



**Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church**  
*Connecting faith with everyday life*

Sermon Archives

Date: March 5, 2017

Title: "The Dark Road to Light"

Scripture: Psalm 32

Description: Psalm 32, one of six Psalms of Confession, urges us to understand that we ourselves are our biggest barrier to happiness. Acknowledging (or confessing) that truth is the first step to happiness. After confession, don't exert a lot of effort in attempting to change. Such efforts simply increase your frustration. Confess. Understand. Then God "will teach you." God will change your heart, and your heart will change you.

Let's talk about something every one of us is interested in: "how can you be happy?" Anybody here uninterested? We want to be happy; that's just who we are. It's the one great question that drives us all: "How can I be happy?"

To answer that question the church offers...Lent. Confession, repentance, sackcloth and ashes—that's what will get us through the dark days until spring break, oops, I mean until Easter.

And yet. And yet, Psalm 32, the passage assigned for the first Sunday of Lent starts its first two sentences with these words, "Happy are those...happy are those." And it closes with a crescendo of, "be glad and rejoice...shout for joy." Maybe Psalm 32 has something for those of us who want to be happy.

America has entered a new era. For the first time in history, more people die from eating too much than from eating too little. More people now die from old age than from infectious diseases. For the first time in our country, more people die by suicide than are killed by crime, terrorism, and war combined. Statistically, you are your own worst enemy. You are most likely to be harmed by yourself.<sup>1</sup>

Psalm 32 knows that. It goes straight to the heart of the dark secret: that the major problem preventing us from being happy is ourselves. Can we just acknowledge that? Can we accept that truth? Because, according to this psalm, if we can say it out loud, not necessarily to everybody else but out loud to ourselves and to God, we've moved a long way towards finding happiness. If we can say, "To a large extent, I'm the problem here." the curtain between us and happiness becomes exceedingly thin.

How do we talk about that? How do I preach confession and repentance in an age of self-defense, in a time when we're so afraid of the world and so angry with others? But we have to talk about it.

A patient goes to a doctor and tells the doctor what he's suffering from. The doctor says, "Very well. I understand your symptoms, and I'm going to write a prescription." And the prescription is for your neighbor. The patient replies, "Thank you very much, doc. That makes me feel much better already." Isn't that crazy? We think we'd feel better if somebody else changes!

Lent. Confession. Repentance. They're all vehicles to help us realize that we have a problem. We *are* the problem. And not mentioning it will not make it go away. Confession is the first step in what makes it go away.

I'd rather talk about forgiveness. Remember the story of the Prodigal Son, welcomed home in warm embrace by his father, who "kissed him and kissed him and kissed him." That's my kind of story. Before he reached home, the story says the son "came to." He realized he'd gotten off track. His father's kiss erased all that, but not because the son was innocent. The son was guilty and he knew it. That's what gave the kiss its power.

In Psalm 32, happiness does not come from being successful, important, accomplished, organized, optimistic, or busy. It comes from being forgiven. You don't have to be perfect, or even be good enough. Happiness begins with the awareness that you are *not* good enough. Get that out in the open and you can stop playing games and feeling the stress of trying to be something you're not.

That's the ego bruising-work of Lent: acknowledging sin, accepting forgiveness. It's hard work. It is also lonely work. Culturally, it is far cooler to blame the Trump administration or Obama Care or the media or terrorism and not assume responsibility ourselves. *Their* wrongs are a big problem; *our* wrongs are hardly noticeable. *Our* wrongs are insignificant slip-ups; how could anyone describe our minor shortcomings as a major problem? Psalm 32 has no hesitation telling it like it is.

The Psalm is also honest about the result. (v.3) "While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. *Selah*"

Don't misread this and get a picture of an angry God, ready to kick butt and take names. God doesn't punish nearly as often as we think. God doesn't need to punish. Like a *jiu-jitsu* master, God doesn't hurt us. God simply spins our rejection of life around so that we can feel the full force of it for ourselves.

It's possible to get away with some of the stuff we do for a long time. We can hide it or lie about it and sometimes it takes years for the fallout to catch up with us. But not internally. When you make a choice, there is absolutely no delay in feeling the consequences. The moment you tell a lie, for example, you begin to lose trust in what others say to you. "You just can't believe anybody anymore," you complain. Choose to hate someone and your heart gets wrapped in barbed wire right that minute. From then on, you sense that people around you are mean and nasty. Our choices really do have consequences. God doesn't have to punish us. Life itself punishes us with broken hearts that lead to broken dreams and broken relationships.

