

"Confession"
Psalm 32; James 5:13-16
Blacksburg Presbyterian
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June 19, 2016

Today is the second Sunday in our summer series
looking at how we Reformed Christians worship.

The topic today is confession.

If you grew up in another denomination
or enjoy the ecumenical services we share in Lent,
you know that a corporate confession of sin
is not something every church does.

But we do, and we always do so right at the very start
whenever we gather to worship God.

We do it up front because in story after story in the Bible
when people discover God is near,
the very first thing they do is confess.

It's easy to take this understanding the wrong way
and turn God into some kind of scary or vengeful presence.
but that is not how the Israelites saw it at all,
and not how we are supposed to see it either.

It's just that in the face of Goodness itself,
of Love itself, we can barely breathe.

The natural response is to bow down in wonder and gratitude.

That's what Isaiah does the day he encounters God in the Jerusalem Temple
He calls out to God that he is a man
of "unclean lips" and lives among people who are the same.

A seraph flies over with a coal and touches his lips,
symbolically we hope, telling him it's alright,
he has been made clean, his sin is "blotted out."

Similarly, Peter falls on his face in fear
the first time he meets Jesus in Luke's gospel.
Peter has just hauled in a huge load of fish
from water that had been barren only moments before.

The mystery of it sends him to knees right on top of the catch.
Sliding around on fish scales and slime, he shouts
"Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!"
Jesus tells him not to be afraid, and that from that day on,
he will be fishing for people.

A Roman Centurion went to Jesus on behalf of a dying slave,
and he too confessed at once.
As a man who exercises authority over other people,
he says he is unworthy to have Jesus in his home.

He knows that Jesus' word alone will do the healing.
Amazed, Jesus pronounces the slave healed.

And so again, the natural response on the part of those
who find themselves in the presence of God is to confess their sin,
and God's immediate, natural response
to honest confession is to forgive.

Not later, not after an obligatory time in which the person feels
dirty or guilty or shamed, but God forgives immediately.

I may have told you before about the woman in one of my congregations
who came to me one day to complain:

"I hate the Assurance of Pardon and passing the Peace," she said.

I arranged my brain to listen well,
expecting one of many the criticisms of the peace:
discomfort with handshakes and hugs,
a feeling of phoniness,
a wish to be left well enough alone during worship,
or confusion about passing the peace
that it's not really ours to give.

(Which is exactly the point, by the way—its Christ's peace, not ours,
not something we can confirm or deny by how we happen to feel).

But she surprised me.

It wasn't the Peace that bothered her.

It was the Assurance of Pardon.

"What's the problem?" I asked.

"It comes too soon," she said.

"Too soon?"

"Yes. I've just confessed and before my confession
has even had a chance to really sink in, I'm being forgiven.

Why can't we put the pardon off for a while,
until later in the service, at least until after the sermon?"

I was glad to hear that confession was important to her
and that she took the corporate confession seriously.

I said as much but I didn't have a solution for her need to delay forgiveness.
Because *God* does not delay forgiveness,
but gives it immediately, the moment we seek it with honesty.

Not only do we confess as soon as we find God near,
We confess on behalf of people other than ourselves.
We believe that each time we confess as a body,
we confess on behalf of the world.

This is not because we are arrogant so and so's
who think we know other peoples' faults better than they do. Not at all.

We do it out of the conviction
that as a gathered community of *sinner*s
we know what it is like to be sinful and broken.

And we also know the release that comes from being forgiven.
And that is why we pray on behalf of others in the world.

In the Geneva Confession John Calvin explained
what we Presbyterians think about the human condition:
that we "remain poor and wretched sinners" in the sight of God.
It isn't that God is hard to please.

Calvin says God regards everything we do in faith
"as pleasing and agreeable."

It's just that whatever good we do is done
with the help of God's Spirit working in us,
so it's not something we can take credit for.

"Thus we always have need of the mercy of God...,"
says the Geneva Confession, "And so we ought always
to look for our righteousness in Jesus Christ...
and in him be confident and assured,
putting no faith in our works." ⁱ

In other words, we need God's help and grace.
We need it all the time, and God is ever willing to give it.

I am going to guess that you might be alright
with confessing as soon as we feel God near,
but that thinking ourselves incapable of doing good
might be a harder call.

There have been plenty of people through the ages
who have argued that human beings are capable of goodness
without any help from God.

One of them was Pelagius, a Celtic monk
who got into an argument with Augustine.

Pelagius own behavior was saintly,
and his famous argument with Augustine was fruitful.
It led Augustine to write his most cogent arguments
about our dependence on God's grace.

Poor Pelagius was proclaimed a heretic.

Augustine won the battle, but Pelagius won the war.
Certainly people continued to believe during the Enlightenment
and again in the wake of the Industrial Revolution
that humankind is perfectible.

Why with so much great learning, science and technology,
we were bound to emerge into an era
when nothing but goodness would prevail.

World War One put an end to that way of thinking,
followed promptly by World War Two.

In truth, if you look at what most Christians believe today

we are still mostly in Pelagius' camp,
thinking that goodness really is within our grasp,
and that if we only tried harder we could fulfill all God's commands.

