

Sermon for July 14, 2019
Isaiah 58:1-9; Ps. 51:1-17

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will proclaim your praise. Amen.

Heartfast

“An unexamined life is not worth living.” --Socrates

“You must be born again.” –Jesus Christ

Let me begin this morning with two true stories about two people’s perceptions of “confession.” I’ve shared the first one with some of you before. Several years ago, a member of a former church of mine asked me why we included a prayer of confession every Sunday. His complaint was that the prayer was a “downer,” intended to make people feel guilty, which especially bothered him because, as he explained, he did not sin. In fact, he told me, he was a very good person—he played guitar at a nursing home, he volunteered at an animal shelter, and he loved and cared for his wife better than most men. I will agree that he was a good person. But he wasn’t a perfect person.

Some weeks later, I had the opportunity to have lunch with this member. What I recall are his impatience with and anger toward the overworked server who had too many tables to handle quickly. Instead of offering any understanding or compassion, he was critical, rude, and snappy towards her. The prayer of confession could have been a real blessing to him.

On the other end of the spectrum was my Aunt Mayme, one of my father’s devoted sisters. Mayme, who eloped at 16, spent several months in a secret marriage, only discovered when her mother found Mayme’s diary under the bed. From that time until her death, despite being married to her husband for 50+ years, Mayme lived her adult life under the shadow of her parents’ shame and emotional abuse when they discovered she had married without their permission. When the psalmist writes that “I know my transgression, and my sin is ever before me,” he could have been describing Aunt Mayme, a loving, generous, and fragile soul, and her long experience with guilt.

Mayme chose to try to absolve her guilt by being baptized. She would join church after church that required baptism for membership so that she could get re-baptized in the hope that that ugly blot on her soul (and on her wounded heart) would finally disappear. In her 80’s, (remember, this struggle had been going on since she was 16), Mayme had the opportunity to travel to the Holy Land, which she quickly took. There, she was re-baptized in the waters of the Jordan River. Weeks after the trip, she told me about the experience and looked at me with water-rimmed eyes and asked in her broken voice, “Rosemary, now that I’ve been baptized where Jesus was, do you think I am finally forgiven?” Mayme somehow missed the fact that she had been born again, and again, and again, and my heart broke for her. I assured her that she had been forgiven 2000 years ago, but whether she ever really considered herself free, I do not know.

Two sides to the coin of confession: one side says it isn't necessary because we are basically decent people and that is good enough; the other side says our sins are too huge, we are too terrible, we have messed up too much, for Jesus Christ to ever forgive us. ***Both of those convictions are harmful misconceptions and are not Gospel; they are not of Jesus Christ.*** We are not infallible—only God is—and neither are we unforgivable. Ever.

Somewhere in the middle of the coin lies the rest of us—we make our confessions because they are part of our worship and tradition, they are words in the bulletin and on the screen, but we aren't really changed by them. In fact, by the time we've passed the peace we've already forgotten them. As Hamlet put it 600 years ago, "Our words fly up/Our thoughts remain below. Words without thoughts/never to heaven go." And that might be the most dangerous place for us to be.

As Reformed Protestants, the Prayer of Confession has been a hallmark of our worship for six hundred years, not so that we can feel better about ourselves because we haven't committed *those* particular sins, and not because we are to feel that we are worthless sinners, but because we do trust in the promise of God's grace, in God's abundant mercy. We also follow what Jesus said to do, and Jesus' first word in his public ministry was "Repent." Paul reminds us in his Letter to the Romans, "for **all** have sinned and **fall short** of the glory of God," and John reminds us in his letter that "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."

Yes, we are sinners. We are all in the same boat. All of us, including the person delivering this sermon. But what we also know is what Paul adds, "we are justified (made right) by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." Our sinfulness does not define who we are, children of a loving God. Our declaration of pardon proclaims the gift of God's mercy and offers the assurance of forgiveness in Jesus' name. That is why it should be answered with a shout of joy, not a mumbled, rote, "Thanks be to God," which calls into question the importance of being "heartfast."

If you look up the word heartfast in the dictionary, you will not find it because I made it up. It is a combination of heartfelt and steadfast, and it came to me as I read this morning's passage from Isaiah and thought about what God, in his disappointment and frustration with his people, truly wanted. I believe God wanted "heartfast people," people who were committed to something, or someone, that they held so strongly and faithfully in their hearts that it changed them. I believe that is what God wants of us, too, to be heartfast people, people so committed in our hearts to God that we, too, are willing to change.

When we look at the passage from Isaiah, what we see are a people who say one thing and do another. They obediently go through the motions of worship because that is part of their tradition, but what they say does not influence what is in their hearts:

“Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please
and exploit all your workers.

⁴ Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife,
and in striking each other with wicked fists.”

The people are not heartfast. They claim to honor God, to desire right relationship with him, and to be his chosen people. They go through the *ritual* of repentance by fasting, but God sees no inner or outward transformation. Confession is one thing: we can all say that we are sorry for what we did, or did not, do. But repentance is an action of the heart.

The word repentance comes for the Greek word *metanoia*, which simply means “to turn around,” or “to change one’s mind” about a way of life. It means to turn from darkness to the light, to let go of those actions and attitudes that weaken our relationship with God and each other, and to put into practice those actions and attitudes that strengthen those relationships. “Heartfast” people make a choice to change their behavior because right relationships matter.

As I reflected on God’s interchange with his people, I thought about our practice, the Presbyterian practice, of weekly confession. It certainly is a ritual that we go through, a recitation of a confession (written by someone else), a twenty second moment of reflection, and an assurance of pardon. We might even call it “The Three Minute Redemption.” But if our repentance, like that of the Israelites, isn’t sincere, if it doesn’t turn us around, it doesn’t satisfy God.

In Isaiah, God’s sense of frustration comes from the fact that there is no change in his people because there is no choice being made to turn back to him, to change one’s mind about following one’s own will. Fasting and confessing only have value if they result in a difference, a true letting go of sinful behavior. God doesn’t want an empty stomach or an empty confession. He wants, as our psalmist so clearly describes, our “broken and contrite hearts,” hearts that don’t dismiss our faults and failings with a few words but hearts that feel our faults and failings. Otherwise, we are guilty of practicing cheap grace.

What is cheap grace? It is saying that we are sorry for something and expecting to be forgiven with no intention of changing. It is expecting to be forgiven even as we continue to choose our will over God’s will. As the theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer defined it: “Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without

church discipline, Communion without confession... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”

These passages from Isaiah and Psalms call all of us to honestly assess our sincerity about our confession and repentance. God sees the shallow heart for what it is, even when we don't. God didn't want his people's sackcloth. God had no use for their ashes, their false humility, their quarreling or their fighting. What God wanted—and wants—is genuine repentance with genuine reform: a heartfast people. And when we are genuine, God forgives totally, freely, and completely. It is gospel truth that God buries our sins without a tombstone. That is who we are: God's *forgiven* people.

In modern lingo, perhaps what God is telling his chosen people is to walk the talk. How do we do that? God gives the answer. Be heartfast when we make our confession and when we repent. Pay attention to it and mean it. Then do those things that the Spirit of Christ has already empowered us to do: Fight injustice wherever we see it. Share our food with the hungry and our lives with the lonely. Provide the poor with shelter and give someone in need a shoulder to cry on. Clothe the naked and include the outcast. Stop any fighting, bickering, or gossiping. Practice forgiveness and kindness, watch our words, and be reconciled. However, these things don't take three minutes. They are the lifetime actions of heartfast people who “are justified (made right) by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,” out of love.

Thanks be to God.