

James 5:13-18

When a local priest announced his retirement after 25 years of service to his parish, a dinner was scheduled in his honor. One of the members of the congregation happened to be a leading local politician and was chosen as the keynote speaker for the event.

Unfortunately, on the evening of the event, the politician was delayed; so **the priest decided to offer some opening remarks** to the gathered group while they waited.

He said, "I got my first impression of the parish from the very first confession I heard here. And, because of it, I thought I had been assigned to a terrible place. The first person who entered my confessional told me he had stolen a television set and, when questioned by the police, was able to lie his way out of it. He had also stolen money from his parents, embezzled from his employer, had an affair with his best friend's wife, and taken illicit drugs. Though I maintained my priestly composure, I was appalled.

"But as the days went on I learned that my flock was not all like that and I had, indeed, come to a fine parish full of good and loving people."

Just as the priest finished his talk, the politician arrived full of apologies for being late. He immediately began to make the presentation and said: "I'll never forget the first day our parish priest arrived. In fact, I had the honor of being the first person to go to him for confession."

Oh, boy. The story ends there, probably so we can each use our imagination to determine what happened next. I imagine it's possible that two careers came to a close that night instead of just one. But I hope not.

It's tempting I know to immediately label the politician as the bigger bozo in the story. He certainly had been accidentally exposed for a pretty embarrassing list of sinful choices. And yet, I wonder if the priest was actually the bigger fool for having believed that the rest of his parish was full of good and loving people. If he really knew them and really took the scriptures seriously, he'd have remembered that we're all sinners saved by grace and that no one is truly good but God Himself, according to Jesus.

If we're being fair, we ought to give the politician credit. Not only had he set the example by being the first parishioner to confess his sins to the parish's new priest, but he also gave confession about his confession to the people gathered for the party. He actually practiced what most of us often just preach – that **confessing our sins and our need of God's grace is a really important, really biblical practice.**

There are several places in the Bible that teach us that truth. But, this evening, I want to focus on the New Testament letter of James, where in the **5th chapter in verses 13-18** we read this:

13 Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. 14 Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.

16 Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. 17 Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. 18 Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

The key verse I want to look at this evening is verse 16, where James wrote: **“Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.”**

For this Ash Wednesday afternoon, James gives us three important spiritual practices that we live out in Christian community together.

Conveniently, the starting letters spell out the acronym CPR. So, we can think of these steps as a way of being spiritually resuscitated when sin has begun to entangle and choke us.

First, James tells us to **confess**, specifically to confess our sins to one another. That's the C of our spiritual CPR.

This is one way our Catholic brothers and sisters have really gotten it right. They've maintained the sacredness of the practice of confession – not just confessing sin to God in private but confession sin to another person more openly. This doesn't mean that your Worship Commission is going to start expecting you to begin publically broadcasting your darkest secrets to one another on Sunday mornings. But, if we're going to take God's word seriously, it does mean that we will need to find at least one other trusted person – a friend or pastor or counselor – with whom we're willing to be very real about our spiritual wrestling matches.

If your immediate reaction is to resist being that vulnerable with someone else, let me lovingly point you back to the benefit of your confession, according to James. Remember, in verse 16, James wrote that confessing your sins is important for your own healing. This is an example of a spiritual practice where you get out what you put in. **Confess little, and you may experience little healing. Confess much, and you may experience much healing.** God's word – your move.

The politician in the story had made the move to confess, and I like to think that his confession led toward healing. Though his sins were on display in the story, think about the sins that were still being kept in secret by the other people at the retirement dinner. As Jesus said, "It's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." And, the politician was smart enough and humble enough to know he was sick. And, he was wise enough to do his part in starting the healing process by confessing his sins to the priest, a brother in Christ.

In the 12 Step recovery groups, there is a saying that goes, **"You're only as sick as your secrets."** Confession is good medicine. No secrets? At least you're on the road toward openness, vulnerability, and healing.

Pastor Brian McLaren has some great thoughts the value of confession. In his book, **Naked Spirituality**, he wrote this, "The conscience is like a moral nerve for the soul. It's like a pain receptor that warns us of moral danger. Self-examination and confession keep our moral nerves from going numb; they keep our moral skin sensitive and not calloused. 'Something is wrong!' our conscience shouts. The pain of a sensitive conscience finds relief when we stop, self-examine, and say the same thing about our wrong that God would say."

