

Confession as a Way of Life
Presented by Jack Heppner
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This morning we are focusing on the discipline of “confession.” I have entitled my sermon, “Confession as a Way of Life” because without confession it is basically impossible to live faithfully as a Christian.

Right at the outset we must dispel the notion that confession is something negative, or always implies failure of one kind or another. That is what usually comes to our minds when we think of confession. “I’ve blown it. I’ve made a mistake. I’ve hurt somebody. And now I must humble myself and confess the wrong I have done so things can be set right.” But as we will see, that is only one aspect of confession which we experience within a much larger context of positive confession. And, when seen this way, confessing a wrong you have done also becomes a positive, life-giving experience.

In its most primary meaning, to confess is simply *to tell the truth about something*. Paul says of Christ, for example, that he “made a good confession” before Pontius Pilate. (I Timothy 6:13) It is clear that he had nothing to apologize for. According to John 18, when Jesus was before Pilate he simply stated that, yes, he was a King, although his kingship was not of this world, and that he had come to bear witness to the truth. In John 9 we are told that the parents of the blind man whom Jesus healed did not confess, or tell the truth about who it was that had healed him, for fear of the Pharisees. In Romans 10:9-10 we are told that if we confess Jesus as Lord, that is to sincerely say the truth about him, and believe, we are saved.

We could site more examples, which illustrate the fact that confession basically means telling the truth about something. Even when it comes to confessing our sins to God or one another, all it basically means is telling the truth about what we did. It is important to establish this over-arching understanding about confession for many reasons – one of them being that when seen in this way, confessing our failures and our sins will not be as difficult as we are prone to make it. Once we are accustomed to “giving voice to the truth,” we can simply also tell the truth when it comes to our sins.

Last Sunday Melissa Buhler made a confession through her baptism – she told us by that act about her commitment to follow Jesus for all of life. This morning we will be confessing our commitment to Christ and his body in the act of communion – that is telling the truth about where we stand in relation to Christ. And during this advent season, which has begun today, we will through our celebrations be confessing that we believe the incarnation to be true – that Jesus did actually come to dwell among us. That the Word became Flesh. That God was in Christ touching all the broken places of this universe, including our hearts. And that all things and all of life is sacred in light of this great event.

Telling the truth or making a true confession, that is “letting your yeah be yeah and your nay be nay,” may sound like a simple thing to do. But it is more difficult to do than to

talk about it. Sometimes it is thought that children are natural liars and it is our job as adults to teach them how to tell the truth. I suppose this may be the case sometimes, but I wonder if more often it isn't the other way around. Our children learn from us that it is not acceptable to tell the truth about the way things are – that it is more acceptable to live a life of deception than to live authentically, confessing truth as a way of life.

You are travelling as a family and you arrive at the house of some friends around supper time. You instruct your children not to tell your hosts that you have not had supper - that you will get them something to eat later on. No sooner are you in their house, however, when one of the children pipes up, “My mommy told us not to tell you that we haven't had supper yet.” You are embarrassed, and your child will feel more than embarrassment later that evening. He must learn the cover up game one way or another.

Children have a knack for telling the truth the way they see it and it can embarrass us if we aren't used to truth-telling. And when we force them to learn to hide behind a variety of fronts we do untold damage to their innermost beings. When I was a child my whole family was forced to participate in keeping the secret that daddy smoked on the sly. How often I caught my daddy sticking a lit cigarette into his pocket to hide the truth – even though the smell betrayed him a hundred times or more. But we played the game of pretending we didn't know anything about it. How traumatic it was when my oldest brother, in the context of an open argument, spoke the truth openly in the hearing of all, that daddy was a smoker. I remember stealing away from the scene and praying that he would stop telling the truth. It was too painful to hear truth spoken openly.

Many of us have been wounded in our childhood because we were not allowed to tell the truth. Some of us learned that it was improper to say how we felt – that emotions were to be kept under wraps. Some of us were bullied, but we could not tell the truth about it for fear of further bullying. Some of us were abused in other ways - physically, emotionally or sexually – but when we tried to tell an adult the truth about the matter, we were told we should stop making up lies or that it was our fault. Some of us were terrorized as children by notions of an angry God who was about to throw us into everlasting torment because of a minor infraction we had committed. For me it has only been in recent years that I have been able to begin telling the truth about the nightmare of my youth, and even now I am finding some people trying to shut me up – to stop confessing the truth about what really happened.

If such realities were rare I would not be that concerned. But I have come to understand that most of us as Christians have a hard time simply confessing the truth. So many of us live behind false fronts by means of which we try to impress others. We are afraid to tell the truth about our fears, our wounds, our brokenness – because that would tarnish the image we are trying to present to others.

