

Confession is Good for the Soul

By: Meagan McLaughlin

October 23, 2022. As we reflect on our gospel text from Luke today, and the varying practices of Confession we each grew up with, we are invited to think about what it means for us as Christians and why Martin Luther saw it as an inherent part of the Good News that he wanted to proclaim.

Readings: [Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-22](#), [Luke 18:9-14](#)

*** Transcript ***

A family member of mine tells a story from her childhood about the way her congregation, and many churches in some denominations at the time, practiced Confession. Everyone went to the pastor every week, and they were expected to share not only what they had done wrong, but how many times they had done it. Confession was required in order to receive Communion, and a proper Confession was believed to be essential in order to get into heaven. One week, she couldn't think of anything to say, so she made it up. She confessed that she had stolen the neighbor boy's purse 13 times. I think it would have been pretty appropriate if she had added on that she'd lied to the priest once!

Confession, in other ways of practicing it, presents a little more like beating one's breast, as the tax collector did in our gospel today, which can be misunderstood to mean that we need to beat ourselves up, constantly calling ourselves out, focusing on our wrongs to the point of humiliation.

Yet, it is said that confession is good for the soul, and we hear this message clearly from Jesus in the Gospel of Luke today, as he tells his listeners that the tax collector, beating his breast and asking for God's mercy, came away justified — brought into right relationship and wholeness by God — while the Jewish leader, who lifted himself up in comparison, did not.

And Martin Luther, many centuries later, although he was highly critical of a practice that required a complete counted list of every sin, wrote "An Exhortation to Confession," in which he said, "When I urge you to go to Confession, I am doing nothing else than urging you to be a Christian."

As we reflect on our gospel text today, and the varying practices of Confession we each grew up with, we are invited to think about what Confession means for us as Christians, why Jesus said the tax collector was made whole when he acknowledged his sinfulness, and why Luther, following Christ, saw Confession as an inherent part of the Good News that he wanted to proclaim.

In "An Exhortation to Confession," Luther laid out the reasons why he encouraged people to engage in Confession, saying that, "If I have brought you to the point of being a Christian, I have thereby also brought you to Confession. For those who really desire to be true Christians, to be rid of their sins, and to have a cheerful conscience already possess the true hunger and thirst." Confession allows us know the forgiveness of God, frees us from the weight of guilt of harm we may have caused, and opens us to receive what we really hunger and thirst for: the mercy and love of God, which is the gospel that we know in Jesus. Luther says that if Christians understood that, we would run after it!

Our gospel text today starts out by saying that Jesus is telling this parable to those who trust in themselves, and regard others with contempt, which can go a long ways toward understanding what Jesus is calling us to. Because we humans at times all trust in ourselves, and strive to make sure we're doing better than those around us. Today, the person who lives a moral life, attending church and

steering clear of sin, thanks God that they are not like those who steal, or use drugs, or sin in easily identifiable ways — just like the Pharisee in our gospel today. Tomorrow, it may be the one who makes an earnest confession and strives to seek justice in the world, thanking God that they are not like those who they see as contributing to injustice. We all at times trust in ourselves, and fall into the pattern of seeing ourselves as better than others. We all need Jesus' invitation to come before God, seeking mercy and forgiveness.

And every week, we come together as a community of faith, we enter into the gospel promise. We hear the good news, that we are all created and beloved of God, marked by the cross of Christ, and sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, not because of who we are and what we do, or how we confess, but because of who God is. We are all, as Luther says, sinner and saint. We all need God.

We are called to show up as we are, to be honest about the brokenness we have experienced at the hands of others, the brokenness of the world and in our lives that we've participated in, the grief, addiction, woundedness, the abuse we may have experienced, and know that God in Christ embraces all of us in all of that.

We join in worship and community each week and are reminded of our place in relationship with God and creation — not in humiliation, but in humility, knowing our beloved humanness, that we need one another, and that all of us sin, and we all need God.

We don't do this perfectly, beloveds. As Jeremiah says, our iniquities, our sin and our brokenness, overcomes us all at times, and at times we all harm one another and our community, and we hope in God, who is always faithful to us. Each week, we come together before God in Confession and Forgiveness, acknowledging our sin and trusting God, who knows and loves us as we are, to forgive and guide us as we continue to grow together. We pray together the prayer Jesus taught us, which Luther points out invites us to confession in two ways: as we pray for forgiveness from God, and for help in forgiving those around us.

In humility, and not humiliation, each week we are gathered in just as we are, we name our human weakness, and we remind ourselves and one another of the promise of God who calls us beloved, just as we are, and is always faithful even as we stumble. Confession is core to the gospel we celebrate, and it is good for the soul.

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

2022, Christ Lutheran Church, Webster Groves, sermon, podcast, transcript, Pastor Meagan McLaughlin, Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-22, Psalm 84:1-7, 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18, Luke 18:9-14, Martin Luther, An Exhortation to Confession