

February 18, 2018  
God's Repair Shop  
Psalm 51:1-17  
Michael Stanfield

A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. 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. Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. *Words of God for the people of God. Let us pray. Bless these ancient words that they may live in us in a new way by your Spirit, Amen.*

We live in a "throwaway" culture. We throw away just about everything.

Not that you haven't noticed. We've been using this expression since *LIFE* magazine first coined the term in an article published in 1955 about a new phenomenon that had emerged in the prosperity of the 1950s. "Throwaway Living" the article was called.

The article noted that instead of using washable handkerchiefs we had begun using tissues and tossing them after blowing our noses.

Instead of washing and reusing cloth diapers, we had begun buying and throwing away disposable diapers.

Instead of taking our tattered shoes to a cobbler many had begun to throw them away because they could afford to buy new ones.

Today we have taken throw-away to a whole new level. We buy thousand dollar electronic devices – from lap-tops to cell phones – that we have no intention of keeping for more than two or three years whether they are fixable or not.

All the way up until the 1970's oodles of small shops existed to repair items that consumers were loath to throw away. Back then a small repair shop could provide a modest family income. You could get your TVs, toasters, radios and irons repaired for a small charge and they were good to go. But these days such shops, for the most part, have completely disappeared.

It's why I have become so intrigued by a new international movement that is both fascinating and heart-warming: "Repair Cafés".

Repair Cafés are free meeting places that are centered on repairing things – together, in community. At a Repair Café, you'll find tools and materials to help you make any repairs you need – on clothes, furniture, electrical appliances, bicycles, and toys. You'll also find expert volunteers with repair skills in every field imaginable.

According to their website, "Visitors bring their broken items from home. Together with the specialists they start making their repairs in the Repair Café. It's an ongoing learning process. If you have nothing to repair, you can enjoy a cup of tea or coffee. Or you can lend a hand with someone else's repair job. You can also get inspired at the reading table – by leafing through books on repairs and Do-It-Yourself."

What began as the modest brainchild of journalist Martine Postma in the Netherlands in 2009 has grown to over 1,300 Repair Cafés worldwide today.

Why do I mention the Repair Café movement this morning? Because our throw away attitude has infected us to the core of our being. We are in desperate need of a place to go for more than just small appliance repair. We need a place to go for *soul* repair – because it would appear that we have learned to throw away things that are far more valuable than clocks, lamps and diapers.

We've learned also to throw away friendships, values, traditions, manners, decency and common sense with the same lack of emotion as we chunk an old computer. We have held this general throw-away attitude for far too long and now many of us are waking up wondering who we are and where we've been and where our life has taken us. (pause)

But whatever you want to call it, we sense down deep that something is wrong. Something is broken. Something is in desperate need of fixing; but it seems hopeless. (pause)

What we need is a *soul* repair café. And in our psalm, we see just that: David taking his broken soul to God's repair café.

As we look in on David – this towering and impressive figure of the Old Testament, this greatest king in Israel's history, this monarch who reigned at the height of Israel's glory – even *he* has developed a throwaway mentality.

+ He has thrown away the laws of God.

- + He has thrown away the sanctity of the marriage bond by going after his neighbor's wife.
- + He has thrown away his self-respect.
- + He has thrown away a woman's honor and reputation.
- + He has thrown away a man's life – the woman's husband, Uriah.
- + In short, he has recklessly thrown away and abandoned the person God called him to be, the person Samuel had anointed when David was but a lad tending sheep, writing poems and playing the lyre.

Here in Psalm 51 is a man ruined, a man whose life is in tatters, a man who is utterly lost. His spirit is broken. His soul is wounded by his own hand. He is sick and distressed. He's been given a diagnosis by the prophet Nathan. He knows the disease. He knows who he really is now and it's not pretty. It nauseates him. And well it should.

He lied. But that's not the half of it. In the style of Harvey Weinstein, he violated the neighbor lady. He then ordered the murder of her husband to cover up his crime. To say he abused his authority and position is a gross understatement. So if anybody needs repairing, it's David. He is in a downward spiral of destruction. He needs *something* or all will be lost – both for him and for God's people! He needs to be fixed, and so he goes to God, the Great Fixer, the Great Repairer of Souls, the Great Weaver of Broken Threads.

David knows a lot about God, and right now the most important thing he knows about God is that God doesn't throw away even those with a god-complex. That's why he can pray, "Do not cast me away from your presence (O Lord), and do not take your holy spirit from me".

God will not cast us away from the divine presence. When we feel far from God, it is not because God has moved. It's because we have. We have moved because we have had a "throwaway God," a God to whom we try and listen mostly, only when it's convenient, a God to whom we pray mostly, only when we are in distress, a God who has become largely irrelevant because we often do not seek God out in our day-to-day lives.

Yet, wonder of wonders, this God does not cast us away. This God repairs and redeems. "For I will restore health to you, and your wounds I will heal, declares the LORD" (Jeremiah 30:17).

"I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten." (Joel 2:25-26).

"Come now (regardless of what you have done); let us reason together," says the LORD: "though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool in the winter" (Isaiah 1:18). It would seem then that God can build – even on the worst in in us.

