

Call to Worship

Our Fathering and Mothering God, has watched and waited for us.

Our Creator has longed for us to 'come to our senses' and realize the joy of being forgiven members, taking our own special place in the family circle.

With love and grace, God gathers us home to the heart, and calls for a celebration!

As God's church we express our thanksgiving in joyous worship, and welcome those turning and returning, just as we have been welcomed.

Prayer of Invocation

God in Jesus Christ, in our confrontations with evil and suffering, you offer us neither easy answers nor numbed silence. You offer us yourself, standing with us, reaching out to us, God with us, for us. And that is better, in our times of pain, even than answers. Speak to us your words of life. In Jesus' name, Amen.

The Word

Psalm 32:1-11

The one whose wrongdoing is forgiven, whose sin is covered over, is truly happy!

**The one the LORD doesn't consider guilty—
in whose spirit there is no dishonesty— that one is truly happy!**

When I kept quiet, my bones wore out; I was groaning all day long— every day, every night!—

because your hand was heavy upon me. My energy was sapped as if in a summer drought.

So I admitted my sin to you; I didn't conceal my guilt.

"I'll confess my sins to the LORD, " is what I said. Then you removed the guilt of my sin.

**That's why all the faithful should pray to you during troubled times,
so that a great flood of water won't reach them.**

You are my secret hideout! You protect me from trouble. You surround me with songs of rescue!

I will instruct you and teach you about the direction you should go.

I'll advise you and keep my eye on you.

Don't be like some senseless horse or mule, whose movement must be controlled with a bit and a bridle. Don't be anything like that!

The pain of the wicked is severe, but faithful love surrounds the one who trusts the LORD.

You who are righteous, rejoice in the LORD and be glad! All you whose hearts are right, sing out in joy!

Living the Word

Lindsay Armstrong, an Associate Pastor at the First Presbyterian Church in Atlanta writes this: "Happiness is high on most people's list of priorities. The hunger for happiness drives much of our lives. The ambitions we pursue, the relationships in which we engage, the professions we enter, the hobbies we love, the clothes we wear, the food we eat, and even the way we observe Lent reflect individual beliefs about what brings fulfillment and happiness." Lent is a time to reflect on 'How am I to be happy?' (repeat)

For the Prodigal Son, true happiness began in a 'Epiphany' moment; the 'aha moment' when "he came to his senses." He thought he would find it in 'extravagant living.' He had to lose all he had and find himself starving before the moment of acknowledgement came to him and he could really see what he had become and where he now was.

Sin – At Seminary I did quite well on my papers and in my classes. I enjoyed discussing theology – how we think about and know God. The only re-write that I had to do was in my last class, where we had to write our

own creed using all of the topics like God's grace, the movement of the Holy Spirit, the forgiveness of Christ, etc. I did well in all of the topics, but I failed in my writings about 'sin'. When it came time to go before the Board of Ordained Ministry to be for probation to be an Elder, once again my paperwork was all in order, except for the lack of what I had written about Sin.

I am a positive person and realized that my problem was that I was not wanting to wallow in the muck and mire of my life, assuming I could keep myself 'good enough' for God without talking about it, dwelling on it. I could say I was a sinner, but none of my sin was too bad. Besides I knew that I was forgiven, so why focus on the dark side of my life? This is called 'cheap grace.' Taking the light of God without acknowledging the dark in us and working through it to find solution. Acknowledging how far we have failed then leads us to finding the guilt. We all have sinned.

Sin is a reality of the human condition. We all have sinned and missed the mark on the bullseye of God's Will for us. Hamartia is the Hebrew word for sin – to miss the mark. We have missed the mark, and we will all sin again. Yet why do we try to hide or deny our sinfulness? We persist in our spiritual blindness, failing to see that through due process, forgiveness has been there waiting for us all along. Because we may think if we deny the sin, we haven't really fallen? None of us want to feel guilt and shame. So we try to justify our guilt by trying to deny the sin.

Once acknowledged, we are wrapped in guilt. When we feel the guilt and shame, then we know we have owned up to the sin. This is the lowest moment. For the Prodigal Son, even in his lowest moment he held onto his father. He knows which way he must turn. He had turned from his father, his home and his inheritance, which was now gone and he had to take the first step, realizing that he had been wrong. None of us want to be wrong, but in that moment when we come to our senses, we see that it is true.

