

Confession

Psalm 32

Fifth of series: Developing Mature Character in the Psalmic School of Prayer

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Worship at 8:30, 10, and 11:30 a.m.

Let us continue in prayer. Now make us happy in your good and gracious presence, God. Make us joyful in the realization of Jesus, the Christ, who laid down his life for us. Give us glee in the power of your Spirit, as we hear your word. Speak to us. Through Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

We recognize today that, on this First Sunday in Lent, the Sunday exists between two not so liturgically important days: Abraham Lincoln's birthday and Valentine's Day. What is a preacher to do? Well, as it happens (and sometimes in the humor of God) there is a bridge between all three. Charles Osgood in his book, *Funny Letters from Famous People*, gives two letters from Abraham Lincoln that somehow ties the Lenten period with his love life. Abraham Lincoln had promised that he would be willing to be introduced on a blind date to a woman. And this is his response to that blind date:

Although I had seen her before, she did not look as my imagination had pictured her. I knew she was oversized, but she now appeared a fair match for Falstaff. I knew that she was called an "old maid" and I felt no doubt of the truth of at least half of that appellation. But now, when I beheld her, I could not, for my life, avoid thinking of my mother. And this not from withered features – for her skin was too full of fat to permit its contracting into wrinkles. But from her want of teeth, weather-beaten appearance in general, and from a kind of notion that ran in my head that nothing could have commenced at the size of infancy and reached her present bulk in less than 35 or 40 years. And in short, I was not at all pleased with her.

But what could I do? I had told her sister that I would take her "for better or for worse," and was now fairly convinced that no other man on earth would have her. And hence the conviction that they were bent on holding me to my bargain. At once I determined to consider her my wife and once this was done, all my powers of discovery were put to work in search of perfections in her that might be fairly set off against her defects. I tried to imagine her handsome; tried to convince myself that the mind was much more to be valued than the person. After I delayed the matter as long as I thought I could do in all honor, I mustered my resolution and made the proposal to her direct. But shocking to relate, she answered, "No."

No explanation given. Abraham Lincoln's confession of his relationship with a woman. He also confessed about his own sense of self-awareness. In another letter, he says:

One day I got into a fit of musing in my room and stood resting my elbows on the bureau. Looking into the glass, it struck me: what an ugly man I was. The fact grew on me and I made up my mind: I must be the ugliest man in the world. It so maddened me that I resolved, should I ever see an uglier, I should shoot him on sight. Not long after this, another lawyer came into town and the first time I saw him, I said to myself: "there's the man." I went home, took down my gun and prowled around the streets waiting for him and soon he came along. "Halt," I said, pointing my gun at him, "say your prayers for I am about ready to shoot you." "Well why, Mr. Lincoln? What's the matter? What have I done?" "Well I made an oath that ever I saw an uglier man than I am I would shoot him on the spot – and you are uglier surely. So make ready to die." "Mr. Lincoln, do you really think that I am uglier than YOU?" "Uh, yes." "Well, Mr. Lincoln," said the man, deliberately looking me squarely in the face, "if I am uglier, then shoot away."

Abraham Lincoln had a style of confession in his speeches and his letters that reflected something peculiar about his belief in God. He could be transparent because he believed that God was gracious and good, at the core of His being. He looked at himself in the mirror and he beheld an ugly person but he was able to talk about that, be honest with himself and with God.

Lent is a time when we should be honest with ourselves before God. It is a time of reflection, assessment, confession. It is a time that we should look into the attic or basement of our lives. We should do an assessment; and the journey inward... and discover who we really are in the presence of a good God. It is a time when, in doing this reflection, we absorb the forgiveness of Jesus Christ, the redemption, the restoration, and the new life that Christ has for us. In the terms of Alcoholics Anonymous, in one of the steps, it is the time that we do a 'fearless moral inventory' of our lives.

In Psalm 32, the call is for the people of God, in worship, to confess their sins. Psalm 32 is an instructional psalm; it is not so much just to do in the event of worship, but it is a way that we can learn the behavior pattern of how to grow in maturity with the living God. It is a psalm about a witness who stands before the people and says: this is how I've sinned and how I've worked it through with God. It is a conversation with God, and the people look on – as the person who confesses and the God who hears the confession forgives.

