

Six Words: Confession

Sermon Series: “Six Faith Words That Aren’t So Bad”

[Psalm 32:1-5](#); [James 5:13-20](#)

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We charge ahead with our Lenten sermon series, “Six Faith Words That Aren’t So Bad.” Our second word is “Confession.”

Last week, our word was “Sin,” and some of you asked if Todd and I flipped a coin to determine who would preach on that term, and I lost. But the truth is, I’m really excited to talk about these difficult concepts. I think it’s important for us, as a community of faith, to wrestle with our tradition in this way.

Plus, sin is something I am familiar with—obviously!—but I have to say, I feel less fluent when it comes to speaking of confession.

For one thing, I imagine there’s a great diversity of experiences and understandings of confession in our pews. Some of you grew up Roman Catholic, where individual confession is considered a sacrament, and maybe you had the experience of visiting a private confessional booth and receiving absolution, forgiveness from a priest.

Many others of you grew up in the Protestant tradition, which rejected the idea that a priest could be a mediator between people and God. From the historical Protestant perspective, absolution is God's alone to give. So Protestant churches moved away from individual confession and toward corporate confession in worship, when the gathered body joins together in speaking about our common sins, sometimes with an opportunity for private prayer.

The UCC church in which I grew up had a moment of confession and assurance of forgiveness every week. Other UCC churches, including ours, only include confession during special seasons, like Lent or perhaps Advent. There also Protestant churches, many of them UCC, that avoid ritual confession altogether.

So I'm mindful of our blended Catholic and Protestant backgrounds here. And of course also mindful of the many people here who grew up without a religious tradition, who are just exploring what it means to be part of a faith community.

My point is, we all bring these images of confession to the table, and our associations may be positive or negative or mixed. I ran into a First UCCer at coffee shop while writing this sermon, a former Catholic. I asked her what she thought of when she heard the word *confession*. "Dread," she said without hesitation. Then she went on to

say that she knows other Catholics find it freeing. We're a mixed bag, here.

And that's a good thing, I think. Because I don't think we all need to agree on what, exactly, confession means in order to worship together. Let's set aside confession as a ritual, for a second, and think instead about confession as a way of being. Last week, I talked about sin less as a set of specific behaviors and more as a reality of the human condition. Confession is another such reality, I think.

I would be shocked if no one here has experienced profound regret. I would be shocked if no one here has inflicted harm and wished they could turn back time and change their actions. I would be shocked if no one here has resisted telling an ugly truth about themselves, terrified of the consequences.

You know that feeling? When shame and guilt build up inside you?

The writer of Psalm 32 knows it well.

*While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.*

*For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.*

Psalm 32 is traditionally attributed to King David, who was God's beloved, and, let's face it, a bit of a rascal. As the Anglican priest Mimsy Jones put it, "If ever a man was fully alive, it was King David, with all the good and bad that implies." It's easy to see why ancient people would've been moved by this Psalm. Here is an exalted King, anointed by God, admitting to a very common experience to which no one is immune: the experience of secrecy and guilt.

And if there's one point this Psalm wants to make, it's that it isn't good to keep secrecy and guilt bottled up forever. It's bad for our spiritual and mental and physical health.

But does that mean that we should all go around confessing our deepest secrets to anyone who will listen? I don't think so. We need a proper container for our most intense feelings. We need boundaries in which to unburden ourselves, or, I think, we just end up feeling more scared and out-of-control.

Here's an example of someone seeking a container for their confession.

Bill Poehlmann pointed me to this story about one of my favorite writers, Charlotte Brontë. In 1842, at age 26, before the publication of

Jane Eyre, Charlotte persuaded her father to allow her and her sister Emily to travel from the English moors to Belgium to gain fluency in French. In Brussels, Charlotte fell in love with her married tutor, Constantin Heger.

We do not know the extent to which Heger returned these feelings; but copies of several letters from Charlotte to Heger have survived, and they are painful to read. Charlotte is vulnerable, exposed, depressed, full of frustrated longing. And my heart really breaks, picturing her: an undiscovered genius, a woman in a patriarchal society, experiencing her first taste of independence and love. And the object of her affection is unavailable and inappropriate. And Charlotte is carrying around this huge, heavy, shameful secret.

What did she do? Well, while wandering sadly one night through the streets of Brussels, she went to the local Catholic parish and sought out the confessional booth.

This might not sound remarkable, until you recall that Charlotte was the daughter of an Irish Anglican priest, and as such, she was raised in a vehemently anti-Catholic environment. She would've seen Catholic rites, including confession, as superstitious fantasies, interferences in the relationship between people and God.

But *something* drew Charlotte into that booth that night. And, according to a letter she wrote to her sister Emily, she made a “real confession.” We don’t know the content of that confession, but we can imagine. And no matter what Charlotte Brontë said, I think there’s something powerful here: sometimes, our human desire to connect, to tell the truth about ourselves, is so powerful that being honest with God isn’t enough.

Sometimes we have to be honest with other people. Or perhaps it is through honesty with other people that we finally feel a sense of God’s grace.

So what does that mean for us? I don’t think it means that we need to install a confession booth over by the piano. But I do think we’re called to look at our own culture around confession. Do we have the kind of space where people can bring their full selves? Have we created moments where we can be honest, even about really difficult things? How can we show each other that our confessions will be received with generosity and grace?

Because no matter the content of our confessions, I think we’re all scared of rejection. We’re all scared that once people see our “real selves” they won’t like us anymore. We all want assurance that even if we mess up, even if we are less-than-perfect, we still have place here.

In the Epistle of James, a letter to early Jewish Christian communities the writer says this:

My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

This sounds harsh and judgmental, but maybe it simply means this: that often, we forget the truth of God's love, that nothing can separate us from it. And so we wander away, swept up in our own cycles of shame and regret. And it's the role of community to bring our people back. To say, clearly, "I see you. Not the Facebook version of you, or you on your very best day, but the full you. And you have a place at this table, right next to me."

During this season of Lent, we're inviting you to practice a type of confession. It's entirely voluntary. The Six-Word Memoir Project is something that I first experienced when I lived in Minneapolis. It's a chance to express the story of your life in only six words. It sounds like an impossible task, but sometimes, when we're forced to limit ourselves, we're able to focus on what's most important. And we'd love to hear your Six-Word Spiritual Memoir. In six words, tell us about

your relationship with God. Your struggles. Your questions. Your joys. Your gratuities. See if you can distill your experience of the holy down to just six words—a sentence, a statement, a question, a prayer, a list, whatever. You can share your memoir—anononously, if you prefer—at the station in the Assembly Room or online. There will be a link to the form in next week's Chronicle.

We'll display the memoirs during Holy Week, that week when we follow Jesus on his steps toward the cross. I can't think of a better time to reveal our stories to one another, to learn from each other, to be one another's confessors on this mysterious journey of faith we take together.

Amen.