In another part of the books, **he writes, “Until I dare share** with you some secret, I am certain I’m the only person so twisted and crooked and pathetic. But quite often, after I share my secret with you, you will tell me that you have the same problem, that you’ve made similar mistakes, and in our shared confession we both learn that we truly are not alone. We’re all a mess, and honesty, like misery, loves company.”

So, who is that person in your life with whom you can really get real? Are you engaging that relationship for confession and healing? Are you making yourself available to be that person for someone else? If you don’t have that person or you aren’t engaging that relationship for confession and healing, maybe it’s time to take initiative in fostering that relationship and engaging that practice. Because, as James says, confession is the first step in spiritual CPR.

The P of our spiritual CPR is to **pray**. James wrote in verse 16 that, once confession has taken place, we ought to pray for one another.

Praying for one another is truly one of the most important and valuable parts of life in community together. It’s one of the reasons why East Woods has maintained a time of corporate prayer sharing in our Sunday worship services. In prayer, we share and hear each other’s victories and vices; we support each other with words of celebration or compassion and concern; and in community we turn together to the God who is able to do far and abundantly more than we can do on our own.

As a next reflection on confession, **Brian McLaren wrote:** When I dare to share and you dare to respond with compassion rather than with judgment and rejection, your mercy and continuing acceptance of me can make visible for me the good news that previously seemed beyond belief for me.

Experiencing mercy and grace from you, someone who is both present and visible to me, I can believe in mercy and grace from God, who is present but not visible to me. I realize I am in a safe presence, a presence in which I don’t need to pretend, because I am accepted by grace just as I am. In your gracious presence, I experience God’s gracious presence.

Praying for one another reflects a balance of shared, communal responsibility. We look to God to do what only God can do. And then, in compassion, we help represent God's gracious presence for one another. Because we don't just pray and then drop it. We pray and then do what we can do for one another to help each other move toward healing.

That's the spirit of **the Serenity Prayer**. "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference." In prayer, we acknowledge that there are things we have the power to change, in our lives and in the lives of others. And, if we love a confessing person enough, we will do what we can to practically help them move toward healing. If we love ourselves enough, we will do what we can to practically move ourselves toward healing. And, Lord willing, God will give us the wisdom to know the changes only He can make so that we can wait with trust to see the healing only He can deliver.

What are those confessions you've shared or heard that might be waiting on a practical response from you in doing your part to bring about the change you're responsible for, in your life or in the life of someone who has trusted you? Perhaps this season of Lent is the season when you'll respond to those confessions and do your part in bringing about those changes.

Finally, the R in our spiritual CPR stands for **receive**. James wrote in verse 16 that we ought to confess to one another and pray for one another so that we may be healed. Notice that the verb 'be healed' is passive for us. We're not healing ourselves through confession and prayer. We are opening ourselves up to receive active healing from the God who forgives us and heals us and restores us.

Back to Brian McLaren one more time. Reflecting on the healing and freedom we can receive in confession, he wrote: "Third comes the great surprise. In an environment of grace – human and divine – I find myself free, free to continue failing if I must, but also free to start doing better if I can. [And, with God, all things are possible.]

I am no longer expending the energy of broadcasting a false image; I am no longer being drained by the constant anxiety of possibly being exposed for what I really am. That previously wasted energy can now be redirected into actually living a better, fuller life."

Do you know, as the Apostle **Paul wrote in Galatians 5:1**, that it is for freedom that Christ has set us free? Christ didn't go to the cross to shame us in our struggles. God didn't send His Son to die for us so that we would continue to hide in our sin. Just like God sought Adam and Even in their hiding place after the first sin, God's grace seeks us in our hiding so that we can be free to receive His grace. As Brian McLaren wrote, God's heart is for that previously wasted energy to be freely redirected toward better living and better loving. Thanks be to God, in Christ, you are free to receive the healing God has for you in those places you've kept hidden.

This afternoon, and each year on Ash Wednesday, we put ashes on our heads to symbolize our sinful need of the grace and salvation God has offered to us in Christ. Humanity began with dust, and to dust our bodies will return. But, in between the dust and the dust, we have freedom – freedom to receive God's grace, freedom to be healed by God's merciful touch, and freedom to live in the abundance of life Christ offered to us at the cross.

Confession is the beginning. It's the start of God's spiritual CPR for us. So, let's take a moment now at the start of Lent 2021 to confess our sins to God and to pray for God's deliverance and healing mercy. After the litany is read, I'll invite you to administer your ashes or to receive them from someone near to you as we remember the kindness we've received from God that leads us to repentance.