To say, for example, that you are in fact lonely might be taken as a sign of immaturity, so you keep it to yourself. To say that you are hurting could be inviting more hurt, so you shut up and just keep hurting alone. To say that you are struggling with an addiction might lead to a shunning of sorts, so you keep trying to fight it on your own. However it

has come to you, the truth is that most of us have been socialized, even within the context of the church, to avoid confession – to avoid telling it like it is. To avoid saying what we really think. The price is too high. It would disrupt the status quo too much and disturb the fragile peace that exists in the absence of true confession.

And so, afraid to speak the truth about ourselves, we are also afraid to speak out about what we see in the world around us – to confess the truth about it. If we see injustice we say it is not our problem and turn to walk away. If we notice oppressive business practices in Steinbach, or in other places around the world, we are afraid to point them out lest people take offense at the truth. If we take note that the cost of our affluent lifestyles is born, at least in part, by virtual slaves on the other side of the world, we place our hands over our ears and run for another shopping spree of slave-labor goods. Don't tell me about the truth, we scream silently. Its dangerous to tell the truth – to simply confess the truth the way you see it. So most often we keep thoughts about the “truth of the matter” to ourselves. We will not confess the truth we see for fear of the consequences.

Some of you have followed the journey that has taken some of my writings into the public arena these past few years. As I have been going more public with the truth as I see it I have received much affirmation, but I have also been subjected regularly to ridicule, shaming, and character assassination. It happens about every four to six weeks. I have been told to shut up – don't call us, we'll call you if we want your opinion! I have been told I am mean-spirited, vindictive and out to cause trouble. I have been threatened with the need to be crucified – although that was probably more smoke and mirrors than anything else. And what is somewhat disconcerting is that most of this barrage of opposition has come from the heart of the Christian establishment. Having flamed out at the end of a forty-year trajectory of service and commitment, some people in high places now would prefer that I curl up and die instead of confessing the truth I see from the edge of the ledge.

What about confessing Christ before the world? It is my deep conviction that one of the main reasons we find it so hard to live out our faith openly, freely and joyfully in the context of the public arena is the fact that we have been socialized not to tell the truth about ourselves and the world in which we live. It has become our customary way of life not to confess the truth. The truth of the matter usually lies hidden somewhere behind layers of defensiveness and evasion. So to confess Christ openly in the public square is at odds with a lifestyle designed to hide the truth about things that really matter. That is why so many of us cringe at the thought of being more open about our faith and how it works its way into our lives and into the world.

We need a revival of truth-telling. A deeper understanding of confessing truth in all dimensions of our lives – about ourselves, our world and our God. But that will take a deep work of grace at the core of our beings. And if we really want to go in that direction, we should be prepared for resistance from those who want to continue to hide behind their fortified trenches of privacy and independence. But I can promise you something

else. The more you learn to make confession of the truth a way of life, the greater will be your sense of freedom, joy and power to live life the way God intended it to be lived.

Now we need to talk a little about confessing our sins. As I said earlier, when confessing the truth becomes our way of life it is not so hard to imagine ourselves confessing our sins to God and to one another as the Bible calls us to do. It's just another dimension of a way of life that is transparent and honest about the way things really are.

I John 1:8-10 calls us to confess our sins to God. ***If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he (Christ) is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.***

I find it interesting that verse nine, in which we are encouraged to confess our sins to God, is preceded and followed by a verse that points directly at the problem we have just been discussing. We have a tendency to say that we have not sinned and so betray the fact that the truth is not in us. It seems to me that this must be a serious impediment to confession, otherwise it would not be stated twice – once before and once after the call to confess our sins to God. Do you find such a tendency in your life?

I would like to make some observations at this point about why some of us find it so hard to confess our sins. I have a suspicion that it may be rooted in a wrong understanding of the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:48. It simply states, ***You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*** There it is, clear and simple! To be a mature disciple of Christ is to be perfect. Taken at face value, this verse has created some deadly theological contortions and some roadblocks to a natural kind of confessing the truth about ourselves to God and one another.

One distortion, I believe, is the idea that the call to perfection in Matthew 5:48 was given simply to drive us to despair. Because we know intuitively that perfection in this life is impossible, we simply cling to the promise that we are perfect “in Christ.” So because we live in this state of “sinless perfection” in heavenly places, we are exempt from attempting to live the life Jesus calls us to – it's impossible anyway! Some have even gone so far as to say that the Sermon on the Mount doesn't apply to Christians today. If they fail to live up to biblical values, that is not a big deal. In the first place it's impossible anyway. And secondly “Christ has got you covered.” We are already forgiven for sins of the past, present and future, and so in reality we are perfect. In this frame of reference confession is just perfunctory at best. If we fail to confess our sins it's no problem – really. Why should I confess my sins if they are already forgiven anyway? It will make no significant difference in the end, will it?