Repair. This is what God does. We need to take our mistreated discarded souls to God's Repair Café because God knows how to make such things brand new!

And what is the cost of a repair job at God's Fix-It Shop?  
Monetarily – perhaps nothing; but spiritually, everything we've got: The ability to surrender

ourselves to the mercy of God, with the willingness to face the consequences of our destructive behavior or attitude – whatever those consequences may be...

Please note: I am not talking about punishment here. But the fact is that destructive attitudes, thoughts, words, and deeds, once unleashed, take on a destructive life of their own which cannot be undone simply with an eloquent prayer. Bathsheba still has to deal with an offspring from a rape; Uriah is still dead. A throw-away attitude breaks some things that *can't* be fixed: Which makes the one thing that can be fixed very hard to fix: *Broken trust stemming from being guilty of destructive acts.*

I have served on a Committee on Ministry of a presbytery for 21 out of my 31 years in ministry. Among other things, the Committee on Ministry is assigned the task of advocating for and maintaining the health of pastor's and congregations. When things go awry with a pastor and a congregation, folks from the Committee on Ministry are called in to manage the conflict and offer counsel and guidance.

As a rule, both congregations and pastors have a very difficult time separating the office of Minister of the Word and Sacrament from the very human person that holds it. Consequently, congregations often find it difficult to forgive pastors and restore them.

On the other hand, Pastors don't seem to understand that once they have broken a congregation's trust in them around a particular area of ministry, it is naturally and perhaps even rightly, difficult for that congregation to trust them again for some time after their transgression – even when they are able to forgive.

It is unusual, for instance, for a pastor who declares bankruptcy, or comes out as being addicted to pain pills, or who has had an affair leading to divorce, to remain in the congregation where he or she has been serving. And a lot of times it is because there are enough who have been hurt by that pastor's behavior to the point of having lost complete respect for the pastor. For these folks, forgiveness – at least for the foreseeable future – is just not currently in their wheelhouse, so as to make it extremely difficult for that pastor to remain.

But just as often, the pastor naively expects that a contrite “coming clean” about his or her transgressions should be enough. It is as if the pastor's thinking is that, because these people are Christian, they are bound by God to forgive me.

And I would have to say that it is *this* attitude as much, if not more than the transgression itself, that makes a continued tenure with that congregation impossible.

Of course, I *have* known pastors who *were* able to find a new relationship with their congregations and remain after such breaches. I'm talking about stuff like admitting that they were high during worship or missed worship because they were too high; Or had an affair with someone while in the process of leading marriage enrichment workshops; Or made questionable requests of an older, more vulnerable member for personal loans because of mismanagement of personal finances that lead to their bankruptcy.

Yet these pastors were able to remain and eventually have healthy ministries in these congregations again. And I don't believe that it was because their congregations were necessarily more forgiving than others – although that played a part. What really made the difference was *their* willingness to accept the resentment of those who had completely lost respect for them, to work patiently to restore their relationship with them, and all while working to restore themselves personally and professionally to a place of respectability and trust.

I can tell you as one who has been a therapist to pastors going through this, that it is an incredibly difficult and excruciating journey. But what separates those pastors who are restored from the pastors that move on to another congregation or leave the ministry altogether is that they know, beyond a shadow of a doubt that:

1. That something in them is broken;
2. That that brokenness has caused others deep pain;
3. They are still, however, loved by God;
4. They are still called by God;
5. That they are willing to take responsibility for their destructive acts as shown by their willingness to endure incredible relational and psychic pain to get it all fixed so that it does not happen again.

In fact, King David, our scriptures tell us, does all these things.

So, in effect, full repentance involves a heart transplant: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me” begs David. The amazing good news is that God can create that new heart in an instant. And this experience – that God is now ruling one's heart – is something that is absolutely essential to the more difficult restorative work that is ahead.

It is a renewed center of value that allows one to truly understand the damage one has caused another – to stand and take the righteous anger directed at one as a result of one's transgressions, without coming to see oneself as a victim of that anger – indeed as seeing what one has done as deserving of that anger.

It's a tall order; but as the apostle Paul tells us, “...if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17, ESV). For the transgressor, this “new creation” must become a lived experience and not just a theological theory one has faith in.

We sometimes feel that our hearts are beyond repair. And, sometimes, we give up on others whose lives seem wasted and beyond repair. After taking advantage of a woman over whom he had great power and then having her husband killed, David certainly fell into that category. The prophet Nathan could unquestionably have given up on David – but he didn't.

And God could have washed his hands of David too – but he didn't. David was worth fixing because he rediscovered his ultimate worth in God. In the same way, we are worth fixing too – no matter what we have done. That IS good news.

Let us pray. Gracious God, we confess that we live in a throw away culture that extends to our spiritual core. Help us this Lenten season to know, like David that you are in the business of soul repair. Give us the courage to face our transgressions, to repent and to re-center our lives on you. And now bless these gifts that they may serve to heal and restore our broken world. In Christ's name we pray, amen.

\*I used Homiletics Magazine for ideas for this sermon.