

Help! We've Made a Mess of This!
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September 14, 2025
Texts: Psalm 51:1-10, 1 Timothy 1:12-17

As I left work on Wednesday, I grabbed a theology book from the bookshelf so I could do a little research for today's sermon. Lily found the book on the dash and read, "Holding Faith... Cynthia L. Rigby. We know her! She's your teacher!" she said. I told her that I was just rereading the part on confession for my sermon. She flipped through the pages, finding the section I had marked, and began to read.

"This realization that there is a disparity between how God sees us and how we actually live certainly gives way to lament and remorse about sinfulness."¹

So, I explained, God made us to do good, to be good, to live in good and beloved community, and too often, we realize we have missed that mark, either because we don't want to or because the systems in place in our world make it really hard. *We don't want this to be the way, and we grieve that it is.*

At home, I opened the news app and grief poured over me...another school shooting at a high school in Colorado and a political assassination at Utah Valley University. The violence and awful, divisive, and unmerciful comments left me emotionally exhausted. *This can't be the way it's supposed to be, and the grief is exhausting.*

When I picked Karen up, she was beside herself, having heard conversations about the day's events. "Mom, it's not okay to kill a person. And we shouldn't celebrate that they died. Even if you don't agree with them or even if they've done bad things that hurt people, you shouldn't be glad about anyone being murdered, right?"

After all, we are all precious children of a God who loves you, me, and everyone else too.

This week, three historically Black colleges were locked down because of threats of violence. There was a shooting at the Naval Academy and multiple schools across the country were investigating threats of violence.

This year, we've seen a lawmaker and her husband be killed, a state senator and his wife be shot, a firebombing of a governor's house, a shooting at the CDC, 24 shootings at universities across the country, and 23 incidences of gun violence on K-12 campuses including Evergreen High School, Annunciation Christian School, and Utah Valley University this past month. We are killing each other. We are being torn apart by violence and the need to perpetuate division. *This, this isn't the way God wants it to be for us.*

This divisive nature feeds on hatred and intolerance of those who are different than you.

¹ Cynthia L Rigby, Holding Faith (Abingdon Press, 2018), 170.

Sometimes I'm the victim of that deep division – the one who has been made the enemy. As a nonbinary person in this country, I've been told I don't have the right to exist, I have to fear for my safety in public places, and I can't receive the healthcare I deserve. Our Black and brown neighbors, refugees and immigrants, women, and those who are poor carry similar fears.

Sometimes we're the victims of that deep division and sometimes, because we don't recognize our own privilege or we just don't want to, we're the ones that perpetuate it because it is so deeply embedded in the systems and institutions of our country and world.

We've made a mess of this. We're not exactly sure how to fix it. But neither can we turn our eyes away and ignore it. In our inaction, we are complicit in the harm that is done. In our daily action, we are complicit in the workings of the systems that create these situations in the first place. *But how do we live the way God wants it to be for us? How do we even start?*

In the scripture this morning, David is lamenting his own sinfulness. Here's a quick recap: overcome with greed and lust, David took advantage of Bathsheba and in an extraordinary effort to cover up the mess he made, he had her husband, Uriah, killed by sending him to the front lines of battle. It was as political as it was personal. He couldn't let himself be found out and so he silenced his opponent, who didn't even know he was an opponent. He used the political war machine to have him killed and the commander of the army allowed and condoned it.

The prophet Nathan lets David have it, telling him a parable about a rich man, who, when he had to prepare a meal for a guest, took the single sheep of a poor man instead of one of his own immense flock. When David becomes indignant because of this injustice, Nathan points out, "It's you! You are the rich man! God gave you so much and you took what wasn't yours."

So, in the psalm, David laments. He confesses. He begs forgiveness. "I know my transgressions, I have done evil in your sight. I am a sinner. Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, wash away my iniquity. Create in me a new heart. Grant me a willing spirit. I will teach others not to sin. I will sing your praise. Have mercy on me."

He knows he doesn't deserve it. He's made a giant mess of things. If he is to be forgiven, it will be solely because God has mercy on him.

