

Second Sunday of Lent 2010 – Second in a series of five sermons on the sacraments –
Sacramental Confession

When I was a young child my best friend was a Roman Catholic girl who lived three houses away from me. Kathy was two years older than I and I looked up to her like an older and wiser sister figure. I remember one day when I was about six years old we were swinging on the swing set in my backyard and I asked her why Roman Catholics said “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” when they said the Lord’s Prayer. At my church (the Evangelical United Brethren church just three blocks away from our home), we always said “Forgive us our *debts* as we forgive our *debtors*.” She didn’t know the answer and I remember almost nagging her to try to find out the reason. This was really ‘big potatoes’ to me! She was not amused.

A few years later, when we were old enough to ride around on our bikes, I would go with her on Saturdays to her parish church where she would go to confession in order to take communion on Sunday. I thought that was fascinating. We’d ride our bikes to Sacred Heart and Kathy and I would stick little doilies on the top of our heads so we could go inside the church. While she was in the confessional booth with the priest, I would be sitting and staring at the statuary and the ornate decorations all around me, smelling the ghost of incense past permeating the atmosphere and thinking “*This* is a REAL church.” I also remember thinking that in addition to *looking* more like a church, it seemed to me that this church took our Christian walk more seriously than any other faith community I had known. This minister took an interest in what Kathy did and didn’t do during the week; he took an interest in whether or not she was doing what Jesus wanted her to do. I was about nine years old and I couldn’t understand why Kathy thought it was all just a boring routine requirement, like doing the dishes after dinner.

Today, as Episcopalians, we have many opportunities in our various services in the Book of Common Prayer to confess our sins corporately or privately. We’ll take a look at some of them in a moment, but first I want to pose a question. In your practice of the Christian faith, do you believe the confession of your sins is something really important or is it just routine, like washing the dirty dishes in the sink or taking out the garbage? Do you even believe in sin? I was at a presentation once by an Episcopal priest who said to the assembled group “Don’t ever let anyone tell you you’re a sinner! You are a beloved child of God!” He said this as if the two things were *mutually exclusive realities* as opposed to being two existential truths simultaneously held in tension with one another.

I know that I am both a sinner and a beloved child of God. I know that I can echo the words of St. Paul when he said: “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do....I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in [myself] another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in [me.]”¹ And because of that fact, I am thankful for the grace of the sacrament that our Prayer Book calls “The Reconciliation of a Penitent.”²

We have previously studied that in order for a Sacrament to take place, there must be right matter, right words (right Rite) and right intention. In the case of “The

¹ Romans 7:19, 22-23.

² The Book of Common Prayer p. 447.

Reconciliation of a Penitent,” as strange as it may seem at first, the *right matter* is our *sin*. We present our sinful selves to God in the way that we offer the bread and wine of the Eucharist to be transformed in the Sacrament of Holy Communion into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. The *right words* are *the words of absolution*: “Our Lord Jesus Christ, who has left power to his Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in him, of his great mercy forgive you all your offenses; and by the authority committed to me, I absolve you from all your sins: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”³

The *right intention* for receiving this sacrament is *having true sorrow for our sins, true repentance* and the desire in our hearts to try to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in the transformation and amendment of the actions and intentions of our choices and our very lives. When these three things are present – a penitent confessing sinner who is absolved by the Church – the grace that is conferred is the remission of our sins. Remission means literally a ‘sending back:’ forgiveness or cancellation of the debt or penalty. In the case of chronic illness, we may say that the illness has gone into remission when the symptoms disappear or at least are lessened for a prolonged period of time. When we receive the sacrament of reconciliation faithfully, we receive the grace of forgiveness for our past and the strength of the Spirit to resist relapses in the future, prayerfully hoping that our sinfulness will be lessened and that it’s ‘symptoms’ will become fewer and fewer as our life is progressively transformed and conformed to the will of Christ.

There is another benefit, and that is the grace of humility which is an antidote to the pervasive sin of pride. When we confess our sins directly in the one-to-one sacramental Rite, we are acknowledging in front of another human being something of which we are in all likelihood deeply ashamed. And that person will love us in Christ anyway, just as Christ loves us in spite of the fact that Christ knows our faults and imperfections more deeply than we do ourselves.

Unlike Holy Communion, which is intended, ideally, to be experienced in a communal context, I think the corporate confession of sin leaves just a little something to be desired, in that it omits one area of self-examination: our sins against ourselves. The Confession states: “We confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent....”⁴ In the corporate context, we only get an inventory of our sins against ourselves once a year. On Ash Wednesday, we include the confession of our unfaithfulness, pride, hypocrisy, impatience, self-indulgent appetites, our anger at our own frustration, our envy, and so forth.⁵ But there could be so much more. Consider for a moment these sins against self: Have you ever

- buried your talents (see Lk. 19:11-26)?
- allowed your self-respect to be destroyed in order to preserve pseudo-peace within a relationship?
- ignored God’s call on your life?
- said “yes” when you meant “no” and suffered the consequences by overdoing for others and ignoring the natural needs of your own creaturehood?

³ The Book of Common Prayer, p. 448 and elsewhere, such as p. 451, p.321, p.360, etc. etc.

⁴ The Book of Common Prayer, p. 79 and elsewhere.

⁵ The Book of Common Prayer, p. 168.

- neglected your own body?

The Psalmist begs: “Wash me through and through from my wickedness and cleanse me from my sin.” (Ps 51:2) St. Catherine of Siena spoke of the sacrament of penance as the sacrament of Christ’s Precious Blood in which God “has bathed us in order to cleanse the face of our souls from the leprosy of sin.”⁶

Just like our real bodies and faces, one washing alone isn’t going to do the job of getting us clean for life. We have to wash over and over again because we keep getting soiled; I know I do, despite the best and holiest of my intentions.

May each one of us come to know the transforming power of the forgiveness of our sins. May we be strengthened to forgive the debts and trespasses of others against us. May we be given spiritual eyes to see ourselves as we are seen by the God who loves us and stands ready to forgive us as His beloved children. May we confess our sins to God and believe in the grace we have received: “Now there is rejoicing in heaven; for you were lost, and are found; you were dead, and are now alive in Christ Jesus our Lord. Go in peace. The Lord has put away all your sins. Thanks be to God.”⁷ Amen.

⁶ As quoted in *Divine Intimacy: Meditations on the Interior Life for Every Day of the Liturgical Year* by Father Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen, O.C.D. Tan Books and Publishers, Rockford ILL. 1963 (1996) p. 306.

⁷ The Book of Common Prayer p. 451.