Even in my lowest moments of guilt and shame, I knew that God loved me, but not how much. Failure to accept that I am sinful, you are sinful, we all are sinful, only makes us sink deeper and farther from the love and happiness God wants for us. But you can't surface from the guilt and shame until you acknowledge the source of it. Often we try to blame others, deny our part in it, but too often we are as much to blame. We are guilty and shameful...in a moment we can see that, but we don't have to live in that place.

The prodigal son rehearses what he will say. "I have sinned against heaven and before you" He names it, by reviewing over and over what is the best way to face his father.

Authentic, sincere acknowledgement of the sin has to be done before the confession. Otherwise the words of the confession have no meaning. There is no need for God to hear your sins, Your Creator already knows...But you need to see them and name them for your own sake, so you can let go of them and move on. Our God knows if your heart is headed toward home or if it is still out wandering and squandering...

Once I 'came to myself' and realized that the challenges I was facing were all for my benefit, I mentally picked one of my sins (you don't need to know which one...), one that I had already acknowledged and confessed, but still hadn't let go of myself. I was letting the muck and mire still cling to me. So I decided it was time for a scientific experiment with God.

I asked God 'Can I really put this behind me for good?' Basically, am I really forgiven? As should be done in any experiment, I asked myself on a daily, then weekly basis, how I felt about that one sin and how much was still clinging. I am not sure if it is a reliable experiment, because soon I forgot to ask regularly. But it was a success, because that old baggage I had been carrying around was no longer even a part of my thoughts. When I really realized that this isn't just words, but reality, I had truly atoned with God and could move on to all of the other shame and guilt I had been carrying. It gives me a new authority in my life. Communion has more meaning for me. Lent has a purpose: to do some self-examination as to how I am doing on all fronts in my life.

There are many parts to this whole process, but here are some basics: First the acknowledgement of the past things; burdens that you are still carrying. Acknowledgement of the current things that keep you from the true happiness and blessings that God has stored up for you.

Then confession; facing up to it; putting words to it; asking for forgiveness. This is never a comfortable task. Think of the prodigal having to face the father who didn't want him to go in the first place. As with us, as we face God who hoped we wouldn't turn from the calling we each have been given.

Next is atonement: big word, simple concept; 'at-one-ment,' being at one with God and with others. Accepting the forgiveness and making it right again. "Are we OK now?" And then letting go of the guilt. Working through this process can bring us to righteousness – a right relationship with God and with others.

Trying to be right with God, doesn't mean to be sinless, but to be able to find happiness by paying attention to how you live your life in a way that avoids sin and recognizes when you have gotten caught in it and moving back toward happiness with God. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was known as a righteous man, but even he said that he was still moving on to perfection.

Psalm 32, our scripture for today, is not actually a confession of sin, but a view of confession and atonement as we look through the lenses of forgiveness; looking back at how forgiveness can give us freedom and happiness. Beginning with verse one and two: *1 "The one whose wrongdoing is forgiven, whose sin is covered over, is truly happy!" 2 The one the LORD doesn't consider guilty—in whose spirit there is no dishonesty—that one is truly happy!"*

We are happier when we finally acknowledge the sin and move to knowing that it can be wiped clean, erased from the books, gone to the past. But when we hold on to our sin it can be painful. Verse 3-5: *3 "When I kept quiet, my bones wore out; I was groaning all day long—every day, every night!— 4 because your hand was heavy upon me. My energy was sapped as if in a summer drought. 5 So I admitted my sin to you; I didn't conceal my guilt. "I'll confess my sins to the LORD, " is what I said. Then you removed the guilt of my sin."*

After this there is no more burden. Confession becomes a prayer of thanksgiving because God has already forgiven us. Before we come to the Communion Table, we say a Communion Confession: I know that we always go through it quickly as time doesn't wait for us, so I want us to look at the words we have been saying and decide if they might be a good confession of our sins...

"Merciful God, we confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart. Is that true for us? We have failed to be an obedient church. Can it be that God has called us to a place which in the past we have denied?"

