“The Sacred Act of Confession”

Acts 19:11-20

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He drops the Bible twice before she is through confessing. She walks out of the confessional booth, with a satisfied look on her face. Madonna, playing Mae Mordabito in the movie A League of Her Own, gave that priest quite a shock. She must have had a doozy of a confession. She and her fellow baseball players are traveling for an away game and decide to stop by a Catholic church. They of course pray for wins in the next series of the season. But they also find themselves in need of confessing all of the various things they’ve done while traveling and playing professional baseball. This is one of my favorite confessional scenes portrayed in a movie. I giggle every time Rosie O’Donnell’s character reacts to Madonna’s confessional experience. The mortified look on her face and the priest’s face.

The confessional booth is one of Hollywood’s favorite tools for a comedic scene. Movies often portray a priest, sitting behind that latticed barrier. A sinner walks in and spills the beans on all they’ve done wrong. There is something hugely intimate about a person confessing their deepest darkest secrets. Lifting a burden off their chest. Asking the priest for intercession. Receiving an assignment of penance in response. A couple of “Our Fathers” and few “Hail Marys” and they are on their way.

These scenes can be rather funny, but they also make me thankful that in our tradition, we don’t practice confession in this manner. I have to admit, I don’t want to hear the personal confessions of parishioners. I would rather be blissfully ignorant!

Our practice of confession looks very different than the Catholic way. The way that our tradition used to do before the Reformation.

The first thing to note is that we don’t consider confession a sacrament. We have demoted it from sacrament to just an important act. A sacred movement in our faith, just like confirmation, which we talked about last week. We don’t find anywhere in Scripture where Christ institutes confession, and so we Protestants knock it down a rank in importance.

Another thing to note about the way we do confession, is that we don’t have church members confess to a priest or a pastor. Like I said before, I am thankful for this! In our Protestant way of doing things, we view Christ as our priest. Therefore we don’t need anyone to mediate or intercede on our behalf. We don’t have to confess to a person and have that person relay the message to God. Because we believe Christ takes care of that step for us. Christ is the bridge between us and God. And because Christ entered this world, we have a direct connection to God. We don’t need someone to pray on our behalf or read the Bible on our behalf or confess sins on our behalf. We can talk to God directly.

So confession for us looks quite a bit different than it does for our Catholic brothers and sisters.

Of the 7 sacred acts that we are looking at this summer, confession is the one that we do most often. Every Sunday, actually. For those who didn’t grow up Presbyterian, this part of Sunday morning worship may seem a bit odd. It may have taken some time to get used to.

Each Sunday, worship goers are at the mercy of the words printed in the bulletin. I will tell you that I vacillate between writing a confession related to the sermon I preach, and using a standard confession found in the Book of Common Worship. It all depends on the week. Either way, you pick up your bulletin, you see those words in bold and during the appropriate time in the service, we all say those words together. Whether or not they seem to apply to you directly. Whether or not they make sense to your particular situation. We say those words together. A corporate prayer of confession. Speaking aloud so that God and each of us can hear.

You might not connect with this prayer every week. Some weeks it may seem weird to say these words of confession aloud. But that’s the nature of corporate confession. We say these words together, regardless of whether they apply to us individually or not. Because they do speak to us as a whole. As a church, as a community as a society. We recognize that we share a common life and therefore need to recognize the sin that we commit as individuals and as a whole. These words speak of sin on a bigger level than just the individual churchgoer. When we say these words, we acknowledge the sin that is rampant in our world. The brokenness that continues to ravage society. We recognize that we are a mess, in need of God’s grace.

For the people in our Scripture lesson this morning, corporate confession was necessary for wholeness.

This is a bit of a weird story, which is why I selected it. You won’t find it in the lectionary schedule, so it is rarely preached on. It is a bizarre scene with evil spirits and magical practices.

Paul has been on his missionary journey, spreading the Gospel, and finds himself in Ephesus. He is making waves in the region and many are coming to follow Christ because of his ministry. This happens to be a region where practicing magic is commonplace. We see elsewhere in the Gospels, where Jesus dismisses this practice and doesn’t make a big deal about it.[[1]](#footnote-1) So long as the ones practicing the magic are doing it for good and not harm. The problem with these practitioners of magic, is that they are claiming to do it in the name of Jesus. This poses a major threat to Paul and his ministry, because he truly is working miracles in the name of Jesus. These false prophets might just undo all of the work Paul is striving for.

Paul is a bit taken aback when he encounters these seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish high priest. These sons are taking it upon themselves to try an exorcise demons by using the name of Jesus and Paul. They are phony prophets and the evil spirits know it. They don’t respond to counterfeit preachers. The sons of Sceva fail to drive out the demons. Instead they were driven out by the spirits.

The reaction of the Ephesians is remarkable. They see what happens when someone tries to perform an act in the name of Jesus, without being an authentic representative of Jesus. They saw these false prophets overcome by the evil spirits. They were shown what happens when ones vocation is grounded in sin.

And so what comes next is a spiritual renewal. There were many people there who had converted to Christianity, but continued to practice this magic. This scene with the sons of Sceva showed them the error of their ways, and they confessed their wrongdoing, seeking repentance and forgiveness.

The beauty of this passage is its portrayal of a people being transformed by the experience of confession. They have a mirror placed in front of their faces, when the sons of Sceva are overcome by the spirits. They see the error of their own ways, because they too have been performing this magic while claiming to follow Christ. What follows is a corporate confession. A slew of people coming forward, confessing their wrongs and repenting of their sin.

Sometimes it takes an experience outside of ourselves to recognize the sin within ourselves. It may be witnessing someone else committing the same sin, like those folks in Ephesus. Or it may be words in a bulletin. A corporate prayer of confession making a truthful claim about the reality we live in. We are given a mirror and shown the errors of our way. Sometimes it takes saying a prayer out loud, in the safety of our sanctuary, to recognize sin in ourselves.

This can be an uncomfortable or even awkward experience.

But it’s one of the things I love about being Presbyterian. We don’t shy away from naming and claiming the wrongs we do and the sin we commit. While the secular world preaches of a Gospel of self-centeredness. We in the church aren’t afraid to call ourselves and each other out on our brokenness. We recognize the truth of our world that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Each Sunday we gather in this place. Broken people in need of God’s healing grace. We don’t come to church because we’ve got it all together. Perfection is not a requirement for entry into this place. Trying to get your life in perfect order before coming to church is as silly as tidying up your house before the maid comes to clean. We walk through those doors with all our baggage. When we reach that point in the service where we confess our sin to God, we lay that baggage before our Lord, seeking forgiveness and healing.

The good news of the Gospel is that when we confess our sin, we are forgiven. It’s as simple as that. There’s no complicated ritual involved. No penance needs to be done. It is as simple as saying the words to God and each other, and opening our hearts for God’s grace to pour in.

When we hear those words of assurance. A pardon of our sin. We can believe them. We can trust that we are indeed forgiven, no matter how much we think we don’t deserve it. God’s grace is so overwhelming, it clears away our brokenness and makes the way for right living.

Thanks be to God we have this opportunity each week to confess as a group. To come before God and be healed and forgiven. Thanks be to God we receive that abounding grace and love. Thanks be to God, our old lives are gone and new life is found. Amen.

1. Luke 9:49-50, Matt. 7:21-23 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)