

Sermon Series: Life Together

Sermon Title: Confession”

Psalm 51:1-3. 10-12

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Most of us have a hard time admitting when we've done something wrong. That's usually true for me (just ask Carrie!), although that wasn't always the case. My mom likes to tell the story of one time when I was about 3 or 4 years old and I was playing in the basement by myself when I suddenly became conspicuously quiet for several minutes. As you know, when kids are quiet, that's often a sign of trouble. My mom yelled down the stairs to me, "Jeff, you're not making a mess down there, are you?" I answered "No...I already did." Wouldn't it be nice if it was that easy to confess as grown adults? It was probably so easy to confess to my mom because she's pretty gracious. Happy Mother's Day to all the moms and mother-figures here today. God bless you!

As Christians, we know that "we all sin and fall short of the glory of God." Yet we still have a hard time admitting that truth, much less confessing the ways we sin and fall short – even though the Bible encourages confession in both the Old and New Testaments. As we wrap up our series today on themes from Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*, we'll spend some time thinking about the role of confession in the life of Christian discipleship.

We'll start by reading from Psalm 51, one of the most famous confessions in the Bible. It's a psalm attributed to David after he was caught in a spectacular moral failure (2 Samuel 11-12). As a recap, David saw Bathsheba bathing one night and decided he had to have her. Even after he found out she was married, he sent for her and slept with her. When David learned Bathsheba was pregnant, he tried to cover it up. And when that plan failed, he had Bathsheba's husband killed. David broke about half of the Ten Commandments there in one fell swoop. God sent Nathan the prophet to confront David about his sin, and Psalm 51 is part of David's response. Hear these words.

***Psalm 51:1** Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. 2 Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. 3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me...10 Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. 11 Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.*

This is the word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

This psalm begins the way all confessions should – by telling the truth. Only it’s not the kind of truth we might have expected. It’s the truth about God.¹ “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion...” The psalmist essentially reminds God of who God has claimed to be and how God has acted throughout history – gracious and compassionate, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. This refrain is found throughout scripture, beginning with when God reveals his glory to Moses in Exodus 34, and it is repeated continuously throughout the psalms. Jonah also recites it as the reason he didn’t want to go to Nineveh: God, I knew you wouldn’t destroy these people anyway – you’re too gracious, compassionate, merciful, and loving (Jonah 4:2). This is God’s character; it is the truth about who God is. As Psalm 51 demonstrates, this truth should give us confidence to confess our sins to God, knowing God will respond with mercy and love.

After the request for mercy, we get to the confession.² The psalmist starts out with three very active verbs to petition for forgiveness: “blot out,” “wash away,” and “cleanse.”³ “Blot out” could also be translated “obliterate” – it’s a complete removal. The Hebrew behind “wash away” has laundry connotations to it. And remember, they didn’t have washing machines back then. Doing laundry was a very rigorous physical process of scrubbing and even beating the dirt out of the clothes. That’s not to say we should incur physical harm to be made clean. But laundry was a hands-on chore, and so is God’s role in removing our sin – hands on, rigorous, and thorough. Finally, the verb for “cleanse” also has some physicality associated with it. It is the same verb that is often used to describe cleansing the temple, or physically removing the things that get in the way of truly worshiping God. Taken together, these three action verbs – blot out, wash away, and cleanse – demonstrate the comprehensive nature of God’s forgiveness.

Along with the three verbs, the psalmist uses three different words for sin: “transgressions,” “iniquity,” and “sin.”⁴ Transgressions refer to a willful, self-assertive defiance of God. Purposely straying, rebelling, or turning away from God. Have you ever done something you knew was not in God’s will, but you did it anyway? Those are transgressions. The psalmist asks that God would blot those out, obliterate them.

The word “iniquity” is derived from the root of the word for “bending or twisting” and it also carries the connotation of deviating from the right track. Finally, the generic term “sin” refers to missing the mark in some way, or failure as the result of a personal choice. We all miss the mark,

¹ On screen please “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion...”

