

The Place of Confession in the Christian Life

Fifth sermon in the series: What the Church Has Forgotten, AA Remembers

Text: Psalm 32:1; I John 1:10; 2:2

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
August 22, 1982

Transcription of the spoken sermon

"Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven..." Psalm 32:1

"If we confess our sins, he ... will forgive our sins and cleanse us..." I John 1:9

How did you react to the Corporate Prayer of Confession this morning? You probably recognized it as one of the more familiar Prayers of Confession because we use it from time to time. If you were ever part of the Episcopal or Anglican tradition you likely knew it by heart. It is the General Confession from the *Book of Common Prayer*.

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from Thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against Thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us. But Thou, o Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders. Spare Thou those, o God, who confess their faults, restore Thou those who are penitent; according to Thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, o most merciful Father, for His sake, that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of Thy holy name. Amen.

I ask about your reaction because it has often elicited strong reaction. In a book written in 1942, an Anglican priest, D.R. Davies, discussed the prayer phrase by phrase. He gave the book the delightful title *Down Peacock Feathers*. That says it very well. Honestly to offer the General Confession is to have one's wings clipped. It is an exercise in genuine humility. But that is precisely why the prayer elicits such strong reaction - it hits us where it hurts; it assails the citadel of our pride. Davies writes,

Nothing has been a subject for greater merriment or jeering raillery in the pages of our modern novelists than that part of the Confession on which

people describe themselves as "miserable offenders." I seem to remember that Mr. H.G. Wells found this a particularly rich vein for his brilliant and riotous pen. With his incomparable facility for skinning people's souls, he has pictured Anglican congregations – which, of course, were very bourgeoisie, very complacent and very respectable – describing themselves, with the greatest hypocritical gusto, as "miserable offenders." And somehow the whole confession withered away in the contempt that flowed from Mr. Wells' pen. And how his readers - of whom I was one - rocked with laughter. That was a long time ago, and today we are rocking with something that is very different from laughter. Mr. Wells himself has ceased to laugh.

(p. 116, The Centenary Press, 1942)

D. R. Davies makes reference to World War II and the great peril in which Europe and the world stood. In a most penetrating analysis of the historical scene of his time he shows that the General Confession is not overstated but rather the kind of humble confession that alone is fitting in the world writ large with war, bloodshed and violence.

I came across another reference to the General Confession in a more recent book, Madeline L'Engle's *A Circle Of Quiet*. She was raised in the Episcopal tradition and attended an Episcopal boarding school. She tells of her encounter with the prayer, which was part of the liturgy at chapel every morning. She writes,

When it came to the General Confession in Morning Prayer I was, with proper humility, willing to concede that I occasionally left undone a few things which I ought to have done (I was, after all, very busy), and I occasionally did a few things which I ought not to have done. (I was, after all, not "pi" (pious); but I was not willing to say that I was a miserable offender and that there was no health in me.

(p. 233. The Seabury Press, 1972)

Later in her life, having married and in process of raising her family, she lived in New England and attended a Congregational Church. They came out with a new hymnal which had a section of prayers in it, as does our own. The General Confession was printed but without the two offending phrases. She says.

It is an interesting commentary on human nature in this confused century that precisely those words which I could not, would not say as an adolescent were deleted from the congregational prayers.

But by now a mature Madeline L'Engle had lived enough and had enough self-knowledge to know that it was precisely those words which reflected honestly the human condition. She goes on,

By that time, in the midst of my fumbling agnosticism, it had become very clear to me that I *was* a miserable offender, and that there was very little health in me. (p. 234)

She told her pastor,

It's all right to think you can be virtuous if you try just a little harder when you're an adolescent, but I don't like having the Church behave like an adolescent. (p. 234)

Coming from a different perspective, Robert Schuller contends that the Prayer of Confession in the liturgy is detrimental to human self-esteem. You will never have to confess to being a "miserable offender" with "no health in you" at the Crystal Cathedral.

Schuller has a point.

The Church has certainly done the world a disservice with its dour emphasis on human sin and failure and its failure to communicate effectively the Gospel of Grace. He is quite right that the Church has been responsible for creating for many of its people low self-esteem, producing a lack of ego strength and thus crippling psyches.

But the question remains whether the remedy lies in deleting the Prayer of Confession from the liturgy. If we were to submit the question to Alcoholics Anonymous they would tell us in no uncertain terms that to drop the element of confession of sin from the Church's liturgy and from the Christian life is to court disaster. I suspect there is a good deal more honest and humble confession going on in AA than in the Christian Church, and AA claims that only through such confession and forgiveness is human transformation possible.

Human transformation. That is what we are about.

Since it seems to be happening with greater regularity and greater effectiveness through AA than through the Church, perhaps we ought to ask why. That is what this series is about.

What the Church has forgotten, AA remembers.

What is the central act of Christian worship has become a practical stepping-stone for the recovering alcoholic on the way to health and wholeness. AA recognizes the truth D.R. Davies was driving at; the great human problem is to rein in the peacock feathers.

Step One was a giant first step: We admitted we were powerless...our lives were unmanageable.

Steps Two and Three were a reaching beyond oneself to a Power greater than oneself to find help - to be rescued.

Step Four was the beginning of the life of sobriety - a searching and fearless moral inventory, revealing the roots of one's drinking in character faults.

But having gained self-understanding, having gotten insight into who one really is, standing exposed with all one's glaring faults, what does one do? To whom does one turn; what does one need?

