

This Is Not the End

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

So have you ever been given a really bad apology? What are some of the ways that people give bad apologies?

Congregation member: Bless your heart. [crowd laughs]

Pastor Scott: That's like the insult of the South.

Congregation member: Not saying apology at all.

Pastor Scott: Yeah. Have you ever had an apology where it seemed like it was maybe an apology but nobody actually apologized? Definitely. What else?

Congregation member: "I'm sorry you feel that way."

Pastor Scott: Yes, that's the king of all bad apologies. Anyway, what else?

Congregation member: "I'm sorry *but* _____..."

Pastor Scott: Yeah. If you're putting your butt into the apology it's a bad apology [laughter]. A *but*, I should say. How about, "I regret that that happened"? Has anyone here been given that one? Or somebody says, "I'm sorry," but the tone of their voice makes it sound like they think it was your fault. "*Sorry — geez.*" [laughter]. I have been given some bad apologies and I also have given some apologies, and if you want to more about that my wife Tracey is right down there. There will probably be a line after the service, you can talk to her.

So keep those ideas in your mind. I want to orient us to the series that we're doing here in the month of September called "Inside Out Faith." The concept is us trying to determine how we as, little tiny individuals fit into a big vast universe, and where God is in all of that. Where is God in our own individual lives and how does that affect how we interact with the wider world? That's the concept of inside out faith — looking at the microcosm of our individual selves in the

macrocosm of our world. And last week if you were here, you remember I talked about the fact that you are known and loved deeply and intimately by the creator of this enormous world, of this entire universe, and how that creator wants to remake you and actually wants you to participate in your own remaking. So for this week and next week, rather than trying to do inside and out at the same time, we're going to do inside this week and out next week. Today is going to be much more inwardly focused, and next week will be much more outwardly focused. And hopefully when we kind of squish them together in our minds after the fact, it will fit within the series pretty well.

But I want to start this morning with a bit of a pastoral rumination, a bit of a pastoral reflection. This week's lectionary text (and if you read them you may have picked up on this), even if you've just been sitting in the chairs today and haven't read them at all before now, it's already maybe becoming clear to you these texts are very heavily focused on sin. And the truth is that pastorally, I often find that to be a difficult topic to teach about, to preach about, to talk about, to counsel people about. And I think the reason for that is just my own baggage from my church settings over the course of my life, because the way that the Gospel, God's so-called good news, is often conveyed in the church makes it seem like sin and repentance is all there is to it. And if you've spent time in the same church circles as I have, you know what I'm talking about. That all that anybody seems ever concerned about and many, not all, but many, of the church settings that I've been part of in my life was an individual's sin, the consequences for that individual on their eternal destination, and reversing that. I'm seeing a couple of head nods. Some of you have been in the same settings that I have been in.

It's not so much that that concept is mistaken or erroneous or not important, but the problem is when that becomes the entirety of the Gospel, I think you have a very lopsided and ineffectual understanding of what God is doing in the world. And furthermore, the even more unfortunate truth is that very often in church settings, the language of sin and repentance is weaponized. It becomes a lever for spiritual abuse, frankly. And now the head nods that I'm getting are a little bit more reserved and painful. Some of you had that experience. And so one of the things that I'm proud of about our community is that we do talk a lot about the rest of the Gospel. We talk about liberation, we talk about justice, we talk about loving our neighbor and our enemy. We talk about welcoming the stranger, embracing those who are cast out of society. And when we do talk about sin we often talk about how sin is systemic, in other words, it's bound up in the systems and structures of our culture and our society in a way that benefits some people while marginalizing other people. And we talk about how we have to divest ourselves, those of us who benefit from those benefits, sometimes in order to bring about God's good news to the world. And that can be difficult. And the insidious thing is that when you spend a lot of time talking about sin and repentance and redemption as a very individually