Meanwhile on the side of the road is Calvin, smiling gently, saying "No."
No, Beloved, some of the worst things that have ever been done
have been done by those who were convinced
they were doing ultimate good:
the Crusades, the Inquisition,
wresting children from their aboriginal or American Indian parents
to ensure they got a "proper" Christian upbringing.
The so-called Poor Peoples' Campaign of the 1960s
which, in the name of urban renewal,
destroyed neighborhoods
to build low income housing that often became
host to isolation, crime, drugs, and sadness.

We cringe to hear such a list,
thinking we would never be so foolish,
but we would and are and always will be, says Calvin kindly,
with no hint of being pleased to be so right.

But even so, aren't there good and caring people everywhere
who sincerely do what they can to care for others
and live decent and honorable lives?
Do we really have to confess every time we worship?

Again Calvin would be the first to say,
it's not for God that we do this, it's for ourselves,
so that we can be fully present
in the face of so much love.
Frederick Buechner says much the same
in the thought at the top of the bulletin today.

Psalm 32 agrees that confession is crucial.
Sin is so much a part of normal human life
That the Psalmist uses three different words for it in first two verses:
sin, transgression, and iniquity.

The word "sin" in Hebrew means "to miss the mark"
or "deviate from the true course."
"Transgression" is more serious. It means "willful rebellion"
especially willful rebellion against God,
similar to that of Adam and Eve.
"Iniquity," which can also be translated "guilt,"
has more to do with the *effects* of sin,
the destructive consequences that invariably come
from the wrong path or the rebellious heart.

Not only is sin so ever present that there are three words to describe it,
but the *effects* of sin, as even many of us know all too well,

can have physical impact on the body.
The psalmist knew there was a mind body connection
and says that while he or she kept silence
“My body wasted away” “My strength was dried up.”
In other words while the writer tried to hide the sin
and cover it up, he or she was somehow engulfed,
covered with psychological and physical pain.
Once the sin is confessed, this destructive condition is transformed.
God engulfs the confessor. God “covers” the sin.
From the moment in verse five when the poet confesses,
none of the words for sin appear again.
Things are different for those who confess and rely on the grace of God.

This quick and decisive forgiveness of God is important,
and it has implications for us.
If God forgives immediately sin that has been truly repented
and honestly confessed, we need to let it go, too.
C.S. Lewis says as much when he writes that concentrating on the past,
and on past sins, is something people ought to avoid.
“Any fixing of the mind on old evils beyond what is absolutely
necessary for repenting our own sins and forgiving those of others
is certainly useless and usually bad for us,” he writes.ⁱⁱ
Literary scholar that Lewis was, he adds that in Dante’s vision of hell,
it was the lost souls who were “entirely concerned with their past!
Not so the saved.”
Beloved, God is a living God who wants us to let go of the past,
a God who “invites us to exercise stewardship over our memories.”

The psalmist also knows that dwelling on the past is unwise.
Instead, the forgiven person should live in the moment with great joy.
The whole second half of the psalm
is devoted to inviting people wise enough to trust
in God’s forgiveness to join in celebration, and be glad.
They are the righteous, the “upright in heart.”
The ones who know that no one can follow the rules and avoid sin.
The righteous, whom the psalmist invites to shout for joy,
are people who confess their sin and trust in God to forgive.
That’s what righteousness means.

Ted Wardlaw was once the pastor of Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta
He tells a wonderful story about the celebration that confessing includes.
On Christmas Eve Central Church had three communion services,
two in the sanctuary and one, a 9:00 evening service, in the chapel.
The chapel was a beautiful English Gothic space,
with beautifully carved wood, splendid stained glass windows
and elegant stone walls.
The people who packed the chapel that Christmas Eve

had to file through a crowd of about 50 homeless men who had not made it into Central's night shelter. These 50 or so men were huddled together at the intersection waiting for a bus that would take them to a city shelter. Ted had invited the men to come in and worship, but they had declined so that they could meet their bus. The congregation then settled into the chapel, and near the very start of worship is a corporate prayer of confession. Then the liturgist announced the news of pardon and acceptance. "Friends," she said, "*Believe the Good News of the Gospel! In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven!*" "At the moment a huge cheer went up on the other side of the stone wall. Because the bus arrived! The effect on in inside of the wall was riveting!" said Ted. "I will never be able to hear the words [you are forgiven] again without thinking of the only appropriate response to them; riotous cheering throughout the precincts of heaven and earth!" AMEN.

ⁱ The Genevan Confession was credited to John Calvin in 1536 by Beza who said Calvin wrote it as a formula of Christian doctrine suited to the church at Geneva. More recent scholarship attributes it to William Farel but in all likelihood Calvin did have considerable influence on the document. Indeed the records of the Senate at Geneva indicate that the confession was presented by both Farel and Calvin to the magistrates who received it and set aside for more detailed examination.

ⁱⁱ The C.S. Lewis quote was found in Charles Taliaferro's *Praying with C.S. Lewis*. Winona, Minn.: St. Mary's Press. p. 94 Taliaferro is responsible for the idea that God wants us to exercise "stewardship over our memories." Brueggemann *et al* write in *Texts for Preaching* that Augustine had Psalm 32 over his bed. Ted Wardlaw's 1997 sermon can be found at www.protestanthou.com.