A second distortion of Matthew 5:48 is the notion that once we get to be mature in Christ, real perfection is actually attainable, not only in the heavenlies but also on the ground. Those who believe this often convince themselves that, since they are at least nearly perfect, there is very little reason to confess their sins. Perfect people don't make mistakes or fall into sin, do they now? To them, if they would admit to a mistake or a sin they would be pricking the balloon of their own maturity. It would be like announcing

that they are not as perfect as they usually pretend to be. So perfectionists have a real battle on their hands. They want to see themselves, and to be seen, as mature and quite perfect. Confessing failure would uncover the truth, which others already know anyway, that they are not perfect. So instead of freely confessing sins, perfectionists try to hide them behind all kinds of blinds and defenses. A popular defense is finger-pointing at the failures of others to draw attention away from their own failures.

I think both of these interpretations are misguided and harmful, both personally and for the community. To be unconcerned about our sins because Christ has them covered anyway, or to think that we have arrived at perfection, are perhaps the two greatest deterrents we encounter to confessing our sins as we should. If we find ourselves at one of these two places I am certain that we have misread the intent of Matthew 5:48.

What I think has happened is that we have read our contemporary, technical notion of the word *perfect* into the biblical text, distorting its intended meaning in the context in which it was used. A careful analysis of this text shows that it is not a blanket mandate to attempt perfection – as if to say that if you don't follow the whole of Matthew chapter five to the letter all is lost. That would contradict I John 1 where we are told that we do continue to sin.

I have wrestled with this text at great length and have come to the conclusion that verse 48, ***You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*** is not a summary statement for the whole chapter, but for the last paragraph of that chapter which speaks about the law of love. Basically it is challenging us to be “indiscriminate” or “limitless” in our love for others as demonstrated by God's love. The German says, “Darum sollt ihr vollkommen sein.” Translating that back to English it would mean, “Be mature, take this directive seriously.” Eugene Peterson translates it in *The Message* as follows, “In a word, what I am saying is, *Grow up...Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.*”

I don't know if that satisfies you, but it helps me. If we can get over the notion that sins don't really matter because Christ has us covered anyway, or that maturity in Christ means literal perfection, it will go a long way towards making us more willing to confess our sins. And when we realize that confessing our sins is simply telling the truth about what happened, as is our customary way of life, we will not feel degraded or demeaned by confessing our sins to God. Confessing the truth about a matter is simply our way of life and we know that ***he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins.***

And now to sum up my meditation on confession, I would like to probe another biblical mandate we have in this regard. We are told in James 5:16, ***Therefore confess your sins one to another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.*** It may not be that hard for some of us to admit privately to God that we have messed up, and receive the assurance of God's forgiveness, as we have read about in I John. However, for most of us it is another matter to go one step farther, as James calls us to.

As a matter of fact, when viewed from within a world of smoke and mirrors, this seems positively frightening. And we have done our level best in Protestant circles to by-pass

this injunction. I remember as a child how our leaders poked fun at the confessional in the Catholic Church. “We know better,” it was said with an air of pride. “We can go directly to Jesus who is the mediator between God and man.” (I Timothy 2:5) Finding forgiveness and healing for our sins did not ever need the involvement of anyone else.

I think we should eat some of our words. Perhaps Protestants protested rightly against the abuses of the confessional in the Catholic Church of the 16th century. But I think that we should take the words of James seriously today and rediscover ways of involving one another in the process of confessing our sins. Yes, we can go directly to God through Jesus. But in many cases it is simply true that involving a brother or sister in the process leads to greater assurance and healing. Some of us have trouble accepting forgiveness when we go alone to God. We go back again and again but find no peace.

We need to take our roles as priests of God more seriously according to I Peter 2:9. The role of priests is basically to represent people to God and then God to the people. We have the authority, as priests of God, to listen to the confession of a brother or sister, and then, upon the authority vested in us by God, declare those sins forgiven.

In his book, *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes: *Our brother...has been given to us to help us. He hears the confession of our sins in Christ's stead and he forgives our sins in Christ's name.* What would change if we actually began the practice of confessing our sins one to another and speaking each other free in Jesus name? Something to think about.

Let us learn to make Confession a way of life. To speak truthfully about the way things are as a matter of course, whether it be confessing truth about ourselves, our world or our God. And to confess our sins to God and one another on a regular basis. May God help us to make confession a way of life. Amen.

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