

“Confessing Prayers”

(1 of 9 in the Lenten series, “Prayer”)

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; II Corinthians 5:20-6:10;
Matthew 6:1-16, 16-21

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From the Pulpit

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A meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio. 2/10/2016, Ash Wednesday 2016, dedicated to memory of our friend Van Barndt who died earlier today and to MarShawn M. McCarrel, II, a poet and prophetic voice for our times who is gone too soon and to his grieving friends and family on their great loss & always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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In The Order of Worship for the German Reformed Church in America published in 1901, you will find a service called “Preparation for the Holy Communion.” In the practice of the German Reformed Church until the merger of the United Church of Christ in 1957, most

congregations held a Friday night worship service to “get ready to receive holy communion” on those rare Sundays they received the sacrament – no more than four times a year.

At the close of the preparation service you were given a token that indicated you were prepared to receive Holy Communion in worship two days later. If you did not have a token for the Sunday service, you could not receive the sacrament. In other words, without penitential preparation, you were banned from the table.

Serving as a “Night of Atonement,” service, the worship was 12 pages long and called for deep and contrite confession. Based in the Ten Commandments and prayers drawn from the Jewish prayer book and the Day of Atonement services, this was an intense service. For an hour, you confessed openly and corporately all your sins. You called upon God for mercy and forgiveness.

No confession – no communion. That clear. That simple.

Hear these few prayers of the lengthy litany of confession.

The minister would say: *“Remember not, Lord, our offences nor the offences of our forefathers; neither take Thou vengeance of our sins; spar us good Lord, spare Thy People*

whom thou hast redeemed with Thou most precious blood, and be not angry with us forever.”

The congregation would respond: *“Spare us, good Lord.”*

Minister: *“From all evil and harm; from the power of sin and the snares of the devil; from Thy wrath and everlasting damnation;”*

Congregation: *“Good Lord, deliver us.”*

Minister: *“From blindness of heart; from pride, vainglory and hypocrisy; from envy, hatred, and malice and all uncharitableness; from all impure lusts and desires, and from all the deceits of the world, the flesh and the devil;”*

Congregation: *“Good Lord, deliver us.”*

Do you hear the intensity of these prayers? Can you feel the weight of honest, heartfelt confession? The message is clear – **get right with God or don't bother coming to communion.**

On and on this went, six pages of confession and only in the end, deliverance and mercy. But, wait there is still more....

Following the sermon, the minister would lead a “confessional” reading through the entire communion liturgy, pointing to Christ's saving nature and our sinful ways as people knelt in contrition. But, by the service's end, there was no communion – only a token awaiting the penitent ones (adults only) for their return at the coming of

the Lord's Day and His supper. This feels so foreign to us in our times. When we hear this, we celebrate we are not there now.

For some of us, this deep confession echoes the story of our faith traditions. For others, we wonder, "Why all this extra effort to confess sins I don't really feel I am apart of?" "I am not THAT bad!" - why say so?!? "Do I really need such confessional preparation for holy communion or a life of following Christ?" Perhaps.... Is my answer.

Many of us have heard and spoken the maxim, "*Confession is good for the soul.*" It's an old Scottish proverb but there is a word missing. The proverb actually reads, "**Open** confession is good for the soul." I believe there is Biblical truth supporting this maxim - open confession is healthy and powerfully healing. Many in our extended family of Christians would espouse the belief that absent open confession, salvation is not guaranteed. For some of us, this may seem shocking. But, pay attention to the truth engendered in this belief. It is this: public confession, open confession is a huge part of being a Christian and receiving forgiveness and grace and the promise of salvation.

OPEN confession is good for the soul.

There was a man named John in my first congregation who regularly complained about the confession of sin which was offered each week in worship. John would regularly say, *“I didn’t do any of these things. I am not saying this prayer.”* Yet, with even greater regularity he would make racist and anti-Semitic comments to me and others on Sundays. He would tell me in no uncertain words about the sins of the growing Hispanic community and all the crime they brought to the neighborhood.

