

“The Two Sides of Confession”

One of the best products of a good vacation, in my opinion, is the reminder that the world keeps on spinning even without me. Many of us, and I certainly include myself in the mix, have a tendency to create a picture of the world that relies heavily on what we do. After all, it's good to feel needed. But the truth is that no matter how important we are, the world will, in fact, keep on going with or without us. This can be deflating for our egos. But it can also be a refreshing thought if we allow it to be.

Another benefit of vacation is the ability to adjust your schedule. I never would have been able to stay up late enough to watch Michael Phelps race if I were expected to be on the job and functioning the next morning. How wonderful to be able to watch such a tremendous athletic feat happen as it happened all the way on the other side of the world. But there is something that bothers me about the Olympics and athletics in general and that is when they interview the athletes right after their competition. It doesn't make much sense to me to question them then. What can the interviewer ask that might add to the moment? And how, given the fact that the athlete has just performed physically, can we expect a coherent answer from the one being interviewed? Which is perhaps why clichés prevail in such situations: Can you tell us how you are feeling? I am speechless. Words can't describe the feeling. What do you have to say to your fans and supporters? Thanks for believing in me. Remember if you can dream it, you can do it. Don't let anyone hold you down. You can do anything you put your mind to.

This last train of thought irks me to no end, because in fact, we cannot do anything we put our mind to nor can we accomplish all our dreams. I am never going to be a professional basketball player. I could train and give it everything I have. It's just not going to happen, for obvious reasons. When I was in the 9th grade I told my mother I wanted to try out for the football team. She took me for a physical. My mother told the doctor of my plan to play football and asked for his thoughts. He advised against it. I was 5'1" and barely a hundred pounds. That was good advice!

You and I cannot be anyone we want or do anything we can dream. All we can do is be ourselves and for most of us that means being very limited beings. That is one of the reasons people like Michael Phelps inspire us. Because he seems inhuman in the pool, but put him on the basketball court with Michael Jordan or the golf course with Tiger Woods and I bet he'd start looking much more down to earth. We all have our limitations. None of us are perfect.

And the good news in terms of our faith is that we are not expected to be. Every time we gather here to worship, we remind ourselves of this. You see, in our tradition, the prayer of confession, or confession of sin as it is sometimes called, is not so much about confessing our own personal sins, although that certainly is part of the deal, as it is about confessing who we are and who we are not. It is that regular and much needed reminder that we are not God. We cannot do anything we set our minds to. In fact, a lot of the time we cannot even seem to get the easy stuff right...and in a sense, that is okay. In this way, our confession has a similar function to a good vacation; it gives us proper perspective on ourselves.

In some traditions confession is done privately, and is more a listing of what one has done wrong. In our tradition, we make our confession corporately, publicly, again emphasizing identity over conduct. It is not about grading ourselves on a scale of sinfulness. It is about reminding ourselves of who we are. In Romans Paul writes, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." So the point is not so much, I have committed this wrong act or that one, or you are a bigger sinner than I am, as it is I am an imperfect, flawed, limited human being, just like the rest of us.

There is another side to confession. Once we confess that we are not God we must then confess who or what we believe is God. That is the side of confession that we find in today's Gospel lesson where Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" Now when he first asks this it is not completely clear whether or not he is referring to himself. But after the disciples reply to his first question, Jesus follows it with another, making it clear that he is talking about himself: But who do you say that I am? One commentator quips that it is too bad scripture is not written like a musical score, indicating pauses. It would be interesting to find out how long before Peter, who was always the first to break the silence, answered. There must have been a significant pause, especially if Matthew, the Gospel writer, had any sense of drama, for Peter's answer is the very climax to which the Gospel has been building: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Wow! Finally, someone said it. They had been discussing in hushed voices for some time. Could he be? What do you think? Dare we ask? So when Peter finally blurts it out, everyone let out a huge sigh of relief. Finally, they were talking about the elephant in the room. But the sense of relief would be short lived.

Jesus says to Peter, “Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” Poor Peter. Here he had the courage to say what was on everyone’s minds, to risk sharing what he believed, and Peter doesn’t even get credit for his confession. Jesus essentially says, “There is no way you would have known that unless God revealed it to you.” Apparently, just as there is a possibility to think of the one side of confession, that is confession of sin, in terms of spiritual demerits. There is an equal possibility on the other side, that we might start patting ourselves on the back for making a confession of faith. What we learn from this passage is that, as another commentator puts it, “Faith is not a gold medal in the spiritual high jump...to come to faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God, is finally to relinquish any sense of merit in having done so” (Tom Long, Matthew, Westminster John Knox, p. 185.)

This confession business can be frustrating stuff. To be sure, there is something in each of us that resists it. “I am a good person. I try hard to be kind. I strive to make good decisions. Why, when I come to church, do I have to confess things that I didn’t do? Why should I be made to feel bad about myself?” These are understandable thoughts and feelings that many of us have experienced. But, in actuality, the goal of the practice of confessing our sin is not to make us feel guilty. It is to remind us of who we are; that we are not perfect, nor are we expected to be. On the flip side, we are asked to acknowledge a reality that is bigger than us, to confess to something that has not necessarily come to us through our own efforts, but has been graciously revealed and handed down to us. This is the ultimate step of faith.

One theologian characterizes the Christian faith much in the way those disciples must have felt just before Peter's confession. Could it be true? Wouldn't that just be the most amazing thing ever? Wouldn't it be magnificent? Can we find the courage to let ourselves believe it, to not only confess it with our lips but dedicate our lives to it, knowing that, in the end, we may be the biggest fools of all? But just imagine, oh, if it's true!

One of the major hurdles I faced in my preparation for ministry was this idea of confession. I didn't see how I could ever, with full sincerity, say that I actually believed all the things that I thought I was being asked to say I believed. I mean there is so much more than confessing Christ. We Presbyterians have a whole book filled with Confessions, many of which I disagree with on key points. (It also seemed to me that they didn't fully coincide with one another if you really paid attention, but that was another issue.) Slowly, and through the help of teachers, mentors and pastors, I realized that it wasn't about my intellectual assent to each and every point of doctrine, rather it was about accepting this tradition as an authority in my life and in my own faith journey; listening, considering, and yes even arguing with its witness.

There is a powerful story about a retired pastor whose wife died the Saturday before Easter. She went quick. She felt sick in the morning and was gone by late afternoon. The next day, out of habit more than anything, this pastor who had just lost his wife found himself in church on Easter Sunday, with the flowers, brass instruments, full choir, all celebrating the resurrection. And although he had been a Christian his whole life and a minister for decades, the words of the Easter hymns

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You see, the mistake we often make is thinking that it's all about us; that we are needed, that the world just won't do without us, that we are expected to do this or believe that. Faith is never primarily about us, but about that in which we are willing to place our ultimate trust. Do we put it in ourselves? Do we say things like, you can do anything you put your mind to, even though we know it's not true, that it just sounds nice and encouraging? Or do we dare to allow ourselves to confess a faith that is so wonderful we can't possibly believe it all the time; that it's not about us after all, but about a God who cannot be known, only revealed, a God who loves at all time and in all circumstances, a God to whom we all belong?

Let us pray: We may forget you from time to time, O God. We may paint a picture of the world with too much of us and too little of you. We may encounter experiences which seem to be in conflict with our faith. *But you never forget or forsake us.* In gratitude for all the ways you have revealed your love to us, may we not only know ourselves as benefactors of your love, but as those who following in the way of Jesus, are willing to put our beliefs on the line in lives of devotion and discipleship. May it be so. Amen.

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