

Confess Your Sins and Pray for One Another
James 5:13-20, Psalm 32
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She couldn't sleep. She was tossing and turning. Finally the seven year old got up and went in to her mom. Earlier when they'd said their goodnights, the mother asked her daughter if she'd brushed her teeth. She answered affirmatively, they hugged, mom told her to say her prayers and off she went to bed. But she couldn't sleep. She was not accustomed to lying, especially to her mom. She burst into tears, and confessed the crime – the lying was worse than not having brushed her teeth! The mother calmed her down, expressed forgiveness, sent the girl off to brush her teeth and tucked her into bed where she went quickly off to sleep.

Confession is good for the soul. I know. I was that seven year old girl! A lesson learned early in life, which has stuck with me.

When we sin—we act or fail to act—in a way that breaks or disrupts the harmony in a relationship. Until we take steps to mend that—we will live in dis-harmony and with a degree of dis-ease.

In the pre-scientific age in which the Bible was written, people made a strong connection between the effects of unconfessed sin and disease. Today research clearly shows that there is a mind-body-spirit connection. That said, *not all disease is a direct result of sin.*

In the scripture reading from James this is evident as he urges believers to pray for healing, linking that prayer with a prayer of confession of sin. To confess means to "agree with God and to say the same thing as God does about my condition; to repent signals a change of heart [and mind] that leads to a change of action." (Journey with Jesus, essay 10/25/2004)

As a college student I read a book by psychiatrist Karl Menninger entitled "Whatever Became of Sin?"

In this book, Menninger notes that the word "sin" had even then (in the late 1970s), had fallen out of common usage. He believed that this was due in part to the criminalization of sin. In other words, many of the sins one might commit, at least the "biggies" from say the Top ten/ten Commandments, could earn one a stay in jail. Stealing, larceny, murder, bearing false witness/purgery. You get the idea.

If one did not "commit a crime and do the time", one could be considered a pretty good person. However that view does not take sin seriously enough.

Recently, an article in Christianity today by Mark Galli noted this same dynamic is present in public discourse today. The word "sin" and "repentance" seem to have disappeared from our vocabulary. Instead the focus is on blaming – blaming unjust institutions, blaming those with wealth and access to power, blaming anyone else rather than accepting personal responsibility seems to be preferred over repentance.

If not busy blaming others, we are more often than not, busy with self-justification.

"I don't need to repent because I'm the one righteously calling out the social and personal sins of others." Or "If I say I am complicit, it will give my political and social opponents(enemies) leverage against me and my cause." Or even more to the point, "If I

were to really examine myself and then acknowledge how much self-centeredness and pride infects even my most righteous actions, I would have to admit I'm a hypocrite and a moral failure."

Well, yes. Aren't we all? That's precisely why Jesus came, to save the world from itself, and to save us from ourselves. That's why the word repentance is usually connected to the phrase "good news."....Jesus' early preaching was summarized: "Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15).

Repentance is the means by which we experience the forgiveness of sins... This alone changes everything, of course. And thus it is also the means by which we can change the temperature of the angry debates in church, online, and in our culture.

What if, instead of stubbornly entrenching ourselves deeper in argument or accusations, we paused and said sincerely, "I'm sorry to say that I've contributed to this problem, and I have a lot to repent of." Or "I have to admit that I've said some stupid and offensive things, like the very one I'm criticizing."

If we were to do that, yes, some would crucify us. **This is the risk** taken by followers of the crucified Lord, who teaches us to be meek and humble of heart.

But often, this repentant posture disarms people and can turn caustic debate into humane conversation. (Mark Galli, Christianity Today, Online edition 9/20/2017, [Whatever became of repentance?](#))

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, after ten years in a gulag/prison in the old Soviet Union, came to the following conclusion:

"When I lay there on rotting prison straw...it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart." Each one of us possesses the potential to do great good, or to commit acts of great evil.

No one is immune.

But there is an alternative to the blame game or self-justification. It is called confession and repentance.

After hearing a sermon on Psalm 52:3-4 (lies and deceit), a man wrote to the IRS, "I can't sleep knowing that I have cheated on my income tax. Enclosed is a check for \$500. If I still can't sleep, I'll send the rest."

Oops. I don't think that is what James had in mind!

Brennan Manning was an author, speaker, and priest. When attending his 50 year high school reunion a former classmate asked him to recap his life since graduation.

Manning responded simply: "Well, it's been half a century of sin and grace."

You may recall John Ortberg's funny story of the red jelly stain on the mauve color sofa. When his wife confronted all three children, one of the daughters pointed to the other and said: "She did it." (As a matter of fact, none of the three children were the offender, it was John himself!)

Truthfully, one of the problems we face is that we'd rather blame someone else, anyone else! But the blame game is no game, and only sets us and others up for more heartache. We get nowhere when we blame others, when we appeal to our genetic inheritance, our social circumstance, or to our parents or to our children. Flip Wilson built an entire comedic career around the simple saying: "The devil made me do it!" It's funny in a comedy sketch, but in real life? Not so much.

