

“When God’s hand is heavy upon us”

March 14, 2010

Text: Psalm 32, Luke 15:11-32

I.

We talk all the time in our common lives about stress and how so many of us live such stressful lives. By stress, I mean some form of overload on our mental, psychological and spiritual being.

Stress is having too many responsibilities and burdens for our life situation. It’s having too many worries and preoccupations. It’s feeling too much pressure for whatever; pressure that—day after day—wears us down.

In our wider culture, there’s so much pressure to produce bottom line results.

1. Take the business world—in particular, the people who work in sales. Companies put incentives out there for their sales people to achieve. However, when they achieve them, rather than reward them, they raise the bar still more, making even greater demands.

They tighten the margins, creating a work environment where, increasingly, every ounce of production is squeezed out of them. Where’s the joy and satisfaction for a job well done? And of course, it’s all driven by profits—by insatiable greed.

2. Then there’s the world of sports—both college and professional. It’s all about winning. That’s why it’s often times so hard to have a *clean* program at the college level—where *clean* means not violating any of the detailed guidelines for recruitment etc. And of course, recruitment is the name of the game at the college level. You either *have* the athletes or you don’t.

This same over-emphasis on winning (to the point where the joy of the sport is lost) is clearly why there’s such high turnover with coaches at the professional level.

No matter who any of us is, we can only handle so much.

3. There’s stress, too, for health concerns. Every week, during our prayer time, we hear about real-life situations where loved ones are dealing with cancer or the threat of cancer ... or some other illness, affliction or health challenge.
4. There’s a further form of stress in our culture that’s more subtle. It’s the stress of feeling, all the time, like we have to give the appearance of being happy and successful. Much of our social life plays out around these sorts of expectations. At least, this is the perception that we think we have to project.

II.

Without becoming too sappy or melancholic, we need to be able to tell the truth about how we're feeling ... about how we're doing. None of us should feel like we have to act superficially happy and successful all the time—particularly if we're going through some genuinely tough times.

It's a healthy thing for us in every way if we're able to tell the truth about ourselves. For sure, we need to find the right balance and—to some extent—choose our time and place, but we need to be able to be real.

Psalm 32 is a powerful and gripping Psalm. It's known as a *wisdom* Psalm or a *penitential* Psalm. What I like about it is that it's functional, which means it serves a clear purpose. And the reason it's functional is because it's confessional.

It reminds us that, as human beings, and certainly as Christians, we need to be able to bring our confession before God. We need to be able to tell God what's in our hearts. Learning to do this in honest and mature ways can help tremendously in reducing our stress levels.

You may have read where, recently, Marion Jones, the disgraced Olympic track and field star who, at one point, was at the apex of the sports world ... (a couple of years ago, she admitted steroid use and went to prison for lying or for some untruth around all of this) ... how she recently signed on with some team in the WNBA (Women's Basketball Association).

Now 34, in her college days she was a point guard at North Carolina, one of the top college basketball programs in the country. In many ways, it's amazing how someone with all of her natural beauty and ability got all caught up in a world of ongoing deceit.

When I think about her—and about Tiger Woods, too—I wonder how they went about doing their business amidst all of the lies and untruths. You'd think it would be an awful burden.

III.

Listen to **Psalm 32** on its call to confession ...

It starts out with a couple of beatitudes to set the tone:

*Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.
Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*

Right away, the words of confession pour out of the heart and soul of the Psalmist:

While I kept silence, my body wasted away ... through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; (referring to God's hand) and my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you (to God), and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord, and you forgave my sin.

What makes this **Psalm** so powerful is that it is so *right on* about the human situation—about us, our lives ... our burdens, our stress, our guilt ... human stuff that we've been keeping inside, that weights us down.

We can all relate because we all have stuff we—for whatever reason—choose NOT to take to God. Sometimes, we try to live our lives as if we don't need God.

- Not that we don't believe and are not faithful and a good person and all the rest.
- But there's this element in our wider culture—our religious culture, too—that's thinks needing God is weakness (particularly for us men) ... and that if we need God, we're in some way deficient.
- How sad.

IV.

The widely respected theologian, **Wolfgang Pannenberg** once said, *Sin is failing to find the SOURCE OF LIFE in our search for life.*

It's not that we're not searching for God or are meaning to be disrespectful or anything else. It's that we're searching for God in the wrong places. How can we find God when we're concealing our burdens and our stress and our worries, and all because we don't want to be that open and honest about who we are?

And when that happens—easily—we get locked into life-patterns where we try too hard to seek the meaning of life through *upward mobility* and the *acquisition of power*; through our *investment portfolio* or the *impressive title* on our desk; or through our children's sports teams, academic achievements and other community-bestowed accolades.

Again, we end up *not* finding God because we're searching for God in the wrong places. As **Wolfgang Pannenberg** alerts us: we're *failing to find the SOURCE of LIFE in the search for life*. That's sin; and it's sin that needs confession because it ends up blocking us from God.

As **Psalm 32** knows, we all have stuff we need to confess—unload ... put behind us ... find relief from. Friends, we all need God—just as we all need other human beings (our family and friends) and we all need love and affection. Needing these things is NOT so much being *needy* as it is being human. And that's a good thing.

When we try to act like we're not needy in any way, we aren't being truthful and we're not being real. We human beings need things; we're social creatures. There are times in all of our lives when we need a new beginning, a fresh start.

We all have stuff in our heart or spirit—rough edges of whatever kind, human tendencies, habits—whatever they are—for which we need forgiveness. That's the human situation.

Psalm 32 invites this forgiveness in us. The psalmist knows the power of sin that lingers, unforgiven. Why? Because he knows—still more—the power forgiveness holds for new life.

V.

Listen again ...

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

That's what happens to us—literally—when we keep things stored up inside ... when we don't open up and bring our confession—whatever it is—before God.

Going on, again, the **Psalmist** adds,

*Then I acknowledged my sin to God ...and I did not hide my iniquity; I said **I will confess my transgressions to God ... and God forgave the guilt of my sin.***

There's a real sense in which God's forgiveness awaits our confession. This reality hovers over the Parable of the Prodigal Son giving us perhaps the most powerful image of Christian love in all of the Bible:

- the image of the waiting father, waiting for his son to *come to his senses* and to come home again ...
- ... symbolizing the gripping hope that runs throughout the Christian Scriptures—namely, that we can live again.

The joy of forgiveness is precisely this: the new life that ensues. Once the sin is articulated and the forgiveness is pronounced, the guilt is removed; it recedes it evaporates. And we can live again.

For, indeed, as the **Psalmist** reminds us: *Happy are those whose transgressions are forgiven.*

All praise be unto God! Amen!

Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz
Miami Lakes Congregational Church, *United Church of Christ*
6701 Miami Lakeway South
Miami Lakes, FL 33014
On the web at www.mlchurch.com