

Psalm 51:10-17 and Matthew 6:1-6: **Good News: Art Unmasks Empire**

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C. Nolan Huizenga, Highland Presbyterian Church

I hope you noticed that in our singing so far this evening, most of the words have come from Psalm 51, one of today's scripture texts. Here are another several verses from Psalm 51 (CEB). Listen for God's word.

Create a clean heart for me, God;
put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me!
Please don't throw me
out of your presence;
please don't take your holy spirit
away from me.
Return the joy of your salvation to me
and sustain me with a willing spirit.
Then I will teach wrongdoers your ways,
and sinners will come back to you.

Deliver me from violence, God,
God of my salvation,
so that my tongue can sing
of your righteousness.
Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth
will proclaim your praise.
You don't want sacrifices.
If I gave an entirely burned offering,
you wouldn't be pleased.
A broken spirit is my sacrifice, God.
You won't despise a heart, God,
that is broken and crushed.

And now we hear from Jesus preaching in the Gospel of Matthew. This is the beginning of chapter 6.

[Jesus said,] "Be careful that you don't practice your religion in front of people to draw their attention. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

"Whenever you give to the poor, don't blow your trumpet as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets so that they may get praise from people. I assure you, that's the only reward they'll get. But when you give to the poor, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that you may give to the poor in secret. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you.

"When you pray, don't be like hypocrites. They love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners so that people will see them. I assure you, that's the only reward they'll get. But when you pray, go to your room, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you.

Thank you all for gathering on this Ash Wednesday. This day calls you and me, along with millions of other faithful ones, into the season and practices of Lent. There's no single right way to open our hearts and lives for Holy Week and Easter. Last year the Highland community explored Lent as a time of pilgrimage, drawing toward God in new places and new ways.

This year we're entering Lent as a time of calling. Through tonight's scriptures God calls us to truth-telling, to humility, to holiness. Psalm 51 is a passionate confession of sin, traditionally ascribed to King David after the prophet Nathan confronted David about his stealing of Bathsheba, Uriah's wife, David's adultery with her, and his murder of Uriah. Nothing adequately atones for all that destruction. But to his credit the psalmist confesses his deep guilt and his broken spirit, pleading with God for restoration of right relationship.

It's an extreme case. Still, for times when our personal or social ethics may be as broken as David's, or if my guilt and brokenness feel more subtle than that, this poem gives us strong language for confession, for telling the truth, for asking God to save us from ourselves.

Then we heard Jesus call his followers to be subtle and artful when they practice generosity and when they pray. Do lift before God everyone who needs prayer, Jesus say. But don't show off with your words or your supposed piety. Jesus goes on in this chapter to show us what a humble and generous prayer sounds like — it's the prayer we say together most Sundays.

And do practice economic justice by supporting and uplifting the poor, Jesus says, every chance you get. But don't ask for credit. Don't demand your name on a plaque. Be so subtle that your left hand doesn't even know what your right hand is doing. That makes me think of superb drummers who develop such limb independence that each hand or foot can play completely unrelated rhythms.

Again, there's no one right way to do this. Last night at our pancake supper a thoughtful church member asked me if I had chosen a Lenten spiritual practice this year, something to give up or something to take on. I had not yet made such a commitment this year, but I was really grateful for the question. It did make me start deciding what I want to practice this season. Because Lent does call us to reconsider our lives' patterns, to make lifegiving changes in them. And we are always better at such faithfulness when we do it in community.

Is there a habit you'd like to change? Or something new you'd like to try? A few years ago during Lent I took a fast from social media. I was surprised at the amount of time that freed up in my life, and also at the freedom I found when I didn't have to keep up with the daily opinions and news of hundreds of people. So that change stuck with me — for better or worse I've minimized my social media use ever since.

I do admire, by the way, people whose motto is "Be the social media you wish to see in the world." My spouse Aimee is such a person, and I love that what she writes and shares seeks to elevate our public discourse.

Because her writing is a form of art. And while art has many valuable purposes, one of them is that art can unmask empire. Humans so easily succumb to the temptation of consolidating power and constructing empires. David Dark is professor of religion and the arts at Belmont University. You've heard me quote him before because his witness feels critical in this time.

David's succinct definition of empire is *militant denial*.¹
Denial of responsibility.
Denial of truth.
Denial of history.

¹ I heard David say that out loud at a Jan 2026 book reading, and it's one of many vital ideas in his book *Everyday Apocalypse: Art, Empire, and the End of the World*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2025.

Denial of rights.
 Denial of freedom.
 Denial of personhood.
 Denial of diversity.
 Denial of interdependence.
 Denial of the other.

We could keep adding to the list. And the militant part has two facets. First, militant as in adamant: a brittle and unbending commitment to all the denials. Second, militant in the literal sense of employing coercive force. Empire, David Dark says, exercises power *over* others. Domination.

Empire dominates culture by denying all voices but its own.
 Empire dominates bodies through imprisonment or deportation or killing.

That seductive power of empire drew King David into sin.
 As we journey toward Holy Week we'll hear again how the power of empire crucified Jesus.

Empire is power *over*. But empire is not the only power in this world.

David Dark reminds us that art carries power too. Art, he says, is power *with*. Like prayer, art has the power to lift us up together. Art calls forth creativity both from the artist *and* from all of us who interact with the art.

Take the example of the painting on the cover of our bulletin. It's by artist and Presbyterian pastor Lisle Gwynn Garrity. What do you feel or think when you look at the painting? What draws your attention?

To me her painting conveys a heavy, foreboding dimness. Below the horizon the world is encased in dark. Above the horizon I perceive drama, storm, upheaval. Yet through all of that, hints of warm light shine and reflect. Angst and hope live so close together in this image, and inside of me. Which makes me feel not alone. Which reminds me that others also are perceiving flashes of hope in a dim world.

Art springs forth from the God-given creative spark in each of us. You — yes, you — have the ability to recognize beauty and truth. You also have the ability to create sentences or drawings or music or figure skating or jokes or *something* — something new that comes from your own spirit.

I used to think that my sister got all the artistic ability in our family. She can draw and create visual art with a fluidity and precision I'll never have. But I've learned that if *I* take a photograph or write down a story, it will always be my artistic expression, not anyone else's. Because none of us experiences the world in exactly the same way as anyone else. And when we express our uniquenesses through artistry, it unmask the lie of empire, the lie of monolithic sameness.

Letting our souls express anything artistic also helps connect us with our loving creator. God, the artist of all beauty and all hope, calls you and me into creative faithfulness.
 This Lent, confess the truth about yourself and about the world.
 This Lent, follow Jesus into prayer and generosity for his beloved people.
 This Lent, resist empire by making art with your life.

In the name of God our Creator, Jesus the Christ, and the Holy Spirit of all truth.