

A Disciple's Devotion: Confession Is Good for the Soul

Psalm 32

Georgetown Presbyterian Church

Rev. Stephen H. Wilkins

March 14, 2010

The other day I had a dream. I dreamt that St. Peter was leading me on a tour of heaven. At one point we came to a strange room. It was a room full of clocks. Every clock had a name on it. The strange thing about these clocks, though, was that the minute hands were all moving backwards. So I asked Peter to explain them to me.

"Each of these clocks corresponds to someone who is still alive on earth," he said. "Every time they sin, the clock takes one minute off their lives."

Well, I was fascinated! While I was there, I wanted to take a look at the clocks of some of the people I knew. There was Carol's clock: the time stood still on her clock, because she's about as perfect as they come! My children's clocks were there, too, and the minute hands were moving, though not too much; they are, after all, pretty good kids. I looked around for the clocks of some of the staff members; they were all there, and some were taking off minutes quicker than others. There was one clock I couldn't find though. I looked and looked, and it was nowhere to be found.

"Peter," I asked, "where's my clock?"

"Oh, it's in the kitchen. We've been using it as a fan!"

We may chuckle a bit, but in truth sin is no laughing matter. In fact, sin is the very reason we have to go through the cross before we can celebrate the resurrection. If we want to learn during this season of Lent what are the vital aspects of a disciple's devotion, we would be deeply lacking if we failed to include an awareness of our sinfulness and the need for redemption from our sins.

You see, sin is not just at the center of our problem; sin IS our problem. It is sin that changed our relationship with God, for it is sin that has created this gap that exists between us and God, a gap that none of us is able to cross on our own. Sin is the cause of our estrangement from one another. Sin is the reason that bad things happen to people who don't deserve them. Sin IS the problem. And so if our faith is to be rightly directed, we need to begin with an awareness that sin has corrupted us, that our being has been tainted, that the image of God in which we were created has been tarnished.

Once again today we have a psalm that has been attributed to David. We don't know the exact circumstances surrounding the writing of this psalm, but we do know that David is one who experienced both the pain of the knowledge of his own sinfulness and the effects it had on his life and his relationships, as well as the joy and liberation of forgiveness.

David was aware of the horrible burden that sin becomes for us, especially as we let it go hidden and unconfessed. "When I kept silent," he says, "my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day

and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of the summer.”¹ Unconfessed sin is like an abscessed tooth; we can endure the pain, but all the while it’s poisoning our bodies as the pus flows through our bloodstream and invades our joints, sometimes causing rheumatoid arthritis. The more effort we put into hiding or denying or ignoring our sins, the more it drains us and saps us of life. The picture that David paints for us is one of restlessness, tossing and turning in bed and unable to sleep, weariness from carrying an enormous burden.

Sin is a serious matter. We can’t ignore it.

There is a pattern that can be found in this psalm. In the Bible, when things occur in threes, that’s a sign of completeness, totality. And in this psalm we have three such repetitions—in terms of our sinfulness, in terms of the confession we need to make, and in terms of the forgiveness that God offers.

In this psalm, there are three Hebrew words employed for sin—the word meaning transgression, or violation of God’s law; the word that means missing the mark, missing the revealed and expressed will of God; and the word that means iniquity, our nature that is bent toward sinfulness, the corruption of our condition. The psalm employs the entire Hebrew vocabulary for sin, and in so doing it is reminding us that sin has crept into every part of our being, and so there is no part of who we are that hasn’t been affected by sin in our lives. So in the threefold use of the vocabulary of sin, David is reminding us of the complete effect of sin on our being and our standing before God.

There are also three different words or phrases used to denote confession. David says “I *acknowledged* my sin... I *did not cover up* my iniquity... I said, ‘I *will confess* my transgressions to the Lord...”² Acknowledgement of our sinfulness, laying our sins out in the open, being honest to God and telling God about our sins—just as the threefold emphasis of our sinfulness indicates the totality by which sin has affected us, so does this threefold use of the vocabulary of confession remind us that our confession has to be complete, as well. It doesn’t do any good if we’re only honest about some of our sins, but not others. It doesn’t do any good if we admit some wrongdoing or corruption of our being, but we ignore or deny it in other areas of our lives. We don’t have the luxury of picking and choosing how much of our sin we want to confess to God. It has to be all or nothing.

But sin and confession are not the only things that occur in threes in this psalm, for the language of forgiveness also occurs in threes. There are three different images of forgiveness. The first is the word “forgiveness,” which in the Hebrew has the connotation of lifting a burden, of God removing our sin from us. The second word refers to God’s covering of our sins, and that is an image referring to the sacrifice of blood in the Temple worship; it is the payment of a penalty. The third image of forgiveness is God’s not counting our sins against us; that is a bookkeeping term, and it means the debt of our sin has been erased from the books.

Do you see what’s going on here? God meets the totality of our sinfulness with a totality of grace and mercy. There is no sin that we can confess that God won’t forgive. There is no burden so great upon us that God can’t or won’t lift it from us. God’s disposition toward us is one of grace, and mercy. We can confess our sin, not with fear of retribution, but with the confidence that God will meet our confession with the assurance of forgiveness, because God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

¹ Psalm 32:3-4

² Psalm 32:5

Earlier this morning we read the story of the prodigal son. He was a young man who squandered his inheritance on loose living until finally he was relegated to eating what the pigs refused to eat. When the son came to his senses, he determined to return to his father's home. He was prepared to confess that he had squandered everything, and he was willing to assume a much lesser status of servant in return for being allowed to come back home. The son was willing to acknowledge his reckless living. He was ready to confess to his father. It is in story form an accurate picture of what David paints as a person who recognizes how sin has wrecked his life.

And so is the response of the father in the parable a powerful reminder of the way that God meets us in the confession of our sin. For Luke tells us that even while the prodigal son "was still a long way off, the father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."³ Instead of locking the door and telling the son, "Sorry, you had your chance, now go away," the father ran out and embraced the young man and restored him as his own son in his home.

The word "prodigal" has as its definition both profuse or wasteful, as well as lavish or luxuriant. And so the parable of the son's prodigal life of sin is also the story of the father's prodigal forgiveness and love.

Confession is good for the soul, because it restores us into a right relationship with God. Confession is good for the soul, because by it we move from "hiding from" God, to "hiding in" God: "You are my hiding place," says David, "You always fill my heart with songs of deliverance."⁴ It is through confession and forgiveness that we cease to run away from God and now walk with God.

Confession is good for the soul.

Indeed, blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered! Blessed are they whose sin the Lord does not count against them! Amen.

³ Luke 15:20

⁴ Psalm 32:7