focused thing, in other words, it's just between you and God, you don't need to worry about anything else; just you and God alone, every head bowed, every eye closed, you know the routine, right? What that sometimes can do is give you a spiritualized excuse for not doing the work of unwinding the consequences of systemic sin. So all of that stuff — I'm proud of myself and I'm proud of all of you, and I'm proud of this community for the fact that we do engage with those ideas, not that we're perfect at it by any means. But here's where I find myself falling short and where I need to ask for perhaps your forgiveness or your grace, is that if I have failed to emphasize when it's been necessary and appropriate the fact that you are all individually sinners in need of repentance, then that's an indication that I'm missing the mark somewhat. I'm not doing the best job that I could as your pastor. Because sometimes there is a clear, present need for individual repentance for a single person; myself, you, somebody else, to confess our sin directly to God with every head bowed and every closed, and to begin the process of turning that around, of repenting.

It's easy to forget (quite convenient to forget, in fact) that we have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory as the scriptures tell us. And not in just some abstract, theological way but in concrete, obvious, unambiguous ways. And so given my kind of baggage and my background and my tendency to preach and teach in a certain way more often than in other ways, it's a little bit of a shock to the system when you open up the lectionary texts on a week like this one and you hear the following verses all from the same week of the lectionary. Psalm 14:3: "Humans have all gone astray. They are all alike, perverse. There is no one who does good, no, not one." That's pretty hopeless, right. Psalm 51:5: "Indeed I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me." Now this is one of those texts that people who don't understand poetry try to backwards-engineer some systematic theology into, but we don't need to go into all of that nonsense. The fact is, David is so profoundly ashamed of his sin that he traces it all the way back to his birth, and even before that. First Timothy 1:13: "I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence." Do any of those words ever apply to you? Or the one that you just heard right before the sermon from Jeremiah 4 where God says through the prophet Jeremiah, "It is I who speak judgment against them, for my people are foolish. They do not know me. They are stupid children. They have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil but do not know how to do good." And then Jeremiah's vision comes to him and he says, "I looked on the earth and lo, it was waste and void. The fruitful land was a desert and all its cities were laid in ruins before the Lord, before his fierce anger." So again, not terribly optimistic in describing humanity, and pretty graphic in its description of the consequences of people's sin, not just for themselves but for the whole city, for the whole land, for the planet, if you will.

So yes, we have failed to speak when we should have, we have failed to act when we should have. We've sinned by leaving things undone, all those things that we gloss right over when we

pray the Confession of Sin from the Book of Common Prayer. But we've also been selfish, hateful, vindictive, dishonest, abusive, foolish. And we've experienced the consequences of that or we see them coming. Or maybe we don't, but they're there. And sometimes even when we do acknowledge our sin, we essentially make one of those half apologies for it. Kind of like King David in Psalm 51, actually

First of all, do you know the story behind Psalm 51? That was a Psalm of repentance that we read at the confession of sin. It's pretty famous, as Psalms go. But he's confessing his sin to God, and the specific sin – well, I probably can't get too far into it, given the fact that in this stage of life when our construction project is uncompleted, or isn't completed, we have a lot of children with us but, um . . . The king was up later than he should have been, and [crowd chuckles] saw a woman he shouldn't have seen, had a nonconsensual experience with her that resulted in her pregnancy, but she was married, so he had a problem that he needed to solve, and he solved it by sending that husband out to the front lines and telling the rest of the people to fall back, and you know what happened to him then. And then David gets on his spiritual high horse and tunes up his lute and sings, "Against you, Lord, you alone have I sinned." And I think to myself, "I wonder what Bathsheba thinks about that."

So we pray our prayers of confession, we sing our songs, and we feel better about ourselves. Without ever having any change of mind, without ever seeking restoration and reconciliation with those against whom we have sinned. We we take it up with God; we take it to our prayer closet and then neglect the command to love our neighbors. And, while wanting to be gentle with those of you who've had the language of sin of repentance weaponized against you in the church, I want to acknowledge the fact that for some of you, the consequences of your own specific individualized sin are weighing very heavily on you. You're carrying that with you every single day – like the old hymn says, "Laden with guilt and full of fears, I fly to you, oh Lord."

