

Confession Obsession

^{NRS} Psa 32:1 <Of David. A Maskil.> Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.² Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.³ While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah

⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah

⁶ Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.⁷ You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. Selah

⁸ I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.⁹ Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you.¹⁰ Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.¹¹ Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

"I hate the prayer of the confession!"

When I was an intern in New Jersey, there was a woman named Janice in the congregation who graced my adult education class, and during Lent just about every week she would make this announcement and tell us all about her antipathy towards the prayer of confession and Lent in general. "Did I tell you I hate the prayer of confession," she would ask. "Yeah, I think you mentioned it," I'd say, thinking in my head, "like a hundred thousand times now."

But no matter the tone in my voice, she'd just keep going. "Well, listen to me, kid," she'd say. She always called me 'kid'. "We've got a confession obsession in the church. It's not right." And then she'd go on and on about this until everyone in the class was pretty sure at least *somebody* had an obsession.

Now most of the time when a person gets fixated on something like this, I just try to give thanks when they're creative and come up with terms like "confession obsession" and then just try to ride it out until we can move on to something else. A lot of things go away with time in the church. But this wasn't the case with Janice. She was down on confession when I started there and Lent only seemed to amplify things. So one day I foolishly asked her why she hated it so much. "So, I get that you don't like Lent and the prayer of confession and all." I said. "But why do you dislike it so much?" And like a flower turning towards the sun, she gave me this huge smile, and her eyes twinkled as if I had asked just the perfect question. Inside my head warning lights started going off and I was thinking, "Awooga! Awooga! Dive! Dive!" What was I thinking? But in spite of my fears we actually had a really good conversation.

She told me she grew up Roman Catholic, and while she always remembered it being a little dark and focused on sin- lent was absolutely pitch black. She remembered that when she was 8, it was during lent that she started to go to the confessional for the first time. 8 years old and she's going to a confessional. I had a pound puppy named "Buster" and stuffed fox creatively named "Foxy Loxy" when I was 8. She was trying to figure out the difference between a venial and a moral sin. I was naming things Foxy Loxy. She remembers sitting in that little box and having no idea what sin even was and barely had a clue what she was supposed to be telling the strange man on the other side. There was a lot of pressure, she said. You had to say something, or the priest would be upset, but a lot of the time she just couldn't think of anything all that terrible she had done at 8 or 9. And so said she started to make things up. I must have looked like I didn't see the irony in this, because she hammered the point home saying, "Don't you get

it? I was inventing up sins just to make conversation. That's a really weird thing to do to an 8 year old."

I agreed with her and laughed. She said it'd be a lot funnier, except the Presbyterians weren't that much better. So I asked her what disturbs about what we do. Well for one thing, she didn't like it that everyone says the prayer of confession together. She said it sounds creepy and reminded her of the witch's guards in the Wizard of Oz, the ones who chanted oh-ee-oh, ohee-oh. Second, she didn't think people were all that bad. She said she certainly wasn't. She said, "You know, most weeks I don't go around axe murdering people or running over nuns. I'm a good person. And so I just don't see how fixating on how awful we are is all that helpful." And finally, if we really are that bad, she said, how could I respect a god who would be appeased by saying a dinky little prayer? And then, apparently unaware that as a seminary intern I had all the power of an Oregonian solar panel in winter she said, "So maybe you could talk to pastor Lauren and do something about this?"

Whenever Lent comes around I think about Janice and that conversation. I'm glad I asked her about it. Since then I've met many more Janices, many more good souls nervous about what seems like the church's "confession obsession." And I honor this, I do. Often they're calling the church on absolutely horrible practices that aren't helpful and never were. But as strange as this may sound- I really like lent. And the prayer of confession is actually the most important and meaningful part of worship for me. And it's not because I'm an axe murderer or run over nuns, not that I'd tell you if I were. And it's not that I think I'm a bad person. I don't. I believe I'm good person- flawed to be

sure, but good. To me confession isn't actually about whether we're naughty or nice. And it certainly isn't trying to appease an unhappy god by groveling a little bit. It's actually not a practice I do for God at all- it's something I do to for *me*. It's something I do to for me. It's a time for me to let my shoulders drop, to remember again the kind of wonder I'm made for, to acknowledge how small I've become during the week, and then to remember God's grace that's already there and let it restore me and reshape me back to size.

And confession in this sense, in this deeper sense- this is what Psalm 32 is all about. Psalm 32 was used in the worship life of Israel- probably something very similar to our prayer of confession. Part of how we know this is that strange word 'selah' you hear running through the Psalm. Selah is one of the humbling words in Hebrew- humbling because scholars honestly don't know how to translate it. It comes from the root verb meaning to lift up, and scholars believe it was used as a musical notation- either cueing instruments or a choir, as in now it's time to lift up our voices, or now it's time for the harps and lyres. So, whenever you see the word 'Selah', think worship.

It also makes sense that this was used in worship because it's so basic- it's like a teaching tool. The poem literally tells the story of what happens in confession. The story comes in three movements, all marked off by that notation 'Selah' with a fourth paragraph summoning the congregation to action.

So the first movement- in verse 3 the Psalmist tells us what it's like for him before confession. He describes it as a kind of hiding, an image used through the psalm. And this hiding, this silence, it isn't helping him- it's hurting him. He writes: "While I kept

silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah.”