We have not done your will, we have broken your law, we have rebelled against your love, How many of us have followed our own will at some point? What law can it mean? Moses' ten commandments? Or the one that says "Love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your being, and all your strength and you must love your neighbor as yourself." How do we rebel against God's love? By ignoring the sin, that can lead us through guilt, to realize we are forgiven?

we have not loved our neighbors, and we have not heard the cry of the needy. How well do we share all that we have so others can also have? I am convicted, how about you? If I really think about who I am I know that I need to be forgiven. Forgive us, we pray. Free us for joyful obedience, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen" We ask to be free to follow God and in joy, through the gift of Christ's life that was given for us.

This is followed by a time of silent prayer, presumably of confession. Then the leader, typically the pastor says: *"Hear the good news: Christ died for us while we were yet sinners; that proves God's love for us. In the name of Christ, you are forgiven!"* There is a special power in being about to remind you that you are forgiven. The people respond: *"In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven."* and I feel God's grace in me as you tell me that I am forgiven.

Confession becomes a prayer of thanksgiving because God has already forgiven us and we can come forward to receive Christ, in the bread and cup, as Atoned and beloved people. There are some who feel unworthy to receive communion. When we cannot receive God's gift of Christ because we are broken, we are then denying God's ability to heal us, forgive us or to bless us. We are all broken, but in the bread and the juice, we remember that Christ died so we can let go of the shame and guilt.

We know once we 'have come to our senses' about our brokenness then our confession can be the next step toward our blessing. How can we continue to live between sins and shame and confession and atonement and righteousness all of the time? By staying connected with our Creator, as verse 8 says: "*I will instruct you and teach you about the direction you should go. I'll advise you and keep my eye on you.*"

There is freedom within that statement, that God once again reminds us that it is up to us to make the decisions as to how we will handle our sins.

Verse 9 says: "*Don't be like some senseless horse or mule, whose movement must be controlled with a bit and a bridle. Don't be anything like that.*" Don't wait for someone to control you, but be in control. Happiness is there to be found. God has presented the opportunities for you to find it and given you the freedom to seek it. But it is up to you to keep track how you are doing with all of this. That is what Lent is all about: time to reflect on who you are and if you are really happy as you are.

In Psalm 32, happiness comes from being forgiven. No more guilt or shame. Verse 10 and 11:

"10 The pain of the wicked is severe, but faithful love surrounds the one who trusts the LORD. 11 You who are righteous, rejoice in the LORD and be glad! All you whose hearts are right, sing out in joy!"

Not many of us want to think of ourselves as 'wicked' nor would we tell others that we were wicked. Yet to be able to name our wickedness, our sin and sinfulness, our weakness in the face of sin, is the first step toward getting beyond it and accepting the joy of the Lord.

It is not for me as your pastor to pound the pulpit and yell at you for denying your sin; that you must confess or else? Or else what? Be condemned to the eternal fires of Hell? Though some pastors might do that...But instead it is for me to tell you to realize that you are living in a personal hell by letting sin and guilt and shame be a part of your lives. There is thanksgiving to be had through God's grace which can move your life from misery to happiness. It is a gift, not an obligation.

All of those 'things' that the world says will make you happy, well, I've heard you can't take it with you when you go. I have attended many funerals and all that is physically left is put into the ground. I often speak in those moments of the legacy that is left behind. Not the money and the homes, but the legacy of love within a life, which stems from the knowledge that our God is a God of joy and happiness who wants us to share forgiveness and relationship within all of life's happiness and failures. Lent is a time to reflect on 'How am I to be happy?'

There is more love in God than there is sin in us. Can you even wrap your mind around that? This takes more mind work, more 'Thinking Greater.' Beyond however far you have come to this point. Put this in your brain and swish it around this week: That on the proper course, your sin can be what leads you to knowing God better and accepting forgiveness, in order to live a happier life.

In the latest Bible Version – The Common English Bible, John 3:16 says "*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life.*" Christ's death and resurrection was for us to know the forgiveness and love of God. Easter is coming...are you ready to celebrate in thanksgiving for this? It means once again riding the rollercoaster that will take us to the depths through the cross, but then to the mountaintop of Easter.

Joy isn't something that we can create without the Great Creator. Sin isn't something we can overcome without the Great Healer. Home is where the heart is. Our God's heart, knows our sin, and gives us forgiveness even before we ask; a God who created us imperfect – human, hoping we will find our way out of the muck and mire, the shame and guilt of this world to home and happiness.