² On screen Ps 51:1-2 NRSV

³ Tate, Marvin E.: *Word Biblical Commentary : Psalms 51-100*. Dallas : Word, Incorporated, 2002 (Word Biblical Commentary 20), S. 15

⁴ Tate, Marvin E.: *Word Biblical Commentary : Psalms 51-100*. Dallas : Word, Incorporated, 2002 (Word Biblical Commentary 20), S. 15

and we all make bad choices. We all sin. In his book *Confessions*, the great theologian Augustine talks about sin as seeking pleasure and truth in places other than God. From these three terms – transgression, iniquity, and sin – we see that the psalmist repents for a way of life that is contrary to what God expects from people who are God’s children.

The path God desires for us is that we love God and our neighbors with our whole heart. That’s a path that leads to life. We don’t always do a good job staying on God’s path. Bonhoeffer suggests the Ten Commandments as a good place for us to start thinking about the ways we deviate from that path. Sometimes it’s the things we do that lead us astray – lie, steal, lust after someone – Jesus says that’s the same as adultery, by the way. Other times, it’s the things we don’t do – like fail to care about the poor, or speak up for those who are oppressed or treated unjustly. Sometimes it’s our actions that are sinful, and sometimes it’s our attitudes. So even though we may not have a publicly visible huge moral failure like David, we all have the need to confess our sins to God. How exactly should we go about doing that?

The act of confession is a touchy subject. We generally don’t like to feel like we’re being judged – even by a holy and righteous God who has every right to do so. In our attempts to mitigate this discomfort, the Christian Church has implemented confession in a number of ways over the years. In the early church (up to 500AD or so), Christians were required to publicly confess any serious moral failures like adultery, idolatry, or murder. They were then subjected to a period of public discipline determined by the church leaders.⁵ So who wants to go first this morning? Serious moral failures, anyone? Step right up! Not surprisingly, this practice was eventually abandoned by the church.

By the Middle Ages, confession became a private matter between parishioners and their priest. It is still practiced that way today in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, where confession is revered as one of the sacraments. But the idea that there needed to be a mediator between God and people in order for their sins to be forgiven was one of the primary motivators for the Reformation. Luther didn’t believe a professional mediator was necessary but rather Christ gave all believers the authority to forgive sins (Matt 18:18).

In the past five hundred years, more churches have practiced corporate confession together through liturgy (as we do every week in our 11:00 service and we will momentarily). Confession is a little easier to do when we do it together in unison. It’s a good and healthy practice for us to tell the truth out loud about who we are, sinners in need of grace. But I worry that it’s a little too easy to simply read the words on the screen without actually letting those words pierce our hearts and turn us back to God.

⁵ Thompson, Ross. *The Sacraments* (London, SCM Press, 2006), p. 184.

The psalmist prays:

***Ps 51:10** Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. 11 Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.*

Creating a pure heart in us is work only God can do, and it's serious, rigorous, hands-on kind of work. In our sinful world, temptation flourishes all around us. We're created good and in God's image but we often stray from God's path, and so we are also in constant need of re-created hearts, hearts that long to be in God's presence, restored to right relationship with God.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation. So what do we do when we've confessed our sins to God but we still fall back into our familiar patterns of sin? When are spirits seem more willing to sin than confess? When we are unable to sustain ourselves on the path that leads to life?

This is where Bonhoeffer suggests a more vulnerable kind of confession, one that requires us to swallow our pride and lay bare our souls out loud in the presence of one another. **James 5:16** **says**⁶, "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."

David mentioned last week the need for genuine Christian fellowship and accountability. As followers of Jesus we need to connect regularly with a small group of people who know us well and can ask hard questions like "How is it with your soul?" When John Wesley's small groups met they often began with that question then followed it up with "How have you sinned this week?" And they took turns confessing out loud right there, and then they prayed for one another, so they might be healed.

