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Center for Spiritual Development

Daily Reflections

JOURNEYING THROUGH LENT

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RENEW A STEADFAST SPIRIT WITHIN ME

By Sister Christine Hilliard, CSJ

Today's Responsorial Psalm

R. Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

*Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness;
in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense.
Thoroughly wash me from my guilt
and of my sin cleanse me.*

*For I acknowledge my offense,
and my sin is before me always:
“Against you only have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight.”*

*A clean heart create for me, O God,
and a steadfast spirit renew within me.
Cast me not out from your presence,*

and your Holy Spirit take not from me.

*Give me back the joy of your salvation,
and a willing spirit sustain in me.
O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.*

PSALM 51:3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 17

Reflection

Traditionally, there are seven “penitential” psalms or psalms dealing with sin: Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143. Martin Luther considered these psalms so important that his first published work in 1517 was a translation and explanation of these psalms. I suspect that our experience of sin – both specific sins and an awareness of sinfulness – is central to being human. Which is to say that sin is not simply an “add-on” in our lives; it is, as the psalm prays, centered in our relationship with God. As some Lenten readings remind us, when it comes to our relationship with God, we have a choice for God and living God’s ways or for ourselves and living self-centered. The Greek word *hemarton* is translated as “sin.” Literally the word means “missing the mark.” For us the “mark” is union with God so to “miss the mark” is separation from God.

In Psalm 51 the psalmist is not only choosing God but is also confident that God’s choice in this relationship is the psalmist. The energy of choice makes known the psalmist’s honest recognition:

*For I acknowledge my offense,
and my sin is before me always:
“Against you only have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight.”*

It also strengthens a deep trust in God’s desire for union:

*A clean heart create for me, O God,
and a steadfast spirit renew within me.
Cast me not out from your presence,
and your Holy Spirit take not from me.*

The admission of sin, i.e., “missing the mark,” does not increase separation; rather it strengthens the union as the psalmist recognizes God’s desire and

choice to be with the psalmist despite the psalmist's sinfulness. Here, in prayer and petition, the psalmist chooses God.



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For Prayer

Find a quiet place, indoors or outdoors, and pray this Psalm out loud three times. Let a word or phrase embrace you during your day. While admitting to “missing the mark” at times, let the energy of your desire for God in your life and God’s desire for you in God’s life, support you.

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