It must be obvious: one needs Grace. One needs forgiveness, the assurance that all the wrongs one has discovered and all the damage one has done do not hang around one's neck like an albatross, but rather are removed, pardoned, covered. One needs the freedom that God's forgiving grace alone can provide. That is where we are:

Step Five: We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

Step Six: We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

Step Seven: We humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

There you have confession in the life of the recovering alcoholic. Again, here there is great wisdom and insight. After taking the moral inventory, which we noted last week was a painful process, the alcoholic is counseled to come to terms with it. It must be admitted to God. Now that is an awesome assignment. If we have a sense of the majesty and holiness of God, then, to borrow a phrase from Kierkegaard, we will come before Him with "fear and trembling." But that is not all that is required. We must have faced our faults honestly and owned them ourselves and then, further, shared them with another human being. It is one thing to tell God; but we can get accustomed to that. It is another thing to blurt out the whole sorry tale to another person.

Confessing our sins to another gives a certain concreteness to the act. Here is the wisdom of the Roman Catholic practice of the confessional booth.

You have no doubt heard many Protestant sermons affirm that Jesus is our High Priest. He is the one mediator between God and humankind and we need no other priest. That is true in theory, but it is less than successful in practice. We should have reflected more carefully before we did away with the booth. Did not God reach us in the flesh of Jesus? Should not the incarnation have given us a clue that God's love and grace and forgiveness are always mediated through the tangible encounter with another?

If we really believe and act on the priesthood of all believers, we will still be all right. This is in fact what happens in AA. Fellow members hear confessions and mediate grace. This we must learn again in the Church, for there will be no profound religious experience for anyone, who has not given place to confession in the Christian life.

The Scriptures give wide place to the experience of confession and forgiveness. Psalm 32 is a classic statement of the confession of sin and the joy of forgiveness. The opening verse is a ringing announcement of the happiness of one who has confessed his sin and experienced the grace of God's forgiveness. The Psalm is attributed to David. This would then be a song written sometime after that passionate cry for cleansing found in Psalm 51. David loved and longed for a woman who belonged to another. He took her to himself and she conceived his child. Failing to cover the transgression, he had her husband, Uriah, the Captain of his army, exposed to the thick of the battle where he lost his life. He then took Bathsheba as his wife and she bore a child. David lived with all that on his conscience and the experience, he writes, on reflection, was pure hell.

Confronted with his sin by Nathan, the prophet, he acknowledged his wrong and sought the mercy of God. Now he sings of that experience, expressing vividly both the agony of guilt and the freedom of forgiveness.

The New Testament tells the story of Jesus who came to mediate to us a knowledge of God, of His grace and to secure for us, for the whole world, the forgiveness of sin. John writes in his First Letter,

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sin, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

This is the Gospel. This is the Good News! To those who truly repent, acknowledging their sin, genuinely seeking its removal, God will grant forgiveness, full and free. Involved in that forgiveness is the love of God and the agony of crucifixion. He will forgive us and cleanse us because Jesus

bore our sins in his body on the tree,

in the words of Peter, and

God made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him,

in the words of Paul.

In another marvelous expression of the same truth, Peter says,

There is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.

This is the word we so desperately need. There is no health in us and, as AA well knows, as long as wrong rages within us, unrecognized, unacknowledged and unconfirmed, it creates hell within us. The manifold disturbance of human personality is the devastation wrought by wrong-headedness and wrong-heartedness, rationalized, excused, justified by the person who uses huge amounts of emotional and psychological energy to repress the truth.

Great relief has come to troubled people through the insights of psychoanalysis, and Sigmund Freud has made a large contribution to our knowledge of ourselves. There is a great deal of distortion and misconception, resulting in a sense of guilt which has no basis in reality and much relief can come to one who gains such insight. But when all wrong-thinking and damaging psychological experience has been discovered and exposed, there is still one great problem remaining...

Real guilt.
For *we are wrong*.

And for this hard core of real guilt, what we need is not insight, but forgiveness. Grace is our only hope. It is precisely Grace that is offered through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Psychoanalysis can expose and reveal; it cannot heal. Only God can heal; if we confess our sin, He forgives our sin.

The General Confession can be prayed only by one who has faced his sin, admitted it, and sincerely desires its removal. It is a strong statement:

There is no health in us, miserable offenders.

Why does that offend us so?

Perhaps we can understand that better if we remember that it is offensive both inside and out of the Church, but not in an AA meeting.

For those outside the Church there is still the need to mask the truth, to deny the dark reality. For those taking their chances, leaning on their own resources, there is the necessity of self-justification. No one going it alone is about to admit such a devastating truth. For those in the Church - at least for many in most churches - the reality of sin has been handled, not in the context of grace, but in a moralizing, judgmental manner. Too often in the Church we have not addressed the biblical doctrine of sin but rather have condemned sins, too often concentrating on minor matters while leaving great issues untouched.

I am convinced that any serious, thinking person can read the biblical doctrine of sin written large in the course of human history as well as reading it in his own heart. And such a person will recognize that the only answer to radical evil is the radical grace of God. But the Church majors in minors and denies its own message of grace with the self-righteous posture of the Pharisee. Congratulating itself that it is not like others, it fails to take sin with sufficient seriousness.

Here we must learn from AA. There is no soft-pedaling what is wrong. The recovering alcoholic knows too well the folly of excusing his behavior. He learns to say, "I am wrong." And in the environment of grace provided by those in the meeting - which is concretely an expression of the grace of God - he dares to look at himself honestly. He experiences grace. He finds himself forgiven. He learns to forgive himself and others.

Let me suggest that, if the Church is to be a redeeming, reconciling fellowship, if the Church would be the instrument to set people free, give them hope and a new self-image, filling them with self-esteem, the best method is not to downplay the problem but to lift up the forgiving grace of God that is the salvation to our greatest human need.

The Church, then, must reclaim this truth - that the Grace of God, mediated through persons, alone brings health and wholeness to humankind.

The Church is not institution.

The Church is *you* and *me*, in honest relationship together, embraced by the Grace of God.