

# Ash Wednesday, Gospel Year A

## SINCE WE CAN'T SKIRT THE DIRT, GOD IMPARTS A NEW HEART

**Psalm 51:1-17**

**Ash Wednesday**

**Analysis by Mark A. Marius**

*1Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.*

*2Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin.*

*3For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.*

*4Against 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 judgment.*

*5Indeed, I was born guilty,  
a sinner when my mother conceived me.*

*6You desire truth in the inward being;  
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.*

*7Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.*

*8Let me hear joy and gladness;*

*let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.*

*9Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities.*

*10Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.*

*11Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.*

*12Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.*

*13Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
and sinners will return to you.*

*14Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,  
O God of my salvation,  
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.*

*15O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.*

*16For you have no delight in sacrifice;  
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.*

*17The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

**Author's Note:** I write this the day after Valentine's Day, the day when we celebrate, commercialize and concupiscere (archaic) many forms of love. My Bible tells me that Psalm 51 is David's response to God after being called out by Nathan for following his own lustful heart and powerful impulses to take Bathsheba for his own. A modern song, "Delta," by Mumford and Sons, raises questions of love in its refrain: "Does my love prefer the other? Or does my love just make me feel good?" A profound

reflection on our understanding of love. This resonates with Psalm 51 as David can now see the dire result of giving into a love that only serves to make him feel good. But this cry of contrition to God places hope that God's love prefers the other, humanity that has separated itself from God. Ash Wednesday is a formal day for contrition in the Church, in which we too place our hope in God's love for us. Christ confirms that God's love indeed prefers the other, and when nothing else matters, will put a divine arm around us.



**DIAGNOSIS: Dirty Hearts (My love just makes me feel good.)**

***Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Transgressions***

We want to feel good without considering that our outward actions in the world cause damage. We violate others to satisfy our own desires. We violate the earth for our own gain. We use power to subdue those who are weaker. The world tells us it's

all consensual. It is all within our rights. We have earned everything. These are the rules we live by. But the word of God and the inevitability of death sing a different song.

### ***Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Iniquity***

Our hearts are exposed as selfish and self-preserving. We do not trust a love we cannot control, after all it's supposed to be my love. We do not trust power we cannot wield. We do not trust justice we don't exact for our benefit. Internally we suppress everything that makes us look bad: pain, suffering, vulnerability, God. But our actions, our transgression, emanate from a dirty heart filled with iniquity. And who is it that sees the selfish love of our heart (Matthew 6:21)?

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Sin**

Our transgressions and iniquity are imputed on our hearts as sin. We have forsaken our relationship with God. We have shown no love for others. We have nothing that can help us, nothing we can sacrifice that will please God. We are found guilty, through and through. And God casts the guilty aside leaving us all alone. Our holy spirit is revoked. Our bones are crushed and tossed in the dust pile.

**PROGNOSIS: HEALING: Deliverance (God's love prefers the other.)**

### ***Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Create***



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hold mercy. Mercy is intrinsic in creation. Does the psalmist cry out all on his own? Or does the voice of Christ joined with the psalmist—that Word who was one with the Father at creation—compel us. Christ comes to reveal to us just how great God's love is for creation. God's Word is unstoppable, even for crushed (dry) bones (Ezekiel 37). In Christ on the cross we witness a broken spirit; but in the resurrection we see a new creation. God's will for creation is eternal and with it comes salvation.

#### ***Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Renew***

God places the love of Christ in our secret hearts. That love frees up a place in our hearts where God can wash, cleanse, purge us. In the sacraments God uses the elements of creation to restore joy and sustain our spirits; renewing us to trust God rather than our failed enterprises. It is a daily process that embraces us until our dying day.

#### ***Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Restore***

As God works in us, our outward actions change. Our lips declare God's love and mercy, which makes us feel good. We lovingly go to other transgressors to show them God's way of love, teaching them love by example. We demonstrate forgiveness by confessing our own transgressions, love by caring for others' needs, mercy by accepting others as they are, God's presence by sharing in others' pain and suffering. As God's love renews us, we become part of a renewing creation.