

## Renew a Right Spirit, Part I

John Wilkinson

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

November 13, 2022

Psalm 51

Every year church Stewardship Committees brainstorm on themes, hoping to come up with the right combo of words and images that will unlock and unleash riches beyond measure. Every year. Your Stewardship Committee is no different. We gathered on Zoom in the summer and started thinking, cogitating, reflecting. I know a man who had a successful advertising career – at one point he was responsible for the national campaigns for Pepsi and Burger King. I am sure that advertising, TV, radio, every form of social media, has its impact on me. I am sure. If someone said to me right now “You need Indeed,” I am sure I would respond “Indeed I do,” because I heard that commercial on TV and radio about a million times in the last month. Still, I am not sure how much a stewardship theme matters. If it’s a good theme, will you pledge more? If it’s not so compelling, will you decrease your pledge? And yet.

Your Stewardship Committee chooses a theme because it hopes it will help provide a window. Funds development people talk about making a compelling case. In the church world, I like to talk about telling a story. A theme helps us to tell a story, helps us to frame out the vision of the church and the reasons you are invited to support it with your financial gifts. That’s what we endeavored to do. We brainstormed and brainstormed some more, with themes and images. We landed on Psalm 51, and its tenth verse: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.” We massaged it a bit – “renew a right spirit” – and Rebecca Thornburgh created a terrific logo to help us visualize those words. And there you have it. If it helps you to pledge more – great. If you’re not so convinced, ignore that impulse, and pledge more anyway.

What that theme has done, though, over the fall, is provide a focus. You have heard members talking in compelling ways and read words and seen images about renewal, about that vision of

a right spirit. We have been very clear about the straight-line connection between that vision and the call to support it financially, which I will get to in a minute. But always it's been the vision. Renew a right spirit. And so I thought we would take a bit of a bigger picture step back today, in anticipation of next Sunday when we will present our pledge cards, and look at the vision behind the vision.

Psalm 51, which we have experienced in all of its fullness this morning, is one of those capstone psalms that not only captures much of what was going on in the psalmist's heart and mind but also reflects the life and heart and mind and soul of the community, that Israelite community. The Eagles don't play until Monday night and sadly there is no more baseball, only debates about pulling Wheeler, so you have time to visit and revisit Psalm 51 this afternoon or in the coming days.

As I said, it is a capstone psalm. Scholars identify it as one of seven penitential psalms, whereby the psalmist expresses a deep sense of penance and penitence and contrition. In fact, we use a portion of this psalm as our prayer of confession from time to time.

The psalmist does not bury the lead. Have mercy on me, O God. Have mercy. The psalmist uses that term, "steadfast love," as the reason why asking for mercy to God will matter. We never fully understand the nature of the sin that the psalmist confesses – perhaps that's the point. If there is a deep dive into the specifics, then we can say "that's not me" or "that's not us." But here, sense the depth of confession, the intensity and earnestness. Transgressions. Iniquity. Cleanse me from my sin. Again, we don't know what the sin is, and the balance between speaking for oneself and on behalf of the people. Whatever it is it is serious – it is "evil in God's sight" – and whatever it is, God has a right to judge, to condemn.

Then there are verses of self-reflection. "I was born guilty." This verse is one of the launching points for the doctrine we call "original sin," that for good and ill and sometimes both, has had a deep impact on how faith plays itself out in daily living. What do we do with "I was born guilty." That's a burden to bear for anyone. Or a notion to overcome. Or a perspective to ignore or reject.

We, in our tradition, have affirmed that notion of original sin. But we have not stopped there. That's the point of the psalm. It goes on. Asking God for wisdom – that's just fine. Removing sin. Yes. And perhaps there are times when we think that God would cast us out, that either we as an individual or we as a collected community think ourselves unworthy of God's grace and mercy and love. Perhaps it's good to articulate that, perhaps that's the point. But for those who are suffering, those who are depressed or isolated or unsure, any of us, I would never, ever want them to consider that God would cast them out, not be in relationship.

