

# A Meditation on the Confession

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## **Advent 1, Year B, Mark 13:33-37**

In the ordinary progress of things, today we ought to be talking about the confession.

But first, I went to a wedding yesterday evening and, as such events usually are for me, it was rather a nerve wracking experience. I don't do well with crowds, especially at weddings, since there's no set structure during receptions. I just bounce off people, playing social billiards and getting more and more anxious. So when we sat down to dinner, I ate it, which was a mistake, because it turned out to be beef, which I do not digest. I plan to be back in the land of the living about 5:00 PM this afternoon. So right now, despite appearances, I'm not here. Gauge your expectations accordingly.

Despite the disclaimer, I'm going to make some rather strong claims for the Eucharistic confession. To begin with, it's not about you. At least it's not about you as separate individuals or people. It is about the Christian community and is a confession of the wrongdoing of the Christian community. If you want to confess your individual wrong doing there is another section of the Book of Common Prayer which provides a service for that. (See Pp. 446-452). There is plenty of opportunity for such individual confession and it is quite encouraged. But what goes on in public worship is the concern of the community, so this prayer is a prayer for the forgiveness of the community for the sins of the community. Now let me give you an interesting little grammatical illustration of this. You will notice that one of the things we confess to, and notice that it is always "we" in this confession, never "I," is "We have not loved you with our whole heart." There's just one, just one heart. The whole worshiping community has a single heart. But if we are talking about us as separate individuals, it should be hearts. But it's not, and I can assure you this is intentional. It is not an oversight, not a grammatical error on the part of those who put the book together. It is simply a recognition that institutions and communities as well as individuals break relationships, need confession, need forgiveness, need restoration. That is what this confession is about. We have not loved you with our whole heart; the heart of this community, as a community, as a collective reality, has been misdirected.

This confession is set in the middle of public worship, the worship of the Christian community. Such worship doesn't suddenly lose its public and communal nature simply because we arrive at a confession. The scripture reading is

read to the assembled community, the creed is recited by the entire community and expresses its acceptance of the scriptural foundation of faith with “We (the community) believe.” This communal focus of worship does not disappear and everyone break up into a batch of individuals again once we reach the confession. That doesn’t happen, it’s not what this confession is about. It is an admission on the part of the church that corporations do, indeed, do evil and that we need to start out with an understanding that we, as members of the church, are embedded in the evil which the church does. We can, as individuals, oppose such evil, but we still have to recognize that, for instance, as an Episcopalian, when the Episcopal Church gets out of line I’m embedded in that action because I’m part of that community. Its history becomes my history. I need to recognize that and do something to deal with it. That’s what this confession is about.

Why does the confession come where it comes in the service?

Previous to the confession we have been approached by God through scripture. God starts things off, he usually gets to initiate. Everything that happens before the scripture reading is in the nature of a prologue to worship. It gets us ready. If you go back to the early church, to the earliest Eucharists we have, there is little before the Bible readings.

So God begins by approaching us through scripture. We respond to that approach through the creed, saying, “Ah yes. We recognize what scripture teaches us as the appropriate beginning point for our Christian life.” As I mentioned when talking about the creed, properly understood, it is not intended to be a cage for theological thinking, but a foundation. So you start there and then you go. You don’t just sit on the creed like it’s a sofa or a nest and hatch eggs. If you look carefully at the formulations of Anglicanism which talk about the use of creeds there isn’t much sense that the creed forms a rigid box for theological thinking.

So, once we’ve heard scripture and accepted the Bible’s starting point as our own, the next obvious step is to relate the rest of the world to that starting point. That’s what happens in the Prayers of the People. The Prayers of the People are not just an attempt to cajole God into dealing with a set of miscellaneous undesirable circumstances which we happen to be aware of in our lives. The Prayers of the People are intended to be a systematic presentation of the concerns of the world, including our lives, to God. Therefore, prayer is a means of relating who we are and what we are concerned with to God. It’s not a form of technology. It’s not a way of getting things done that we can’t get done in other ways. Prayer is a way of creating relationships. Relationships do exist to get things done, but if we have relationships merely to get things done, that’s called manipulation – which is sometimes all right and sometimes not. It is, however, not recommended as the primary element in one’s relationship with God – or other people, for that matter.

