

Renew a Right Spirit, Part II

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Psalm 51

This is one of those days when there is a lot going on. Liturgically speaking – and who doesn't speak liturgically – it is a day called "Christ the King" Sunday, a day added to the liturgical calendar in 1925 by Pope Pius XI as a way to respond to, in his mind, growing secularism. Protestants later adopted this Sunday, sometimes called "Reign of Christ" Sunday, and placed it on the last Sunday of the liturgical year.

That means that today is that Sunday, and therefore the last Sunday before Advent starts. We know it's almost Advent because Target had its Christmas displays out in August and the radio stations have been going 24-hour "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas" for several weeks. We will properly pivot to Advent next week, but we can already sense it coming, and not just because of the weather. And we will do our best not to get to Christmas itself too soon, with plenty of talk about anticipation and expectation and preparation.

And though it's not a liturgical day per se, it's a Sunday filled with theological meaning, the Sunday before Thanksgiving, a day not yet totally overwhelmed by commercialization, a day, at its best, when we can focus on the important practice of gratitude, gratitude for things great and small.

So there is a lot going on, liturgically speaking, and we overlay all of that on what already is going on in our world – just days after momentous midterm elections, concerns about inflation and food prices, war continuing in Ukraine, all of the other headlines that reflect our conflicts and divisions, including the killing of three football players at the University of Virginia and the killings – just last night – of five people at an LGBTQ club in Colorado Springs.

We are distracted by sports, or at least I am, but even sports these days can fail to offer the kind of respite from the real world that we seek. The World Cup, which I love, is a good example.

And yet...Taylor Swift has a new album – my daughter says it's good. "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever" is out – see it, it is good.

And, in case you missed it, at the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, it is Stewardship Sunday, the day when we make our financial pledges for the next year to support the church's mission and ministry. Different churches do it at different times, most over the course of the fall. We do it on this day – typically Christ the King Sunday, the Sunday before Thanksgiving, the last Sunday of the liturgical year.

Logistically speaking, when this sermon is completed, you are invited to come forward and place your pledge card in the basket. If you forgot yours, there are additional ones located in the pews. Then I hope you will stay and enjoy a pancake brunch prepared by the Stewardship Committee and friends to celebrate our mission and ministry. There will be activities for the kids of an Advent-y nature. If you are not quite ready to pledge today, I do hope you will do so soon – bring in your pledge card next Sunday, or mail it to the church, or send a confidential email. The sooner the better as we are already working on next year's budget, and this helps immensely with our planning.

Over the course of the fall, your fellow church members have made the case for support, about how and why this church's ministry matters – worship, music, arts, mission, education, nurture, all led by gifted staff and much of it happening in, and from, this place, this building. These messages have been organized around a theme, the tenth verse of Psalm 51 – "create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." We have paraphrased that a bit, creative licensed it: "renew a right spirit." We will unpack that just a bit more.

But first a simple message from the Session and Stewardship Committee. Thank you. Thank you in advance for your pledge. Thank you. It is an act of faith made in a moment when acts of faith are either viewed with decreasing relevance or increasing concern, or both. That is to say, the culture takes religion less and less seriously, or it looks at religion with greater and greater concern. We – you – think religion, faith, neither irrelevant nor a cause for concern, but rather a matter of importance and a matter of hope. Religious, faith, Christian faith, even as it is practiced here, matters to you, and you believe it can matter in the world.

Money is not the only way to support it, and you understand that as well, coming out of COVID, or at least adjusting to a new COVID reality. You exercise your faith in the way you interact with others, the way you use your time, the way it gives shape to your beliefs. All of these matter, and matter a great deal.

But this does too. Stewardship is a word we typically associate with money, even thinking of it in a more secular way, fundraising with a religious patina. If that's the case, that's our bad. Stewardship is about how we care for, nurture and invest, all of the gifts God gives us. That includes our time, our work, our values, our relationships, our things. And it includes our money. In that sense, every Sunday, every day, is Stewardship Sunday, an opportunity to share what we have received. But this day takes on a special meaning as you formally make your intentions known. So thank you. Thank you.

Renew a right spirit. Psalm 51 is called a penitential psalm, as we explored last week. The psalmist confesses at a deep level and profound way, a sense of confession, of sinfulness, and the need for God's mercy. In verse 10, "create in me a clean heart, O God," we get what in the funds development world is called "the ask." Having laid out the record, how do we hope God to respond? Renewal.

