselves—when we’re not feeling forgiven, understood and accepted—it’s usually because something is out of sync or *not right* with our spirit. It’s that feeling of uneasiness or anxiety because some part of our spirit—something within us—is not settled or at peace.

Sometimes, it’s something we said that didn’t come out quite right ... like when we have a bad moment ... or a series of extended bad moments. The point is there are times when *we’re not right* ... when there’s an imbalance, an uneasiness, however subtle, in our spirit.

Sometimes it’s more than uneasiness; it’s guilt. And unresolved guilt, over time, can wear away at us. It can burden us and weigh us down to the point where *we’re not ourselves*; and left unattended—again, over time—it can transmute into depression and it can bring us down.

II.

Psalm 32 reveals a keen understanding of the human spirit and of our human situation when it comes to guilt. It understands the importance of a clean and healthy spirit. CHECK IT OUT!

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. And happy are those in whom God sees no wrong or immorality or deceit.

In other words, it's blessed and good to have an unburdened spirit. If we think about it, we know that. Like when we know there are things we need to attend to with others or things we've been holding back in ourselves.

The relief we feel when we take care of things.

- When we make the phone call we need to make to check on someone, to see how they're doing and offer some words of support.
- Or when we follow through on some commitment we made that we haven't gotten around to take care of.
- Or when we are able to vent pent up frustration or anger to a family member or friend. Don't we all need to *vent* now and then? Don't we need to *let it out* and clean out the spirit?

Left undone, these things wear on us. But, the **Psalmist** understands. CHECK IT OUT!

*While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
And my strength was dried up as if by the heat of summer.*

Wow, isn't this an insightful confession of the spirit? When we bottle things up inside us; when we don't express them ... don't deal with them ... don't get them out and tell the truth about ourselves, it affects our health. It can literally make us sick.

The **psalmist's** body *wasted away* through groaning all day long. Hear it again:

For day and night God's hand was heavy upon me ... and my strength was dried up as if by the heat of summer.

The sin in our spirit, friends, the unresolved guilt or whatever it is ... it saps the strength out of us. But God knows ... and **God's hand is heavy upon us** because God wants us to do something about it: confess ... repent ... turn in some way to God, whatever it takes, to unburden ourselves.

Hear the **Psalmist** again: *Then I acknowledged my sin before God ...no longer hiding it ... and God forgave the guilt of my sin.*

Happy are those whose sins are forgiven!

III.

This may well be what was happening with Zacchaeus in our reading from Luke 19. In the story, Zacchaeus is obviously a troubled man. By troubled, I mean there's a burden

in his spirit, a heaviness in his soul. But how could there not be? He's a chief tax collector.

In first century Palestine, chief tax collectors were compromised human beings. Typically, they were rich and were widely known for colluding with Rome and for taking advantage of others to make a better profit for themselves. THINK subprime mortgage agents on steroids.

In general, in the gospel stories—and particularly in Luke—Jesus has some harsh words for the rich.

1. Early in Luke, Jesus blesses the poor but warns the rich: *But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation* (Luke 6:24).
2. In chapter twelve, Jesus tells a parable of a rich farmer who wanted to build bigger barns to store his crops, but that very night, judgment comes knocking on his door.
3. A few chapters later, Jesus tells a parable that contrasts Lazarus in heaven with the rich man in hell.
4. And in chapter 18, right before our reading this morning, the rich young ruler in the parable—in spite of his many virtues—walks away from Jesus sad.

In contrast, Jesus only has words of healing and encouragement for Zacchaeus. And thinking about it, we can't help but wonder what was going on with Zacchaeus that day that led him to want to see Jesus.

- No doubt, he'd heard about Jesus ... about his reputation as a healer, perhaps, and his customary practice of welcoming and breaking bread with every kind of person.
- No doubt he'd heard about how the Spirit, somehow, seemed alive and powerful in Jesus.
- No doubt he'd heard about the way people were affected by Jesus—by his love and the sheer energy and charisma of his presence.

But the bottom line—still—was that he sensed, given all that was going on in his spirit, that he needed to see Jesus. He knew things weren't right with him.

IV.

More than we ever want to admit, most of us know the difference between right and wrong. The problem isn't that we don't know. The problem is that we don't want to admit it. We don't want to admit that we're off base and are bending the truth a bit.

- Easily, we get lost in the clutches of the greed or pride that has found too prominent a place in our spirit.
- And soon, paying no heed to possible consequences, it becomes a way of life.

That's when we need a *voice from the holy* to sound out, nudging us out of our sin and calling us back to God.

For King David, after he had sinned with Bathsheba and then, worse still, had plotted to have her husband, Uriah the Hittite, killed in battle, the *holy voice* was the prophet Nathan who pronounced judgment upon David, calling him to his knees in repentance and igniting a painful process that led David back to God.

It wasn't that David didn't know he was wrong. As king, over time, he had simply been corrupted by power. He had grown use to thinking he could do whatever he wanted.

No doubt, to some extent, it was the same with Zacchaeus. Surely, Zacchaeus knew when he was exploiting people and being hard-hearted in the function of his duties. Sometimes, we sin because we can ... there's no greater power to stop us. Still, most of the time, we know.

Again, who knows what was going on in Zacchaeus' spirit that led to his encounter with Jesus and, eventually, to new life and a new future beyond?

When God's hand is heavy upon us!

V.

Psalm 32 sounds out in tones of universal application. But it is particularly helpful to the Zacchaeuses of the world.

- For those of us, desperate for forgiveness even though, at first, we may not know it.
- For people, eager for an experience of God's grace, even though we may not be able to articulate it.
- For people bent over with guilt and the heaviness of sin in our lives but, somehow, unable to see it.

It's like, when we hear the words, *Happy are those whose sin is forgiven!* When we hear them often enough, eventually, we go, *wow, that's it. That's what's been weighing me down. I need the grace of God to wash over me. I need to be forgiven.*

So often, friends, if we give the Bible a chance, it tells us who we are—in the stories and in the teachings—and it helps us understand ourselves and find our way to healing and renewal.

When God's hand is heavy upon us, the spirit comes ... and confession rises up in our spirit:

*Then I acknowledged by sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity. I said, **I will confess my transgressions to the Lord, and you forgave the guilt of my sin.***

VI.

And Zacchaeus rushed ahead so he could quickly position himself in a tree to see Jesus. And when Jesus came to that place, he looked up and said to Zacchaeus,

Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.

And Zacchaeus couldn't believe it and, quickly, hurried down to welcome Jesus. And some of the folks who saw all of this began grumbling to themselves: *Look, he's invited a sinner to break bread with him. What's with that?*

And then Zacchaeus, overcome with healing and good will said, ***I will give half my assets to the poor and pay back four-fold anyone I have wronged.***

And Jesus said, ***Today salvation has come to this house for he, too, is a son of Abraham.***

When God's hand is heavy upon us, God's love, grace and salvation cannot be held back from any of us.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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