So, if I have failed you, as your pastor, by underemphasizing the Biblical teaching that we are all sinners, that you each one of you is a sinner – first of all, sorry, but I guess today is a bit of a make-up sermon, because there's really no way to avoid that topic given the texts that the lectionary assigns us today, which is one of the good things about the lectionary. It doesn't let me dodge over those texts. And if the Holy Spirit has seen fit to use these Bible passages today, and to use my words today about these Bible passages as a way to make you aware of your sin – the churchy word is to *convict* you; it's a very a legal term – if that is the state that you find yourself in right now, laden with guilt and full of fears and unsure of where to go or what to do, then this might be a day of salvation for you. This news that seems bad on the face of it might begin to turn into good news; this might be a day of salvation, of rescue for you. Because, as

important as it is to realize your own failings and your need for God, it's even more important to know that that is not the end of the story!

For each one of those verses that I read a few minutes ago from the lectionary passage that reminds us of our shortcomings, there is a corresponding verse in the same chapter, in the same assigned reading, that can offer you hope and reassurance. Psalm 14 tells us, "There's no one who's good – no, not one," and a little later says, "But the Lord is their refuge." Psalm 51, the David confession Psalm, says, "Indeed I was born guilty," but in the end, David sort of comes around and asks God, "Create in me a clean heart, and put a new and right spirit within me." In 1 Timothy, the Apostle Paul says, "I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence, but I received mercy, because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and Christ Jesus judged me faithful and appointed me to his service." As Pastor Jessie told the kids earlier today, the most dangerous of all sinners to the early Christians became an apostle and leader in the church, and wrote a good part of the New Testament. And even that very, very difficult to hear passage from the prophet Jeremiah that said, "The whole land shall be a desolation," has the words of hope at the end of it, where the Lord says, "Yet, I will not make a full end." So even in the face of total destruction there is hope.

And then there's the best news of all, which is that if you are a sinner – which, I think we've pretty much established that you are (and I am) – then you are exactly the type of person that Jesus wants to spend his time with. And so I'm going to read the entirety of the Gospel reading for today, which is Luke 15:1–10. If you want to follow along, you can do that. In the red Bibles, you'd be looking at page 850, or you can just listen as I read it.

"Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him," *him* being Jesus, "And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them!' So he told them this parable:

"Which one of you, having 100 sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the 99 in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost!' Just so, I tell you there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance. Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost!' Just so, I tell you there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Jesus, who perfectly reveals the heart of God, makes it clear that God is eternally willing to pursue and reclaim those who are the most lost, the farthest away, the least well put together. So, my sinner friends, please know that God is out there looking for you. God is scouring the house; she's sweeping out the spaces under the couch. God is knocking aside brush in the wilderness, looking for you. And when God finds you, there will be a great celebration. And may that be hope for you today.

Let's pray together.

God, we are both convicted by these challenging words from scripture and encouraged by the grace that is offered behind them. We pray today that your Spirit will speak to each one of us in the space that we most need to be spoken to. Those who need the grace will receive it, first and foremost; those who need the conviction, the reminder, the uncomfortable truth of our own sinfulness, will receive that, first and foremost. May we each respond to your Spirit according to the need in our lives and in our souls. May we be the recipients not only of your conviction, but of your grace; not only of this truth, but of the healing that accompanies it. May we be remade inwardly so that we can be part of your work of remaking the world around us. We pray in Christ's name, amen.

As we continue to sing, our communion table will be open as it is each week following the proclamation of the Word of God. I invite each of you to come if you are seeking Jesus in this place. The bread and the cup are both reminders of his body and blood, broken and shed for you, and for the forgiveness of sins, but also the real presence of Christ the Savior, which you can take into your own body, as you continue to worship. If you are not yet ready to take communion, you're perfectly welcome to stay where you are. We also have a member of the Prayer Team at the back of the room who'd be happy to pray with you in person, if you like to receive prayer. However the Spirit may be speaking to you today, I invite you to respond – in prayer, in song, at the table, in meditation. Our table is open; come if you will.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at ArtisanChurch.com.