

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Inside Out: A Good Look at Ourselves”

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Psalm 53

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We continue this week in our series “Inside Out.” Just started last week, and our hope is to take a look at some of those existential questions: who are we, who are we made to be? Last week, we were in Psalm 139, which declares “I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made,” and we asked what does it mean to be made, to have the mark of one’s creator, and not to be just a random happening?

Well this week, we continue with another look in the Psalms, but perhaps this psalm being of a bit different tone. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, they commit abominable acts; there is no one who does good.

² God looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God.

³ They have all fallen away, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one.

⁴ Have they no knowledge, those evildoers, who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon God?

⁵ There they shall be in great terror, in terror such as has not been. For God will scatter the bones of the ungodly; they will be put to shame, for God has rejected them.

⁶ O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion! When God restores the fortunes of his people, Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

God of Grace and Mercy, we pray for your guidance and healing this day. May your Word be both of comfort and conviction to us: of comfort in that your grace meets us where we are, but of conviction in that we might be turned to recognize just how much in need of grace we are. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

“God looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. They have all fallen away, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one.” So kind of a different tone from last week, wouldn’t you say?

It could be tempting, if you were here with us last week, to think that we’ve just about got things on rails now. Last week’s word from Psalm 139, that we are made, knit together, and

hemmed in by a God who loves us, is an encouraging one—or I hope it came across as encouraging. You were made for a purpose by a Maker who loves you.

This is good news. I hope you hear it as good news.

But it could be tempting to let that good news take us too far. Or rather that we misinterpret it in ways it shouldn't be. We can start thinking not just that we're *made*, but also that we're God's gift to whatever. That's taking good news too far. And it can be tempting to do that: to twist the affirmation that you were made by a loving Maker into our own license to puff ourselves up.

And that's where you can count on Scripture to bring us down to earth again.

The psalm we read, Psalm 53, does not exactly take a high view of the human condition. "Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God,'" it begins, "They are corrupt, they commit abominable acts; there is no one who does good." Now this is not an invitation for you to go and confront that friend or that family member who may not be so much on board with the whole church thing, whether they'd claim the label of atheist or perhaps the softer "agnostic." Honestly you may find yourself in one of those camps even right now, and we're glad you're here. Folks, this psalm is not license to go up to whomever you might know who's atheist, agnostic, skeptical, whatever and say, "Look, here it is in the Bible. 'Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.' So you're a fool!"

But what is this psalm saying? Definitely isn't painting a rosy picture. This is talking about sinfulness, about a fallen, perverse nature, about surveying humanity and not seeing much that's worth liking. "There is no one who does good, no, not one."

So tell me, is that view of humanity something that we're eager to have? Last week, I invited y'all to look at another person, noting just how much, even just on a genetic level, we have in common, recognizing that the person you saw was made by God.

Now, I'd invite you to do the same thing again. Look at another person. Now, in your mind, whoever it was that you looked at, did you see a corrupt, fallen, perverse, sinful being? Some might be thinking, "You bet I did. This is best game ever." But I'd guess that for others, if not many, maybe we recoiled at labeling another person that way, the way this psalm labels them: corrupt, fallen, perverse, sinful. Maybe you thought, "Well who am I to judge another person?" And that's good; we'll get to that. But what is it about our hesitation to recognize something fallen, something broken about our condition?

Doesn't seem in sync with the way Scripture presents it. Not just in this psalm. You could go to another psalm, Psalm 51: "I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me." Or to the prophets, in Jeremiah: "the heart is more deceitful than all else and desperately sick." Or to

Paul's writings, in Ephesians that we are "by nature children of wrath," or in Romans, "death spread to all because all have sinned." And that's just a sampling.

Point is, over and over, right alongside all the affirmations that we are made, that we are created, that we are loved by God, Scripture tells us that there is something desperately amiss when it comes to the human condition. Do we recognize it? Or do we recoil from it? Sometimes we need a good look in the mirror.

A lie the world has sold us is that people are all inherently okay on their own, that people are all by nature good and decent on their own. "Sure people make mistakes, but deep down, they're good inside." Something like that.

But if we're honest with ourselves, is that what we see? I mean sure, of course people can be capable of beautiful acts of compassion and selflessness. But writ large, in the heart of humanity, would you really say that the common denominator across all time zones, cultures, and generations is that people are kind, that people are selfless? Is that what you see?

Now, to say there's something amiss, something fallen, something broken about the human condition isn't the same as saying we're all little sociopaths running around. It's a mixed bag. Even psychological studies are mixed. There was one study assessing the inherent selfishness of infants that discovered, even in the first year of life, an empathy toward others in distress. I hope to see some of that empathy in the near future, because if memory serves, yes babies are sweet and beautiful, but they're also tiny little dictators who will cry and wail until they get what they want—or maybe that's just Howell babies.

Is that kind of selfishness something we're willing to see, to recognize? Do we agree with the psalm when it says "There is no one who does good, no, not one"?

Now, truth be told, I think there's a bit of venting going on here. (Sometimes that can be good to remember when we come to the psalms: that these are songs of faith that do more than just sing happy words. They express all facets of faith, including praise, doubt, anger, pain, and in this case, I think, frustration and even despair.)