Confession in our tradition – in the Presbyterian reformed tradition – is always two-sided: the confession of sin is always in the context of the confession of faith. Our confession of who God is is greater than our confession of sin. We first confess that God is gracious and good and we adore God for who God really is, in goodness and kindness. And then we have the freedom to confess our sin. Notice how tightly connected those two are. We should not be confessing sin to a God that we believe is going to 'get even with us' if we tell God about what's really going on in our lives. God's grace gives us the freedom to look at ourselves and note that we are sinners.

Psalm 32 describes some of these attributes of God that are so powerfully necessary for us to have the freedom to forgive our sin.

God covers sin: the Lord imputes no iniquity to a person who confesses. God forgives. God listens to the confession. God creates a safe place for the person who confesses and protects that person. God preserves the person from trouble and God is steadfast always, in love and grace. Some very powerful things that we must assert about God for us to have the freedom and privilege to confess. What we believe about God will either lead us to confession, or drive us away.

How often I have heard a story like this, too many times: A woman came to me a few years ago and she got right to the point. She said, "I have breast cancer. I want to know what I did my life to deserve breast cancer. Why would God give me breast cancer?"

I realized that we weren't talking about her issue as much as we were talking about her view of God. I said, "Why would you think that? That God would give you cancer?" "Well, when I was a child, I was in an elementary school where the teachers told us that, if we did not lead good lives... if we did not give up certain things... we would inevitably get cancer in our lives."

I hear this too much. If nothing else, let us learn that we must declare our commitment to a God who is well-described and defined in the Scriptures as: steadfastly loving, gracious, merciful, kind, patient. A God who does not get ready to 'zap' us because we've confessed sin, or because we are sinners. It is true, that if we hold back the sin and we do not confess it, that the implications of our lives are what the psalms says – that we carry a tremendous load of heaviness. And it leads downhill from there.

How we see God impacts how we confess. If we see God as angry, vindictive or retributational, vengeful – then we will hide...cover our acts... deny... avoid. But if we see God who is loving and merciful and gracious and slow to anger, as Scripture repeats over and over again, then we have the freedom to be open and confess, and tell God who we really are and what's really happening in our lives. What you believe about God gives you permission or inhibits you from clear confession.

I grew up personally in a theology in the Christian church that said that God was primarily a God of judgment. The grace of Jesus Christ has covered that judgment, but God is still a God of judgment and God will "get" you if you don't have your act together in Jesus Christ. I hope that we do not teach that kind of theology here; because it really teaches that Jesus is the exception to the nature of God. Jesus is the parentheses of a God who is really angry in the Old Testament and angry in the book of Revelation, and you'd better get your life together with Jesus right now because God will get you otherwise.

That's not the theology that we teach here and it is one of the reasons I was driven to become a Presbyterian. I've heard too many stories of people who are running away from God and do not feel the freedom to confess because they believe that God will "get" them.

Our culture doesn't help us on this. Our culture is continually saying to us: admit nothing; deny everything; protect yourself; defend yourself. If you say what is really going on in your life, it can be used against you... and it will be used. Cover up... deflect... and avoid. Because really what the culture is, is in judgment... condemnation... gossip (which by the way is really our determination to confess other peoples' sins because we won't confess our own!)... castigation... obfuscation... deprecation... attack. It's not a culture that is conducive to confession. As some would say, it's a culture of narcissism – we want to look out for ourselves, but we won't see our own flaws – we see everyone else's flaws.

It's a culture of litigation. It's a culture that says: protect yourself or it can be used against you in court. It's also a culture where the media – all kinds of media, even church media – can take what is said and turn it so that we're even afraid to say what we might say. This is not a condemnation of the media or of law. It is a statement about our culture. It is not a culture conducive to the framework of confession, or the nature of the love of God.

There are several kinds of confession that we need to pay attention to. We do one here regularly and that's public worship confession – where we say our sins together. But the sins are pretty general. There's another kind of confession that's more personal and private – and that's when we confess in our relationship with God personally, by ourselves in the closet.

But then there's another pattern that's a little tougher in our reformed tradition – we often think of it as Anabaptist -- that's communal confession that's talked about in James: where we should confess our sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that we might be healed. And we Presbyterians get a little nervous about that one!

Then there's public, representative confession – where a person who's leading a group goes to another group and apologizes and confesses how that group has hurt the other group. Not too long ago, the Roman Pope went to the Eastern Orthodox leadership in Constantinople's equivalent, and said to them: I apologize to you and ask your forgiveness for how we – the western church – did damage to you in the great Crusades.