Renew a right spirit. Of this verse, biblical scholar Artur Weiser writes that "the petition for a new heart...springs from the profound realization of (human) nature: when sin is an intrinsic part of (human) nature, its overcoming is possible only if God creates a new nature which accords with God's purpose." We cannot overcome our nature by our own efforts, Weiser says, but "only with a steadfast spirit given to (us) by God. It is God who will bring about change in our hearts; any morality, and good, is a gracious gift of God." (See pages 406-407 in "The Psalms" in the Old Testament Library) We ask God to do what we can do ourselves, Walter Brueggemann writes. (See pages 100-101 in "The Message of the Psalms")

"Renewal" is a tricky word. A while back, a series of books was published on the future of the Presbyterian church. More than one author lamented the changes we were facing. Some even called for a return to what was. I understand that, at least in part. Perhaps you do as well. And yet. And yet. Renewal is not about nostalgia, about the days when Sunday mornings rolled around everyone popped up and made their way to church. Those days only really existed for a short time in American history anyway. But stores are open on Sundays now. That won't

change. Soccer practice happens on Sunday mornings, or baseball or lacrosse or hockey. That won't change. Automatic, presumptive church membership is a thing of the past. We can lament, for a bit, but if we get stuck in looking back, rather than looking around and looking forward, renewal simply can't and won't happen. Renewal is about what is next, about responding faithfully NOW, about innovating into the future rather than seeking to recapture the past.

And "right" can be a tricky word also. It can contain more than a little hint of moralism, the quest for purity. We know how poorly that quest can go. Morals, yes, how we live our lives, how we make ethical choices, how we engage with others, especially those different from us, how we spend our money, exercise our agency. Morals, yes. But when that creeps into moralism, Houston, we can have a problem. Legislating how others live and behave, and doing so from a position of piety and self-righteousness, can be a shaky proposition. Doing so by "baptizing" those positions as Christian, or exclusively Christian, or as the only ways that Christianity can be exercised, can be highly problematic, and worse. A right spirit is about God's righteousness, not ours, and our ever-constant efforts to measure our lives against God's hopes for them. We have, in this place, adopted Matthew 25 as a kind of measuring stick, God's call to address poverty and racism as a way to think about what "right" looks like.

And "spirit" can be a tricky word. Back in the days when brick and mortar bookstores were a thing, you could track the change, and you can do the same thing online now. Fewer and fewer books on "religion," and more and more on "spirituality." The phrase "spiritual but not religious" came into vogue, seeking to separate the life of the spirit with the practices of institutional religion. And I get it. The church has not always been its own best representative. And I do know that mindfulness practices, yoga, meditation – things not always associated by the church and sometimes rejected by them – can matter, do matter. But the life of the spirit, to us, is never an independent thing, existing either apart from God's Spirit of the life of community. "Spirit" here, in Psalm 51, reflects a Hebrew word for wind, the wind of our spirit joining others, joining God's to allow new breath, clean and fresh breath.

So while we need to be mindful of what "renew a right spirit" can mean – neither nostalgia nor moralism nor individuality – we can be empowered by it. God doing

a new thing, bringing about justice, transforming community. In a particular sense – and I hope not too crass of a sense – that is what you are investing in when you make your pledge. In the broader sense, that is what stewardship is about, seeking the new and investing in our shared calling to be transformed and be transforming. Pledging, of course, is not the end point, but the beginning. This kind of renewal is continuous, the call to justice ongoing, a spiritual community always evolving. It is challenging, challenging for all of the 2022 reasons we've laid out. But it is always a gift. Restore to me the JOY of your salvation, the psalmist writes. The joy, not the burden. Such joy brings delight to God.

You may know this story...Martin Rinkart was a Lutheran pastor who came to Eilenburg, Saxony, at the beginning of the Thirty Years' War, in 1620 or so. The walled city of Eilenburg became the refuge for political and military fugitives, Overcrowded, facing deadly pestilence and famine, overrun by armies three times. The Rinkart home was a refuge for the victims. During the height of a severe plague in 1637, Rinkart was the only surviving pastor in Eilenburg, conducting as many as 50 funerals in a day. He performed more than 4000 funerals in that year, including that of his wife.

In the face of his war-torn, plague-ravaged reality, Rinkert wrote a hymn, what we know now, and what we will sing, as "Now Thank We All Our God." It is a thanksgiving hymn. It is a stewardship hymn. It is a hymn of renewal and hope and joy. "Now thank we all our God with heart and hands and voices, Who wondrous things hath done, In whom this world rejoices; Who, from our mothers' arms, Hath blessed us on our way With countless gifts of love, And still is ours today." Amen.