Then our pivotal verse: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." A plea for renewal, a plea for restoration, a plea for sustenance, a plea for new beginnings. There are a couple of verses following that lay out a threat – transgressors, sinners, potential bloodshed. Perhaps, the scholars theorize, that's the exile. Perhaps something else. But if the psalmist makes it through that, praise will be sung, and more than that, right worship will be offered.

We sin.

God forgives.

Renewal and restoration happen.

We express gratitude.

It is a beautiful vision reflecting a powerful rhythm. Confession. Forgiveness. New life.

Gratitude. Without saying it, the psalmist is talking about grace, God's unconditional welcome, unmerited, underserved, in the face of humanity's continual and continuing sin. Forgiveness and grace are not dependent on us, but God. That is tremendously good news, the best news.

And we are far more able to receive that grace as we acknowledge our shortcomings. We don't pray a prayer of confession to make us feel guilty, though it can feel that way. We pray a prayer of confession to help us embrace yet again the enormity and depth of God's forgiveness.

What does this have to do – at all – with stewardship, with how we respond with our financial gifts to support the mission and ministry of the church, this church. Here's how I think it might work. We have not been in exile in the same way that our Israelite forbears were. And yet there

are exile dynamics all around. COVID was a kind of exile, when we lost our rhythm, when many suffered in many ways, when the critical nature of some things we had been taking for granted came into clearer view, and, when some of our cultural divisions became even deeper. A kind of exile. And we need to spend time reflecting on that – our response. Our Matthew 25 commitment is just that, looking at congregational vitality through the lens of poverty and racism. In the face of all that, we call on God for renewal. Emerging-from-COVID renewal that also ups our game in terms of responding authentically and wholistically to the real challenges our world faces. Renewal.

Over the course of the fall, and today, you have experienced the elements of what that renewal looks like – ministry supporting the faith development of our children, youth, families and adults, their hearts and minds and souls. Music and arts which inspire and challenge us. Social witness, what we call our outreach, our mission, that seeks to meet the immediate needs of our neighbors through food and clothing and whose longer-term vision is to address the root causes that created those needs in the first place.

In our budget, much of that looks like supporting our staff – as makes sense – who guide and support this work on our behalf. And a great portion of that in our budget supports the costs of this place – this lovely edifice and its systems and its cooling and heating and cleaning and running. We get that.

What I hope we can get is that this budget is at best a reflection of values and priorities, and for us, a reflection of that call for renewal.

“Clean heart” can be a tricky phrase, leading to thoughts of purity and moralism. But think of that clean heart as a sign of renewal, or a kind of emerging from COVID re-boot and re-calibration that says we will aim to connect more deeply with our membership while serving our neighbors – in Chestnut Hill and Mt. Airy and Germantown, in Philadelphia, more broadly.

Simply put – that renewal costs money.

And simply put, our landscape is changing.

There are fewer of us pledging. If you've pledged in the past, please consider doing it again. Some of you give generously, yet without pledging. If you can make that shift, that would help us in our planning. Some of you have not and do not pledge. Without singing for my supper too much, would you be open to that invitation, supporting this vision of renewal and all that it takes to make it happen?

We all know the narrative. The decline of religion. Cynicism. Other choices to make. Generational disinterest. And yet here we are – with a vision for renewal. I believe this vision for renewal matters to each of us and all of us, and more so, I believe it matters as it spills out from this place to all the places that are hungry for hope and love and the kind of grace our new favorite psalm outlines.

God is creating new things all the time. I believe that. And I believe that we are called by God to be the vehicles, the vessels, for that renewal, in the lives we live, in the things we support, and yes, in and through this church. I believe that.

There is an old fundraising adage. It's not "give till it hurts, but give till it feels good." The psalmist speaks of joy and pleasure. Perhaps that can be the case, a gift in giving with the sense that you are supporting this vision of renewal. If that's the case, then the theme has been helpful in framing your response. As Laurie mentioned, you will receive, if you haven't already, your pledge card in the mail. Bring it next week, and offer it, as an important way to support this place and its mission, but more so, as an investment in grace and the hope you place in the vision of renewal, in the God who forgives and redeems and restores, and calls us to do the same. Amen.