Mea Culpa is a Latin phrase that has come into common usage, meaning "sorry about that" or "it's my fault". A contemporary translation? "My bad", "it's on me". These words are actually part of both the Episcopal and the Catholic prayer book. *Mea maxima culpa means "my own most grievous fault."* It is no one else's, it is my own.

There are numerous examples in scripture, King David, being one. After committing adultery with Bathsheba which like the domino effect, led to numerous other sins, including murdering her husband—David was confronted by Samuel about his sin, and he repented. Psalm 32 (and 51) were written by David, describing what it was like to live with unconfessed sin, and then to come clean before God and experience God's grace.

Another biblical model for this type of confession is the son Jesus told about, who asked for, received, and then squandered his inheritance, returned home and said: "Father I have sinned, against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." (Luke 15:21).

What follows in that story is **not** rejection...**not** recrimination...not a dressing down about the son's faults and failures. Nope.

What follows is the warmest embrace one can imagine, and a party to remember. Repentance reaps the reward of grace, forgiveness, a slate wiped clean, a fresh start, a new beginning, the old is gone, the new is come! (read I John 1:9)

That is why many theologians, including the Apostle Paul, can see even our sins in a positive light—how? Our sin—as bad and as ugly as it can be—is also the occasion for something even greater: God's abundant love and amazing grace. Paul suggests this in Romans 5:20-21 NLT

²⁰"God's law was given so that all people could see how sinful they were. But as people sinned more and more, God's wonderful grace became more abundant. ²¹So just as sin ruled over all people and brought them to death, now God's wonderful grace rules instead, giving us right standing with God and resulting in eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Last evening at the Community Prayer Service sponsored by PMA, we sang the old hymn, It Is Well With My Soul. One verse in particular stood out to me, the words illustrating the blessing that confessed sin is in our lives:

"My sin, oh the bliss of this glorious thought
My sin, not in part, but the whole
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, Praise the Lord, O my soul!!"

St. Ignatius of Loyola said it this way:

"Be grateful for your sins, as they are carriers of God's grace."

Brennan Manning offers this suggestion:

Imagine that Jesus will dine with you tonight. In being seated at your table, Jesus has full knowledge of everything you are and are not, your entire life story, all the hidden agendas, dark desires, every skeleton in your closet, all your mixed motives. Manning says..."despite Jesus's intimate knowledge... it would still be impossible to be saddened in His presence...You would feel his acceptance and forgiveness."

This dynamic can be observed in the Gospels when on more than one occasion, Jesus was invited to a dinner party, where some "undesirables"—some who were considered the worst sinners in that society (tax collectors and prostitutes, to name a few), showed up uninvited. His hosts are utterly scandalized, but Jesus? He is comfortable with everyone, ever gracious and welcoming.

Back at his 50th High school reunion, Brennan Manning told his former classmate:

"Yes, it's been half a century of sin and grace. I've been a drunk and I've been divorced. Faithful during my marriage, I was unfaithful in celibacy, a liar, envious of the gifts of others, a person who was insufferably arrogant, a people pleaser, a braggart...[but] by sheer undeserved grace, I've been able to abandon myself in unshaken trust, to the compassion and mercy of Jesus Christ." (B. Manning, A Glimpse of Jesus, p. 24)

Manning understands the gravity of his sin, yet even more, he grasps how much greater is the Grace of God in Jesus Christ.

What about you? And me?

The blame game or the effort to justify ourselves—both perpetuate the problem and do nothing to relieve the dis-ease that exists in our relationships with one another or with God.

Only confession—honestly baring our souls before God, and to at least one other person—can bring the relief that we so desperately need and which we are often afraid to seek.

I was behind bars. Summoned by the Kent jail, responding to the request for a chaplain. As steel doors slammed shut behind me, and opened before me, I was a little nervous. "Jane Doe" was waiting for me in a plain room, obviously monitored by camera and from the jail's central monitoring station. Jane was charged with assault. She ranted and raved for about 25 minutes...blaming others, her circumstances, on and on and on she went. Finally spent, she stopped. After several minutes of silence, she said quietly, "I did it." Her whole demeanor: her posture, facial expression, tone of voice, everything changed in that moment of confession.

John 20:23—we need to hear that we are forgiven by God and by others. We are mediators of God's grace to one another!

It's a risk to be vulnerable to another human being. God already knows the truth and is patiently waiting for us to confess—to agree with Him about ourselves.

The risk of vulnerability, earns the reward of God's grace mediated to us through another person. "Jane Doe" knew there were consequences for her behavior; but she also knew the love and grace of God.

James urges us to "confess our sins to one another" and experience healing...the healing of broken relationships, let alone, the possible healing of our minds, bodies, and spirits.

Thanks be to God!

Let us pray...