



Sacraments and Sacred Moments:
“AMBASSADORS OF GRACE”
(Confession/Reconciliation)

2 Corinthians 5:16-21
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Angela's Ashes is a beautiful memoir of author Frank McCourt's childhood growing up in Limerick, Ireland. If you haven't read the book, you may have seen the movie. One of my favorite scenes takes place around the time that young Frank makes his first communion. After a good scrubbing bath and a brushing for his messy hair by his maternal grandmother as he is dressed and ready for church, Frank is almost late for mass when everyone gets up late. When he goes up with the rest of his class for communion, Frank nearly chokes on the dry wafer that he receives from the priest at the chancel railing before he eventually manages to get it down his throat.

Following mass, Frank wants to go and hang out with his friends, but his maternal grandmother insists that he come back to her home for a first communion breakfast. So when they arrive home, he scarfs down the breakfast that she made. It's clear that his objective is to be able to go hang out with his friends. At one point, his grandmother comments about his eating habits saying, "Will you look at him? The manners of a pig. He eats like a Presbyterian. Is it a millionaire you think I am? An American?"

Suddenly Frank holds his hand over his mouth and runs outside to the backyard to get sick because he ate too fast. His grandmother is outraged because he's not only thrown up her breakfast, but quite possibly the host that he received at Mass, as well. In a good Irish Catholic family, these blessed elements are the actual body and blood of Jesus. So she drags him back to the church for confession, concerned about what it means to have the Lord's presence in her backyard.

In the confessional, Frank says, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It's been a day since my last confession."

The priest asks him, "A day? And what sins have you committed in a day, my son?"

Frank says, “I overslept and nearly missed my first communion. My hair stuck up like a Protestant’s and I threw up my first holy communion breakfast. Now my grandma says she has God in her back yard and what shall she do?”

The priest says, “Tell your grandmother to wash it away with a little water.”

As Frank steps out of the confessional and into the sanctuary, he tells his grandmother what the priest said. She asks whether she should use holy water or ordinary water. When Frank says that the priest didn’t tell him which one, she sends him back into the confessional where he begins again, “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It’s been a minute since my last confession.”

The priest asks, “A minute? Are you the boy that was just here?” When Frank affirms that he is, the priest is exasperated and asks, “What is it now?” So Frank tells him that his grandmother wants to know whether she should use holy water or ordinary water. In the next scene, little Frank is outside the confessional saying to his grandmother, “He says ‘ordinary water’ and ‘don’t go bothering him again.’”

For those of us Protestants whose hair tends to stick up or perhaps those of the Presbyterian variety who eat too fast for Frank McCourt’s grandmother, we chuckle at the thought of such a confession. Even more so, the idea of confessing sins or wrongs to a clergyperson is foreign to us. Protestants don’t do confession, do we? While it has been said that “Confession is good for the soul,” most of us are not so ready to bare our souls. Besides, some offenses are just too trivial to burden another soul with them.

A quick Google search for the definition of “confess” yields the following suggestions: to “admit or state that one has committed a crime or is at fault in some way,” to “admit or acknowledge something reluctantly, typically because one feels slightly ashamed or embarrassed,” to “declare (one’s religious faith),” or to “declare one’s sins formally to a priest.”¹

If confession is to admit that we have done wrong, it’s no wonder most of us struggle with it. “Fessing up” could involve punishment. At the very least, it could mean that what we have to confess causes us shame or embarrassment. If that’s the case, why confess?

I’ll never forget the time that one of our exchange students stayed out past his curfew. Dawn and I stayed up to wait for him to come home. He wasn’t horribly late, so we weren’t at the point of worrying, but we wanted to make sure that he made it home all right. So we sat in the living room waiting for him to arrive, knowing that he’d have to walk past us to get to his bedroom

Suddenly, there was a loud “thud” in his bedroom. While I went to bedroom door, Dawn went to the front door to discover our student along with some friends (two of whom happened to be the Baptist pastor’s kids) sneaking into his bedroom. One of the other preacher’s kids looked at Dawn and said, “Yeah, my parents wait up for us, too.” After trying to tell us that the door was locked when it wasn’t, our student eventually apologized for being late and sneaking in. Dawn asked, “Are you really sorry for coming home late or are you sorry that you got caught?”