It's so important here that it's the Psalmist who is describing his own turmoil. *He's* the one who knows he's hiding. And *he's* the one who knows what it's doing to him. No one is telling him what to do or what to say. Confession, right confession, can only come from the heart of the individual. Janice was absolutely right that what she experienced in the church as a child was wrong. It was wrong not just because you shouldn't stick small children in creepy wooden booths, but because she wasn't really confessing what was on her heart- she wasn't trying to put to words what she was really feeling inside; she was just trying to say what she guessed the adults around her wanted to say. It wasn't coming from her- it was coming from them.

And this gets to Janice's second objection- that we all say the prayer of confession together. To Janice it seems like either folks were just on autopilot or worse it's a kind of brainwashing. Well, please hear me on this. We print the prayers spoken together not as an order, but as an invitation. And if you don't believe what you are saying or have serious concerns about a prayer, please, please, please, I beg you- honor these doubts and concerns and be silent. Honest silence is SO much better than mouthing things just to go along with the group.

But why do it all, Janice would ask. Why not just stop it altogether? Well, we confess together for at least two good reasons I can think of- the first is that many of our sins aren't just individual but corporate. The environmental crisis for instance, this is a group problem, not an individual problem. And since we're all part of the problem, we pray together in the hopes of becoming part of the solution. But another reason we pray

together, the more important one to me, is that we do this as a way of caring for one another. I've said it before, but there are days when for whatever reason, I might come here and be unable to pray. Depending on the week, I may be dragging in here unable to trust in the promises of God that morning- no matter how hard I try they may just seem too good to be true. And it is on these days I need the body, I need us all here to pray with and for and alongside me- to say the words I really can't, until the day comes when I can again. And then, on another week, it'll be my turn to return the favor, and pray when you can't.

So we pray together not to try and brainwash you. Believe me I'd change the prayers, maybe slip something in there about sending the pastor to Bermuda or something. So again, if you don't understand the prayer, if you don't believe the prayer- please honor this and know that it is perfectly faithful to be silent. If you can't be honest here, if you feel like you should say things that aren't true just to make other people happy- we should just close the doors. Because that's not faith- that's just a bunch of lemmings with a cross.

So, the Psalmist opens by telling us he's confessing because the path he's walking is no longer clear. He's the one who chooses to break his silence and come out of hiding. And in the second stanza he tells us what happens. He says he offers his confession to God, he comes out of hiding- and, and he puts this so simply, God removes his guilt.

Coming out of hiding. At it's deepest level, confession means to come out of hiding, to step out of the shadows and to see ourselves clearly, to see ourselves honestly, blemishes and all.

One of the images for sin that's most helpful for me is blemish or scar. Whenever we are physically wounded or we physically wound someone else, the body is irreparably damaged- it may heal, but it will never be exactly like it was, the cells will always grow back slightly differently. And when the wound is deep enough, the body will create scar tissue- marks that will be with us often for a long, long time. These marks often tell stories.

One of the most moving scenes of Homer's great epic the Odyssey takes place at the very end- when Odysseus has finally made his way back home. It took him 10 years to get to Troy. And then another 10 to get home. He comes back home a stranger. No one recognizes him- not even his own wife. So they receive him into the house as they would a stranger, a guest. And when their old servant Eurycleia bathed Odysseus in the morning, she saw an old scar on his leg. It was a scar Odysseus received when he was just a boy. A wild boar nearly killed him when he went to visit his grandfather. He lived- but this scar marked him the rest of his life. And even though Odysseus had grown old and his face had changed and even his body had changed- this scar remained. And when Eurycleia saw it, she recognized him immediately and he had to swear her to secrecy.

The wounds we've received, the wounds we've given others- these sins, they mark us. Confession is this bath in which the Spirit washes over us and we see ourselves- wounds and all. And we bare ourselves like this not to make ourselves feel worse, but so that we remember who we are and where we've come from, and we do this to know that these wounds may mark us- but they do not define us.

And we're able to do this only in the trust that God, the one we're confessing to, is, in spite of all the times religious leaders have gotten it wrong throughout the years, love, and nothing else. Now this isn't an easy love, mind you- a kind of love that looks the other way when we are tearing into one another. This is a fierce love- a love that gets right in our face. But it is love- and love, when we come out of hiding, always forgives.

And this brings us to the last line of the Psalm where the Psalmist cries out in joy. "Be glad in the Lord and rejoice! Shout out, you pure in heart!" One of the things I've always struggled with regarding confession is the line between healthy honesty and whining. And the end of this Psalm is really the answer I think. Does confession, does lent- does this leave us feeling lighter, simplified, more able to do what needs to be done? Are we left with joy, or at least a sense of relief? Or does it just tie us up in more knots, amplifying the voices in our head telling us what lousy people we are, and replaying past traumas over and over again? When prayer leaves us more whole, more able to seek after what you know to be right pathways- then I think this might be worthy of the name confession. But if we're left feeling worse than we did before, but we keep doing it over and over again anyway- that I'd say this is worthy of the name obsession, and I'd say silence would be far better.

I'd like to leave you with Wild Geese by Mary Oliver- I've used it before, but it's worth hearing it again. It's a poem in which we contrasts confession obsession, this kind of hand wringing we do sometimes, with true confession- with unburdening and allowing ourselves to be loved by God.

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting —
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

This lent, may we not walk on our knees a hundred miles through the desert- literally or
figuratively. But let us tell ourselves and one another true things, our joy and our despair.

And as we let all these things go, may we attend to the simple ways God continues to
love us, and may we, like the earth beneath our feet, begin to wake back up again.

Amen.