First time that that had ever happened between the two churches.

Recently, the president of the seminary that I am a graduate of – Fuller Theological Seminary – went to the head of the Mormon Church at the gathering of Mormons in the Tabernacle in Salt Lake, and apologized to the Mormons on behalf of Christian evangelicals, for being so condemning of Mormon people and attacking them. Well you say, "the Mormons are wrong." But that doesn't excuse attacks and belittlement and betrayal.

Or we've seen recently how Jason Giambe, in the scandal over steroids, has now stood in front of the cameras and confessed that he took steroids, and he apologizes to the people of New York. Public confession is a thing that seems to build some bridges and release some tensions.

But in this culture there are signs that a person will not be confessor. There is the pattern of judgmentalism, condemnation, blame and shame, name-calling, vindictiveness and rage, self-righteousness, stubbornness. The text talks about: if you are as stubborn as a mule, then how do you expect God to forgive you? A person who is that stubborn will not tell God that he or she is a sinner. People

who are attacking... reactive... controlling... manipulative...intimidating...all signs of a person who cannot confess that they are, in fact, a sinner before God. They attack to deflect the attention.

Recently a young man came to me and said: "I am gay and I do not want my parents to know this." And I said, "why?" "Because they would not understand and they are very vindictive people. And if they found out I was, they would cut me off, abandon me, disinherit me and pretty much declare me 'not alive.'" He happened to have parents that claimed to be evangelical Christians.

This is not a good thing. It creates an environment where we can't really confess because we'll get hammered if we do. The attitudes of confessional grace must be present in a church that says, "we are a ministry of grace." If we say we are a ministry of grace, then we must say we are a ministry of confession. And that there's a tight connection between our freedom to confess and God's freedom to forgive; that they are mutual actions. Without confession there is no forgiveness. God is forgiving, yes. But unless we confess, the forgiveness and the grace of God does not come toward us – we do not receive it.

Demonstrations of humility, openness and graciousness are usually the result of a person who's confessional about God's goodness and their own sin. Being transparent, vulnerable, accessible, teachable – a sign of a person's self-awareness and willingness to confess their sin. Kindness and forgiveness... patience... all a sign that a person is confessionally-aware that they are a sinner in need of grace of God.

We do not have time today to talk about the three big areas of confession: money, sex and power. But unless confession reflects all three of those areas, we have not fully confessed. The psalm teaches clearly that if we do not confess, we carry a tremendous heavy weight in our lives. It's an over-burden. It's like living in a desert place and we become dry and bony. "Day and night your hand is heavy upon me," the psalm says, "my strength is dried up as by the heat of summer." To release the guilt in our lives, we must confess.

But sometimes we've been taught that it isn't just about our action that's the problem – it's about who we are before God. And we are told about things that shame us and blame us, and we cannot let those things go. Shame is, as Lou Smeads says, about ourselves, whereas guilt is about what we do. He gives a test for whether you are feeling shame or you're feeling guilt:

I feel like I'm a fake. If people knew me they would not like me. I feel inadequate. I seldom feel joy. I feel inferior. God is disgusted with me. I'm permanently flawed. I can never measure up. I'm not acceptable.

Those are all signs of shame, and shame is the kind of thing that keeps us bound and never being able to live in forgiveness. It's false guilt. Jesus said,

Come to me, all you who work so hard at life to make it right... those of you who are heavy-laden and over-burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you for it is light.

Jesus is here to be the gracious one who will not condemn, but who will pronounce forgiveness if we confess.

So today, I invite you into the gracious presence of Jesus Christ during Lent. Don't be stubborn like a mule. Take some time out in this Lenten time and sit before God and make a list of the things that are not right in your life. And affirm, while you are doing it, that God is gracious and kind and forgiving. Tell God and make amends to the people that you can talk to – that won't hurt them. Be quick to say when you are wrong. If my two daughters and my wife were here right now, they would say: Gareth's that's your biggest trouble; you have a hard time saying when you're wrong. Practice the presence of a gracious God. Discern the difference between guilt and shame.

In Jesus Christ you are forgiven. The gracious God who created us, who saves us, who walks with us, does not want us to carry that load. Confess and be forgiven. Amen.