As one contemporary version translates vv 3 -4: "When I kept it all inside, my bones turned to powder, my words became daylong groans. The pressure never let up; all the juices of my life dried up. *Selah*."

There's that word. "*Seelah*." or "*Selah*." None of the experts know how to pronounce it, or what it means. I agree with the ones who make a guess that it's a

musical instruction. It means, "pause." Give it some time between what was just said and what comes next.

What does come next is this: (v.5) "Then I let it all out; I said, "I'll make a clean breast of my failures to GOD. Suddenly the pressure was gone—my guilt dissolved, my sin disappeared." Don't be flip about this and let it sound like it's as easy as 1, 2, 3. "When I kept it all inside...the pressure never let up. The juices of my life all dried up. *Selah. Pause.* Maybe for some of us, maybe for all of us some of the time, it's a long pause. We go through a lot of hurt before we finally admit, even to ourselves, that we are a major part of the problem. There's a lot of *selah* in these short descriptions. A lot of pauses. This isn't an instant fix. But honest confession does turn the page to a new life.

Honestly confess your true self to God. Then, here's what you do next. Nothing. Not a thing. Psalm 32 does not say a thing about how you change. You know why? Because the more you try to change, the worse it gets. You can use your willpower and effort and self-discipline to change, but it won't last very long. Effort can put food into your mouth, it cannot produce an appetite. Effort can keep you in bed, it cannot produce sleep. It can make you reveal a secret to someone, it cannot produce trust. Trying to change is like using a row boat to get to Tahiti. A couple days of hard rowing and you're exhausted, so you just quit. Picture a sailboat. The sailboat puts forth no effort. It simply pays attention to the wind, and with no effort, the wind carries it to its destination.

Love and freedom and happiness are not things you can produce. They are gifts. The gospel has said that all along. You try to change out of discipline and effort, and you will be in a constant state of anxiety and dissatisfaction. The anxiety and dissatisfaction will themselves destroy the happiness and peace you desire.

Observe, understand, be aware of your present state. In other words, confess. Without pushing. Without forcing things on yourself. God will shape your heart and your heart will change you.

Confess your faults, then give yourself what God gives you—forgiveness. God doesn't say "I hear you. Now come back when you've cleaned up your act. You need to shape up, then we'll get together." No, God says, "You are forgiven."

Suppose you ceased all efforts to change and improve yourself. Would you then be doomed for things—and you—to always be the same, never get any better? There is another way. Become aware of the parts of you that bring dissatisfaction and cause harm to your life. That's confession. Just be aware of those parts, those behaviors and your understanding of the harm they bring. Then you will notice a marvelous thing: you will be changed. "I will teach you the way you should go..." Change will happen, but it will not be brought about by your cunning, your hard effort, coercion and punishment that produces more tension and more conflict. No, the change will be natural, graceful, unselfconscious.

(v. 8) "I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.  
9 Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you."

Remember when you were 7 or 8 months old? You crawled. One day you went to a play group and saw other children walking on their feet. You were so ashamed and dissatisfied with yourself. Such a baby, crawling everywhere. With great determination, you set a goal. You would be walking by your first birthday. This resulted in countless tumbles and falls. Your backside became bruised from the sudden collapses of your pudgy legs. You cried. The cry of a frustrated child is different in quality from a hungry child or one with a wet diaper. You didn't cry; you screamed. You were angry all the time. So on your first birthday, in an act of defiance, you smeared birthday cake all over your face. And you quit trying to walk.

Then, at about a year-and-a-half, you were done with crawling. Over the next few days, you began to walk. It was beautiful. It was natural. You hadn't given up crawling for lent. You hadn't read a book, "Seven Steps to Taking Steps." You were ready to walk, and you walked.

For a brief time, you had mastered Psalm 32. Become aware of your shortcomings. Acknowledge them. Understand their effect on your living. That's all. You'll know what comes next. God will teach your heart. Amen.

1. These statistics came from a Ted Talk by Yuval Noah Harari.  
[http://www.ted.com/talks/yuval\\_noah\\_harari\\_nationalism\\_vs\\_globalism\\_the\\_new\\_political\\_divide](http://www.ted.com/talks/yuval_noah_harari_nationalism_vs_globalism_the_new_political_divide).