One day I told him in the greeting line after worship that he needed to pray the prayers of confession because his closed lips were getting him in trouble with God. *“What do you mean by that?”* he responded. I answered, *“I mean you have become blind to your own sinfulness. You lie to yourself about the unkindness of your words and actions to people of color and our Jewish sisters and brothers.”* He said, *“I don’t see that at all.”* I said, *“John, that is the problem. As your pastor, I am telling you to open your eyes and confess your sins.”*

I would like tell you that John “saw the light,” turned around and became kind to our neighbors. I don’t believe that happened. But, he at least stopped his open commentary against them on Sundays in church. Perhaps he even prayed the confession. I don’t remember seeing his lips

moving.... But, I do know that **open confession is good for the soul....**

In Psalm 51:17, the Psalmist proclaims that God never “**despises a broken and contrite heart.**” But the real question for us in the 21st Century is – how do we experience a contrite heart? How does our grieving, broken, sorrowing and repentant heart open itself to God and those whom we relate to in our circle of family, our community and our world?

I would suggest that reaching the place of contrition takes four steps: **asking, confessing, receiving and obeying.**

To enter into true confession, we begin by turning to God and **asking** for help. *We cannot make* “**heart repentance**” happen. It is not something that we cause to come about by creating a certain mood or playing the right kind of music to trigger contrition. It is a gift from God – pure and simple. **We have to ask God to come into our heart.** Try this: “Gracious, God enter my heart. Take away the sin that is in me.”

We also don't do this once and then done. We ask with boldness and persistence for God to make our hearts contrite. We ask God for a weeping heart and a lamenting

heart. “Lord, let me receive the gift of tears.” If at first heart sorrow doesn’t come, we keep asking. We keep seeking. We keep knocking. We keep praying. We keep confessing. “Mercy” we ask of the Lord.

Beyond asking for God to come to us, we have to **confess** our lack of faith, our distance from God and those whom we love, our hardheartedness. Unbelief, disunity, arrogance and self-sufficiency and our offenses too personal to say in public...too many and... too awful to mention - must first find a way to our hearts and then to our lips. C.S. Lewis writes in Letters to Malcolm, “the true Christian’s nostril is to be continually attentive to the inner cesspool.” In this confession we leave no room for excuses or extenuating circumstances. We say, “By my own fault, my own most grievous fault I have sinned O Lord.” We should fall on our faces when we pray this one.

Third, **we receive**. Through our confession, our God who is faithful and just and full of mercy and compassion will forgive and will cleanse us (I John 1:9). Like the father of the Prodigal, God will run to us when we approach God in the depth of our heart. In the practice of the monastic movement – which was entirely non-clerical – all the laypeople started each worship service by giving reciprocal confession to one another. They received Christ’s assurances

from one another. No middle person. No clergy. Just nose to nose. Face to face. True Confession to True Confession. Before there was Facebook, there was Face-to-Face confessions... Perhaps a return to such direct confessional prayer would help heal ourselves and this world.

Finally, **we obey**. It is not enough to ask God for heart soft and broken where there is space for repentance. It is not even enough to confess freely and openly our many offenses. Embedded in the words of assurance and forgiveness is the call to obedience. We must be zealous in practicing what we have received through the grace of God. We go to the person we have offended and without hesitation ask for forgiveness. We make restitution. We behave as one who is turned around in our lives of true confession and repentance. *

Ask. Confess. Receive. Obey. These are the steps to true confession and contrition.

Tonight, there is no better place to begin this sermon series on “Prayer” than with “Confessing Prayers.” Let us get the junk cleared out of our spiritual blood system. Let us get right with God. Let us find the place of tears that keep us from full disclosure and let us become complete honesty before God. Before we are declared dust on this day, before

we step forward and receive ashes on this day, let us get right with God and the people God has placed in our lives.

Taking a page from the 115-year-old prayer book of spiritual forbearers, may we hear these words and let them soak into our bones.

“As I live saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his ways and live...for God so loved the world that He gave his Only Begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

These words are tested and true. Believe them and live. Amen.

*Drawn from Richard J. Foster’s, Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home, HarperSanFrancisco, 1992, pp. 42-45.

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