If what we've done causes us to feel slightly ashamed or embarrassed, or if it could involve some sort of punishment, it's no wonder we'd prefer not to admit to it in the first place, especially if no one knows. If we could just come in a little late and no one notices as long as there's no "thud" to be heard throughout the house, then no one will ever know, right?

Confession makes us vulnerable, and vulnerability can be seen as a sign of weakness. Perhaps as Christians we view confession with a feeling that we are horrible sinners in the hands of God or others in the Church who are ready to exact punishment or to make us feel the full guilt and shame of our actions.

In James 5:16 we hear these words: "Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed."² In I John 1:9, the author tells us, "If we confess our sins, [God] who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."³ In the scriptures, confession seems to be about opportunities to live in truth, to receive healing, forgiveness, and the restoration of relationships with God and one another.

In our lesson from Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth, Paul expresses that what God seeks above all else is reconciliation with all of humanity. Beyond anything else, God desires to live in relationship with us. Paul reminds the Corinthians that in Christ, we see things differently, including one another. He writes: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" As a result of our new life in Christ, we see everything, including one another, through an enhanced vision that comes from this new life in Christ.

Paul goes on to say, "All this is from God" (meaning it's God's gift to us to see things differently), "who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us."

Many churches now refer to the sacrament of confession as the sacrament of reconciliation because it is about more than just the moment of confession. It's about more than 'fessing up. It's about the renewal of relationships. It is about the opportunities that God provides for us to reconnect with God and with one another.

As United Methodists, we don't have a sacrament of confession, or reconciliation for that matter. While our clergy may hear informal confessions from time to time, we tend to make a regular common confession to one another during our worship when we pray the prayer of confession. There is usually a time of silence which offers us a moment for personal reflection. On the other hand, it is still important for us to share a word of grace with one another. If we were to use the prayer of confession from our hymnal, you would also see that like this morning, the clergy member offers the words of grace to the people and you offer the words of grace to the clergyperson. We remind one another as laity and clergy that in the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. We share in a common priesthood in this way; we act as priests for one another, offering forgiveness and reconciliation.

While confession is not a sacrament for us, confessions are sacred moments in which God offers us the opportunity to be honest about harms we have committed, works we have left undone, and times that we haven't quite gotten love, discipleship, and relationships with God and one another right. A key to those sacred moments is reminding one another that God always loves us and holds us. Even when we have walked away or strayed, God follows after us. This is central to Paul's reminder to the Corinthians and to us. In Jesus, God is about the business of reconciliation with God and one another; God works to bring us together.

At the heart of times of confession is God's desire to see reconciliation and truth in lives and relationships. While we tally one another's wrongs and are quick to point out the sin we see in others, our corporate confessions remind us together that we stand as one people in need of God's grace which we receive in abundance as we are honest enough to be true before God and one another.

Paul says, "So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."⁴

Our work, then, is not to shame and guilt the world or one another, but to be vessels of the new life that we have received in Christ. It is not to judge the world, but to be God's appeal, inviting those around us to experience the God who has made, is making, and will make all things new, including you, me, and the world around us. We are ambassadors of Christ, bringing God's grace to reality wherever we find ourselves.

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson paraphrases Paul's words this way: "We're Christ's representatives. God uses us to persuade men and women to drop their differences and enter into God's work of making things right between them. We're speaking for Christ himself now: Become friends with God; he's already a friend with you."⁵

As friends of Jesus and ambassadors of God's grace, confession is good for the soul; our soul as well as those in the world around us.

¹ https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS748US748&site=async/dictw&q=Dictionary#dobs=confess

² James 5:16, NRSV.

³ I John 1:9, NRSV.

⁴ I Corinthians 5:20, NRSV.

⁵ I Corinthians 5:20, *The Message*.