

Paths to Community, Part 2: Confession and Forgiveness

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Romans 3:21-26; Mark 2:1-12; Matthew 18:21-22
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
March 28, 2021 – Palm Sunday

Prayer

Living God, help us to keep our eyes on Jesus. During this week, during this roller coaster of a week – just as in the roller coasters of our lives – help us to keep our eyes on Jesus, and to allow him to show us how to live, in order that we embody his love and his grace and his steadiness. In his name, we pray. Amen.

Our sermon series on the gifts and the demands of Christian community draws to a close during this most important of weeks, as we enter into the drama, the anguish, and the surprise of Holy Week. It is most appropriate that we are concluding our series this week because it is Holy Week that gives us the narratives, the stories, and the testimony to Jesus that have always been the *greatest inspiration* for Christian community, the *greatest judgment* upon the Christian community, and the *greatest clarification* for Christian community. The church is formed by the events of this week, and by them we are placed in the midst of the world's griefs and hurts. We are placed in the midst of the gun violence of our nation, seen in Atlanta and Boulder; we are placed in the midst of the racism that has shown itself locally, at recent sports games in Arlington and on a middle school campus here in McLean; we are placed in the midst of the polarization that pulls at every one of us; we are placed in the midst of every circumstance of loss and grief, and we discern the presence of God's reign not in our own ability to control those circumstances, but in the vulnerable and broken heart of the living God.

We conclude our series by reflecting on the role that *confession and forgiveness* play in Christian community. As we begin talking about confession and forgiveness, we may acknowledge that talking about these things may not make the church very popular. Our world does not want to hear much about the essential role of confession and forgiveness. With confession and forgiveness, we step into the kingdom of grace, and our world resists grace in all kinds of ways. To flourish in our world, one needs money, education, power, success, a good reputation, and that most elusive of qualities, "coolness." If you have these, you may have a shot at flourishing in our world. If you do not have these, then you are disposable. Our world has no patience for grace, no room for grace. If you are not perfect, if you are not pure, then you get canceled, you get labeled a loser, you become a target for someone else's rage and unprocessed pain.

That is what happens when you choke the grace out of a world, out of a community, out of a church. There is no more patience, no more generosity, no more laughter, no more flexibility. When we cannot admit when we're wrong, then we're going to spend a whole lot

of time and energy trying to pretend that we're right. And the life of keeping up appearances is not only hollow; it is exhausting.

Confession and forgiveness create an environment of humility *within* us and *around* us. And humility turns out to be an essential ingredient for the well-being of a Christian community, of a church. Nothing will tear a church apart more quickly than when one person or group begins to think they are somehow superior than another. Contempt and ridicule – which can be so tempting to engage in around the gossip table – are absolute poison in the life of a community, and especially in a church.

Humility, as we have discussed before, has to do with staying close to the ground, of being down to earth. It means not looking down our nose at other people. And the primary theological reason why we cannot look down our noses at other people comes to us this morning, courtesy of Romans 3. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Bam. Right there, in a simple and memorable statement, is the heart of the reason why the church should be filled with down-to-earth people, who know that they are no better than anyone else. Because “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” You have sinned, the person sitting next to you at home has sinned, the person you miss sitting next to at church has sinned, the person who always got under your skin and drove you crazy has sinned. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Confession is the practice of noticing, and acknowledging, the specific ways that we have fallen short, the ways that we have broken covenant with God. Each of us must do this, for the well-being of our souls. This means that confession requires self-reflection and self-critique. Self-critique, of course, is one of the hallmarks of prophetic faith, whereby the prophets of Israel turned a critical eye, not only upon the wrongs of Israel's enemies, but upon the wrongs of Israel itself. It was their willingness to criticize their own people that earned the prophets the wrath of their fellow Israelites. But it is also what has made the prophetic writings endure with such radiant authenticity to today.

We reflect on our lives, we acknowledge the concrete, specific things that we have done that have been harmful to others, to the world, to ourselves, and in that acknowledgment, we turn back to God. Confession is a practice of continual turning. Confession is not something we do to shine our noses and keep our records clean. We do it to turn back to God, to acknowledge the things we have done that have broken covenant with God and other people, to come to the conscious realization of the ways that our lives are out of alignment, the ways that our lives are disordered and how part of the responsibility for that disorder belongs to us. In the language of the Ash Wednesday litany of penitence with which we began the season of Lent, we confess “all our past unfaithfulness: The pride, hypocrisy, and impatience in our lives, our self-indulgent appetites and ways and our exploitation of other people, our anger at our own frustration and our envy of those more fortunate than ourselves, our intemperate love of worldly goods and comforts, and our dishonesty in daily life and work.” We lay it all out there, because these things are the truth about us.

The world can't talk like that, because the world is too busy trying to keep up the pretenses of perfection. But the world also *won't* talk like that, because the world does not trust that forgiveness is the reality that constitutes the universe by the grace of God.

But the church knows that pretense, and keeping up appearances, is a lousy way to live, and not only is it lousy, it's unnecessary *because forgiveness is flowing in the universe*. That's why Jesus tells us to forgive, not just seven times, but seventy-seven times, forgive so many times that you lose count. Forgiveness is flowing in the universe. We are swimming in it, even though the world tells us that we're always on the knife's edge, one mess-up away from being thrown into the outer darkness. The truth is that you are forgiven. I am forgiven. Your neighbor is forgiven. And because we live in that forgiveness, we can find the courage to face up to the things we have done. The wrongs that we have done will still have impact, and there may well be consequences for those things, but the consequences will not separate us from God's love for us in Jesus Christ.

It means we can do what the friends in Mark 2 do. They bring their hurting friend to Jesus. The paralytic does not get himself to Jesus; it takes his community. They bring him because he is broken in his body, which is paralyzed. They bring him because he is broken in his heart and soul, which are wounded by sin. They bring him to Jesus, and Jesus transforms his life. Confession and forgiveness are not just an individualistic reality; they are experiences of community. We bring others to Jesus, and others bring us to Jesus.

The world doesn't do any of this. The world, in its infatuation with whichever Caesar happens to be on whatever throne, encourages a spirit of scorn towards those who are broken. The world encourages us to distract ourselves from the suffering of the poor. The world encourages us to feel entitled to our privilege. ... The world does not believe that building the beloved community is even possible.

But the church follows a different King than Caesar, a different King who shows us that the way to true abundance is to give it away, the way to true life is to share it and let it go, the way to true peace is to confess your sins and wrongdoing, the way to true security is through standing with those who are vulnerable.

What sin are you aware of in your life this week? In what parts of your life are you most tempted to keep up an appearance, to keep up the pretense of being perfect or right or impressive? How might you let go of that pretense, come back down to earth, confess your sin, turn back to God, and live by God's mercy rather than by the accolades and the approval of the world? To God, and to God alone, be all the glory, now and forever. Amen.

Prayer

Teach us, O Lord, to live by your grace and not by our own performance. Teach us to live by your mercy, your forgiveness, and your truth, and not by the approval of others, or the accolades of the world. Teach us to embody your grace more and more, in our congregation, and in the world. Through Christ we pray. Amen.