

First Sunday of Lent

LENT. Everyone's favorite Church season. Forty days in which to emulate Jesus and place ourselves in a spiritual desert by fasting and praying. And, like sugar free frosting on our gluten free Lenten cake, it is also a time when we focus on the confession of our sins.

So exactly what is confession? While the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist are included in the stories of Jesus' life, the Gospels give us no indication that Jesus thought the practice of confession was necessary for his followers. No, the Sacrament of Confession was established by the emerging Christian Church in the years following the resurrection and has taken many forms throughout the centuries. As Episcopalians our service is structured so that we say the Prayer of Confession and receive absolution before we begin the Eucharistic Prayer, symbolically cleansing ourselves before we come to the Lord's Supper. But this way of confession has always felt perfunctory to me, a casual nod to a much deeper and more profound religious experience.

What is confession? First, let me tell you what confession is not.

When I was about 10, I asked my classmate Barbara, a Roman Catholic, what confession was like. She described going into the confessional booth and kneeling in front of the screen which separated her from the priest, confessing her sins and being told by the priest to say so many "Hail Marys" or "Our Fathers," the number of which was apparently doled out in proportion to the severity of the sin. "What kinds of things do you confess?" I asked. "Ohhhhh... like being mean to my brother or using a swear word. Stuff like that," she answered. "What happens if you've had a good week and can't think of anything to confess," I pressed. "Well then you just make something up," she countered. "You can't go to the altar and get the wafer unless you've done confession." It is easy to attribute this misunderstanding of the nature of confession to the immaturity of this child. But I'm sure there are adults who still believe confession is nothing more than a means to a sacramental end.

About a decade later, I was at a party with a group of people, many of whom were gay priests or organists in the Roman Catholic Church. As the wine flowed, and feeling themselves in a safe environment, these men began to open up about what it was like growing up in the Catholic Church. One man said that, as an adolescent, he was so ashamed of his thoughts and feelings that he could not confess everything to just one priest because he figured the priest would be too horrified. He structured his Saturday afternoons and Sunday mornings so that he could make multiple confessions, divvying out his perceived sins to multiple priests. His family and friends were oblivious to his inner turmoil and praised him for his devotion and piety. Although he chuckled as he told this story, I could see the troubled teenage who was terrified of eternal damnation and who saw this strange concoction of confession as his only way out of that fate. No, people are not sent to hell because they have not managed to remember and confess each and every of their sins, perceived or otherwise, before Mass begins on Sunday morning.

For my last example of what confession is not comes straight from “Monty Python and the Holy Grail.” Remember the scene where God speaks to King Arthur? As the sky opens up and the face of God appears in the clouds, Arthur and his companions drop to the ground. “Oh don’t grovel,” says God. One thing I can’t stand is people groveling.” “Sorry,” says Arthur. “And don’t apologize,” says God. “Every time I try to talk to someone it’s, ‘sorry this’ and ‘forgive me that’ and ‘I’m not worthy’. What are you doing now?” I’m averting my eyes, Oh Lord,” says Arthur. “Well don’t. It’s like those miserable Psalms. They’re so depressing.” Remember that line in the confession in the old Prayer Book -- “And there is no health in us”? I was so glad when they removed that sentence. I found it hard to say that line and yet understand myself to be “beautifully and wonderfully made.” No, there is a difference between standing humbly before God and groveling at God’s feet. And the later stance demeans both the creature and the Creator.

So what is confession? The best example comes from my friend, Elizabeth, a woman I knew many years ago and who was 30 years my senior. Elizabeth had an interesting life, having grown up in England during WWII and having lived in many different countries. Her apartment was like a museum, each artifact she had

collected was evidence of an interesting life event. At one point, Elizabeth began giving and selling off most of her things. At the time I could not understand this -- How she could part with these treasures? But she explained that there came a time in everyone's life, when one had to downsize and to let go of the material burdens of life. She smiled at me and said, "It's a bit like confession and absolution."

Yes, confession is like a de-cluttering of the soul. Church tradition has created for us a method for letting go of the burdens that we all inevitable accumulate throughout our lives and walking into the future with lighter steps.

Knowing that we can receive absolution for our sins also allows us to "sin boldly" as Martin Luther is alleged to have said; not that we should intentionally go out and break the laws of both God and our society; rather that we should not be so burdened by the fear of making a mistake or misstep that we don't live the lives that God has given us in the fullest way possible.

Confession is simply this:

Are you carrying around the weight of guilt for something you did long ago, something that as time has passed you now understand was sinful? Ask God to take the weight of that guilt from you and thank God for the wisdom you have received.

Have you, intentionally or unintentionally, hurt someone, and are carrying the burden of a broken relationship? Lay down that burden and ask God for guidance in seeking forgiveness.

Have you been hurt by others and are carrying the grudges of past event, and the soul sapping need for revenge? Ask God to help you shed those feelings and learn how to forgive others in healthy ways, just as you have been forgiven.

No, Lent is not a time that many people look forward to. The fact that it tends to coincide with mud season in New England doesn't help. We could view Lent's focus on sin and repentance, as a time of opening oneself into the wrath and punishment of God. Or, and I suggest to you that this is the better and more true

way, we can see Lent as a wonderful opportunity to let God heal the parts of our souls that have been shattered by sin.

AMEN!