David's sins were personal, but today, I want to explore what David's prayer might look like for our corporate confession, the confession we make as a community as we pray for God to deliver us from the guilt of bloodshed.

What does it look like for us to confess our corporate sin...the ways we've been complicit in the tearing of the fabric of society and the erasing of people who carry the image of God in their bodies, in our silence as much as in our actions? We must stop killing each other. God was really clear about that, and so was Jesus. We can disagree on many things, but we must save the lives of our neighbors, even if we don't like them, don't agree with them, or find it inconvenient. We

must learn how to discuss difficult topics without inciting violence or insisting on silencing the opposition.

We know our transgressions.

We have not protected those who need protecting. We have protected our own comfort.

Deliver us from the guilt of bloodshed.

Help us stop the killing, help us heal broken spirits, help us bring about peace, not just in our thoughts and prayers, but in our actions. In our buying and selling, in our working and living, in the lifting up of our voice in community life, help us create a fair and just world.

Create in us clean hearts and grant a willing spirit within us.

Let us imagine what God wants for this world and work tirelessly to make it so.

Have mercy on us.

Cindy Rigby writes, admitting our sinfulness “also yields to a deep yearning for healing – the desire to bring our daily lives and behavior back in sync with the reality of who we are, as those met and made by God.”²

When we let ourselves truly admit where we have fallen short, to God and to ourselves, we long to be made right, for the world to be made right, for our lives and our world to be the way God wants it to be for us. But we can’t fix this on our own.

Kate Bowler speaks about it this way:

“I know that somewhere in this mess is a wrong I chose. There is something familiar about it, and that makes me even more upset with myself. I don’t want to wear it, but that is untenable. Show me the whole truth of it, in every aspect of its unfolding. This is medicine, here to heal me, here to heal the world I love.”³

“It is here,” as Rigby continues, “that the doctrine of salvation comes into play. Salvation, in this understanding, is not about rescuing us from being bad, but restoring us to being the good people we were created to be. Included in the work of salvation, then, is forgiveness of certain out-of-sync actualities- the sinful behaviors in which we have engaged that are contrary to the reality of our created existence. Included, also, are the redemptive actions of God accomplished by Jesus Christ.”

When my children were young, we taught them to apologize using a four-step pattern. First, say you’re sorry and name what you’ve done. Then acknowledge what was broken by your actions. Then say how you hope to change next time. Finally, ask if they forgive you. Over and over, whether at home or at school, it was this last step...they got pretty good at getting through the first three steps but would refuse to ask for forgiveness or dissolve into tears, burying their face in my shoulder instead. It’s terrifying because you know you don’t deserve it and it’s only because of someone’s mercy that you would be forgiven. And they could say no.

But friends, the saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Jesus Christ came into this world to save sinners. Your friend may struggle to forgive, but God, through the Holy Spirit,

² Cynthia L Rigby, *Holding Faith* (Abingdon Press, 2018), 170.

³ Kate Bowler, *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day!* (New York: Convergent Books, 2024), 50-51.

never gives up on reconciling us to who God made us to be. God relentlessly offers mercy and saves us for the work of saving the world.

Now, here's the thing about forgiveness. It isn't one moment in time, and it isn't one-sided. It is the stitching together of a community, the unity with another, that was torn asunder. And it requires both people, or both sides, to step into forgiveness.

And here, it is our sin against God. We've made a mess of God's world in the way we live together, we are not living into the image of God within ourselves, and we need God's forgiveness. So, first, we boldly confess the ways our world is broken and take a hard look at where we are guilty of perpetuating harm. We don't have to be afraid of this because Jesus is cheering us on.

And then we recognize what Jesus has done. In his living, loving, dying, and rising, we are forgiven, healed, and made whole. And that changes everything. It changes the way we respond to those who have wronged us. It changes the way we respond to those who are wronged by others or other oppressive systems. It doesn't mean we just take it when people hurt us or someone else. Actually, it requires us to pay attention to what's going on, have a heart for the marginalized, and work until the broken systems are fixed or made completely new. And it means that we seek justice and mercy even for the oppressor, as we seek justice and mercy for the oppressed. We don't heal by hating harder. We celebrate our forgiveness by loving louder. Amen.