You can hear the frustration behind the words. It's voicing a sense of hopelessness within the world: if humanity is so bad, so depraved, so perverse, what hope could there be for the people of God?

Did you notice that wrinkle in there? That there's a distinction being made between "all people" and "the people of God"? It's kind of subtle, but it seems there's a line being drawn. V. 4 says "Have *they* no knowledge, those evildoers, who eat up *my* people as they eat bread, and do not call upon God?" There's a distinction between, on one hand, the "fools," the "corrupt," the "perverse," the "evildoers," all those who fall under that line "there is no one who does good, no,

not one,” and then, on the other hand, “my people,” that is, the covenant people of God. This psalm may be showing us another all-too-human trait: that it's one thing to say, “Everyone is rotten,” but it comes a lot more naturally to say, “Everyone else is rotten.”

Many years ago, there was this philosopher named Diogenes. (Bet you didn't think you were going to get a classics lesson today.) 4th century BC. One of the so-called Cynics—and “Cynic” here isn't how we use it today, meaning someone who just kind of deconstructs and distrusts a lot about the world; it meant instead a school of thought that sought virtue often through the rejection of social norms or creaturely comforts. And that's exactly what this man Diogenes did.

He renounced all possessions, because what he saw in humanity and all of its trappings, especially in the culture at the time of Athens, Greece, was nothing but folly, vanity, artificiality. His only possessions were the clothes on his back, an empty barrel—that was where he lived on the streets—and a wooden cup to eat and drink out of. And one day, he saw a child drinking out of cupped hands, so he destroyed his wooden cup, thinking it to be “superfluous baggage.”

His self-denial became so well-known that he was sought out by others. And even Alexander the Great, yes *the* Alexander the Great, went to find him. Alexander, so the story goes, comes to him as he was sitting in the streets, and Alexander asks him if there was anything he could do for him. Now for your standard philosopher, this would have been a moment of arrival: the patronage of someone as powerful as that. I mean, this wasn't even just a powerful person; this was one of the towering figures of ancient history asking “Is there something I can do for you?” And to that question Diogenes answered, “Yes, you can get out of my sunlight.”

Now at this point, some of us might be admiring this man. Renouncing possessions. Seeking a virtuous life. Not being tempted by rubbing elbows with the powerful. We might see principle here, conviction.

But then there's another story about this man Diogenes. He was apparently fond of stunts in the streets of the city. And, as one story goes, he would walk around the streets of Athens in broad daylight, but carrying a lit lantern. He would go up to people, shine the lantern in their face, and then dismiss them. When he was asked what he was doing, he said, “I am looking for an honest man,” meaning, he wasn't finding one.

The implication, though, was that he was the only one. He was looking for an “honest man,” that is, another one like him. It's one thing to say “Everyone is rotten.” It comes much more naturally to say, “Everyone else is rotten.”

I believe that behind the words of this psalm are not just its claims about the state of humanity. Yes, “There is no one who does good.” If you're out looking for “an honest man,” a

truly, purely honest, righteous, selfless person like Diogenes was, then guess what, you may be looking for a long time. But also behind these words is something more insidious: that tendency, that eagerness to shine the lantern in someone else's face but not in our own.

As we speak in this series about identity, we have to hold two things up and recognize them at the same time: that we are made, yes, that we have been created for a purpose by a Maker who loves us, and just saying that bestows worth and dignity upon every human being, and also that if left to our own devices, we are fallen, perverse, corrupt, prone to indulge just our selfish impulses. The first one's easier to hold up and celebrate. The second is less so. We'd much rather take a good look at someone else than be forced to take an honest look at ourselves.

Two weeks ago, our Session met, and as we do each meeting, one of our elders offered the opening devotional, this month by John Luttrell. He started by reading the passage we read from the Gospel of Luke earlier, a parable Jesus told of a Pharisee and a tax collector who went to the temple. The Pharisee prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people," while the tax collector wouldn't even look up, "but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'" Jesus said, "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

And John noted afterward: "Do we feel better when we place ourselves above others by pointing out something about them that separates us, makes us superior? ...As Christians we profess to believe that all of us as well as those we don't like sin and fall short of the glory of God.... Somehow some of us have mistaken Christianity as a call to hunker down and protect the flock from the outside world. Much like the Pharisees began to believe, we fall for the lie. It's us against them. But that's not what Jesus said. Instead, he reminded the Pharisees and us, he didn't come to rescue the righteous. He came to save the sick and those in need of a savior."

If you were wondering this whole time whether there could be good news in recognizing our own fallenness, our own brokenness, our own sinfulness, that's it. The invitation here is not to wallow in our own depravity without any hope and think of increasingly eloquent ways to talk about how bad we are. It's that there is a freedom in coming clean, in acknowledging how broken we are, "There is no one who does good, no, not one," like the tax collector beating his breast, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Then we're no longer trying to live up to anything, or trying to earn anything, because we can't; we're not capable. And we're not trying to shine the lantern in someone else's face either. But instead we find ourselves hearing the words of Christ assuring us that he didn't come to rescue the righteous; he came to save the sick.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.