Bonhoeffer advocates for this kind of extreme confession because he takes seriously the extreme power of sin to sever our relationship with God and ruin our lives. And it does that so subtly! Somehow, even though we all know we're all sinners, we feel the need to hide our sins and pretend like nothing's wrong. But Bonhoeffer warns that, "The more isolated we are [a person is], the more destructive will be the power of sin over us [him], and the more deeply we [he] become[s] involved in it, the more disastrous is our [his] isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of the unexpressed, it poisons the whole being of a person."⁷

⁶ On screen please James 5:16 NRSV

⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York, Harper & Row Publishers, 1954), p. 112.

Unexpressed sin poisons the whole being of a person. This is why confession is so important – we need an antidote to the poison of sin. Fortunately, God gives us that antidote in the gift of confession. When we bring our sin out of the darkness and into the light with our Christian brothers and sisters, we find forgiveness in Christian fellowship. Now the fellowship bears our sin and confers God’s grace on us instead. As Bonhoeffer puts it, “The sin concealed separated us from the fellowship, made all our apparent fellowship a sham; the sin confessed has helped us find true fellowship.”⁸

Friends, if you are weighed down this morning with concealed sin that’s making you isolated and alone, making you feel like your Christian fellowship is a sham, first of all know that you are not alone. I suspect there are many of us feeling this way today. Secondly, know that there is hope! Perhaps it’s time to join a small group, a group of people to ask hard questions with, and to share confession with on a regular basis in order that you might experience true fellowship. If you don’t know where to find a group like that, please come talk to me or any of the pastors and we’ll connect you.

When we confess our sins, we are acknowledging that we can’t beat sin on our own. We’re acknowledging that God’s active, cleansing, sin-obliterating work in Christ on the cross makes us a new creation. When we confess our sins, we remember who we are as baptized children of God. Bonhoeffer says, “Confession is the renewal of the joy of baptism.”⁹

And just like baptism, confession leads to restoration and new life. We are only baptized once, but we can renew our baptism through confession as often as we need to. When sin pushes us away from God’s path for our lives, confession guides our feet back to solid ground. *Create in me a pure heart, O God.* From the beginning, God has been about the work of creation. When God made the world, God created order out of chaos and brought light into the darkness. When we confess our sins, God forgives us and re-orders the chaos in our hearts. The idols that we made more important than God are obliterated, and our sinful darkness is overcome by God’s glorious light. Our hearts are once again made pure, we rediscover the joy of God’s salvation, and God renews in us a willing and steadfast spirit to sustain us as we continue on the path God desires for us. Confession leads to restoration and new life.

I invite you to renew the joy of your baptism and respond to the Word we’ve heard this morning by confessing our sins together. The words will be on the screen. Let them be more than words we read. Let them be the prayer of our broken hearts. When we finish reading I’ll provide a time of silent reflection to allow those words to take root in our souls. Please stand as we confess our sins together.

⁸ *Life Together*, p. 113.

⁹ *Life Together*, p. 115.

Confession and Pardon

Almighty God, in raising Jesus from the grave, you shattered the power of sin and death. We confess that we remain captive to doubt and fear, bound by the ways that lead to death. We overlook the poor and the hungry, and pass by those who mourn; we are deaf to the cries of the oppressed, and indifferent to calls for peace; we despise the weak, and abuse the earth you made. Forgive us, God of mercy. Help us to trust your power to change our lives and make us new, that we may know the joy of life abundant given in Jesus Christ, the risen Lord.

All pray in silence.

Leader to people:

May you know deep in your soul that our gracious and merciful God hears our prayers and creates new hearts in us, renewing the joy of our salvation.

Hear the good news:

Christ died for us while we were yet sinners;

That proves God's love toward us.

In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!

People to leader:

In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.

Leader and people:

Glory to God. Amen.