After we have done all these things, heard scripture, affirmed belief through the creed and related the world to God in prayer, the next step in the service is to recognize that, as a community, everything we have done so far is inadequate. The understanding of God which we derive from scripture is inadequate. That has been clearly demonstrated time and time again and how anyone can have

any question about it passes wonder. After all, scripture has said, according to various Christian communities' understanding of it, "Women are to be subordinate." Right, as I look around this congregation! Well, that is an example of my point. "And, oh, by the way, race slavery is God's intention." "Oh, by the way, 'Spare the rod and spoil the child.'" "Oh, by the way, Jews are Christ killers and ought to be eliminated." It sounds to me as if any honest Christian community has a great deal to confess. And I might add, we are still doing these kinds of things. After all, I have a lot of colleagues who are trying to use scripture to deprive gay people of their place in the life of the church. That is going on at this instant and is, in my judgment, the same kind of communal misuse of scripture as I mentioned in the previous examples. It is a bending of God speaking to us used to justify our own ends. And that's something which requires confession.

At least we must confess we are a community capable of such things. If we lose sight of the fact that we are a community capable of such things then we will not be a community, and I refer to today's gospel here, on the watch for such things in ourselves. Not being on the watch has caused the church to descend into cruelty more times than I care to imagine. So it seems to me that the communal confession is very appropriate in the service right where it is, thank you.

Now let's look at what we've done with the creed. Instead of saying, "God is infinitely multiform. Seek him with all your heart and soul and mind," what the church has used the creed to say is, "Here are the limits of your thinking, don't go beyond them." Again, I think, a matter for confession. And when we turn the creed from a foundation for creative theologizing and a chance for one's community to have a grounded relation with God into a means of determining "I'm OK but you're not OK," then we need to confess a use of the creed motivated by something less than a full hearted generosity of love. In other words, when the creed is turned into a tool for hunting heretics, then, all too frequently one has moved beyond that which is permissible for the love-directed life.

Even in the Prayers of the People, although it is a bit more subtle, our self-centeredness is all too frequently apparent. We pray for those things which do us good, but I sometimes find myself more intent on naming my friends I wish to see healed than my enemies who may need healing just as much. And that, also, is appropriate matter for confession.

So don't think of this confession as dealing primarily with private matters – how I swore at the other drivers in the traffic jam on Highway 20 today. Go ahead and confess that if you want to. There is nothing wrong with tossing that into the silence between prayer and absolution. Depending on how blue your language got, of course. But the main point of this confession is to recognize the shortcomings of the church in the use of God's gifts to it. That's what it's really and truly about.

That is to say, that we need to somehow recognize our imperfection in the use of scripture, creed and prayer before we approach this altar with the claim that we are being made new. After all, it's rather difficult to be made new if

nothing needs to change.

So that, I think, is why the confession is where it is in the service and what it's really intended to do. The fact that we have managed, year after year, and confirmation class after confirmation class after confirmation class, to so heavily individualize something which is so clearly communal is simply another instance of how badly the community, as such, needs confession.

Now, a couple of comments on the text itself. It begins: "Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you..." How? "In thought, word and deed." The completeness of this listing of the means of sin, our thinking, our speaking and our doing, is intended to shut off any avenues of escape. The next line intends to do the same thing: "...by what we have done and, also, by the way, by what we haven't done." Just an observation after years of pastoring: What people don't do is generally far more dangerous to their spiritual life than what they do do. Neglect is frequently more deadly than aggression. It's also a lot easier to practice and to justify. And so it's extremely important in thinking about whether or not this community meets its responsibilities to think about what we truly haven't done and not just what we have done that hasn't gone well.

Now a little warning about this. People are always approaching me apologetically about what they have intended to do for the church and haven't started, or what they've started but haven't finished, that kind of thing. We're not talking about that. We are talking about what the community is unaware of. What kinds of cruelty we have practiced because we haven't bothered to watch. That's the concern here. An example of this would be a community in which there are conflicts lasting for years and poisoning the community's life, but no one ever says a word about it, so it can never be confessed. Never be dealt with. Now some conflicts are small enough they aren't worth talking about because they go away and don't affect, seriously, the life of the community. They are pin-pricks rather than gashes. But some don't. It's that kind of poisonousness in the life of a community that one becomes adjusted to and therefore one which one accepts, that's the concern about what we have left undone. It's not that in this community I have to fold the linens all by myself. That one goes away. That's trivial.

We've now been hedged in, by thought, word and deed; done and undone. Then it says, "We haven't loved you with our whole heart..." Heart is here used in the old biblical sense to mean the scene, the place, the locus, the focus of one's intentional as well as one's emotional life. Hard heartedness in the Old Testament doesn't refer to cruelty, but to a lack of the ability to recognize what's before one's face. If you don't see what's happening around you, then you are hard-hearted. So when Jeremiah prays to God to take away hearts of stone and replace them with hearts of flesh, he's talking about the ability to recognize the presence of God when God comes. To say that we haven't loved God with our whole heart means much more than an emotional response or feeling. We have not been, as a community, aware of his presence in the world around us, asking for our succor, asking for our sense of justice.

Then we say that we haven't loved our neighbors as ourselves, which is

generally obvious enough to need no comment – except to say that neighbors are not chosen, but given. Which is why we don't say that we haven't loved our friends as ourselves. The two mean something more than slightly different. Our love needs to be larger than our personal preferences.

After we have made this statement admitting the problem and our responsibility for it, we issue our apology. We're sorry and we humbly repent. Being sorry and being repentant are two different things. I can be plenty sorry and not repent. Repentance implies an intention of amendment built on the experience of sorrow. To amend – and this is important, the most important thing I'm saying this morning – to intend amendment does not mean to solve the problem. A lot of people think, "Ah, I've done something wrong, I've got to make it all right. I've got to fix it." This is the road to either frustration or despair. Many things can't be fixed, you can only deal with the results. What repentance means is to respond in some way, in some way that turns to the light. It doesn't mean that you solve the problem or fix things. It can mean a whole lot of other things. Sometimes it means we will learn something from an experience. To intend to learn from an experience can be a sign of repentance. Sometimes the intention is to remain aware of a continuing problem in life. Sometimes that intention to watch is a sufficient repentance. Sometimes the intention is to change behavior in some way. How the community responds to things, the part one plays in that community response can be repentance. Repentance has many faces. But what is common to each face of repentance is that it involves a change in who we are, a change which is possible because of a sense that God loves us.

Second comment, the change of repentance doesn't have to be permanent. The church is aware enough of the nature of human nature to know that people have to intend things six ways until Sunday before anything happens. That's why we don't just say this confession when we begin our Christian lives and then not again, we repeat it every Sunday. In order for repentance to become real and a part of who we are we have to be regularly reminded about it. We forget.

To be sorry is to begin the process. To repent is to complete it.

Now, one other comment. If you look at this confession closely you see two different ways of understanding sin, or its opposite. 1) We delight in God's will. 2) We walk in God's way. Now walking in God's way is an extremely old image. It shows up in ancient Mesopotamian literature 1500 years before Moses. So it's an old image, usually used to talk about keeping the rules. God outlines the path, you stick to it. This seems to be the predominant way that people think of being good or not being good. God outlines the path and you stick to it or you don't. Whole books in English literature like *Pilgrim's Progress* have been built around this image, as well, I suspect, as the ethical lives of most Christians.

This other image, delighting in God's will, is a more subtle and difficult image. To delight in God's will means a treasuring of what his will is for its own sake. Think about conflict. Real conflict isn't avoided when two people disagree and one doesn't say anything. That may be a surrender but it is by no means that kind of relationship which leads to delighting in each other. Delight

surpasses mere obedience. To achieve a real kind of unity as a community there has to be a striving also for shared ends, not a mere absence of overt conflict. Now for practical purposes agreement doesn't have to be total and, in fact, it's frequently good if agreement isn't. We learn from different ways of seeing things, much disagreement has instructive capacity. So don't be in too much of a hurry to find agreement. Remember that God willed variety in creation, so to delight in his will is to delight in the variety, the differences of creation, including the human ones. And in willing differently from God we become isolated, lonely, and that, essentially, is what sin is. It is not disobedience to an arbitrary rule that God just happens to drop on us because God likes to drop rules. What sin is, is the disjunction which happens when God and I don't end up loving the same thing. Therefore I become isolated from what things really are.

So delighting in God's will, that's an important thing to be after. So long as you don't fall into the trap of thinking that finding out what God's will is, is anything less than a slightly longer than life-long project. Hate to tell you that, but I think it's the case.

The final point. One of the unhealthy and dangerous ways of using a confession is to think about it in terms of where you are right now. I know that sounds strange because we are usually told to live in the now, and right now I'm telling you not to do that. But the Confession is part of a long process. The danger is to think that who you are right now is who you really are. Well, in one sense it is. But you are also very much where you have been, and, if the process of confession and absolution means anything, you are also where you might be, where you are going. The possibilities that God has in mind for you are as much a part of who you are as the problems you are experiencing. The Confession is an attempt to say that the church recognizes and tries to provide a way of movement from one to the other. Now we frequently don't know what we are doing when we do that. When the church tries to help people to move, we don't know what we are doing, but we have to be willing to try to support people when they seek that movement toward God which no one else in the world's history has ever attempted. It's not just where we are right now, it's not just all the problems and troubles we are experiencing, it is also where and who you are called to be and the confession has as much to do with that as with the other.

That's more than enough on all that and I intend to sit down at one of the tables upstairs and anyone who cares to shoot can do so.