

Sermon on Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2010
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

“So what are you in for now?” said the principal to the boy fidgeting in his office. “Oh, good, the principal doesn’t know what I’ve done, or why the teacher sent me!” the boy thought. Now I can negotiate my fate, at a lesser charge. So he asked the principal, “What did the teacher say on my pink slip?” “Only that there was a mishap with ink in your classroom, for which you were responsible.”

“Oh, that. I admit that I spilled a bottle of black ink on the floor under my desk. I’m sorry that I was careless. But it was an accident, I assure you!” (The boy neglected to divulge that he had also dipped the ponytail of the girl in front of him into this same ink bottle, which had made her turn her head quickly, spilling the ink onto the floor. He was glad to admit to the lesser charge!) “Well, don’t let it happen again. We don’t have unlimited resources for purchasing bottles of ink!” the principal admonished him. “Oh, yes sir, I promise – next time I’ll be more careful!” the boy said with a sigh of relief, and returned to the classroom.

Confession. Classic authors have said that “confession is good for the soul.” That confessing our sins before God, or admitting our wrong doing to another human being can be good for us. Some may call it therapeutic, helping us to let go of our guilt. But too often we treat confession like a trip to the principal’s office. We go in hoping to bargain with God over our level of guilt, hoping God doesn’t see into our heart’s intent to do wrong, ready to rationalize or make excuses. Then our confession is false; it has no meaning, and does no good for us or the person we may need to confess to.

It can be hard to say “I’m sorry.” It’s hard to admit we have willingly wronged another person, or did something hurtful, intentionally or otherwise. Most of us would rather avoid admitting guilt or making a confession if at all possible. But confession is absolutely necessary sometimes to mend our relationships, and learning to say “I’m sorry” is part of becoming an adult human being. That’s why it is so important for us to teach our children how to say “I’m sorry”. And for you and I to say “I’m sorry” to our loved ones when we have done wrong, as well as make confession to our Lord.

So confession has been part of the life of the Church from the beginning. Repentance for the forgiveness of sins was the original gospel preached by John the Baptist, and it was the good news preached by Jesus when he emerged in Galilee. Confession is how we customarily begin our service of holy communion, and the corporate confession of our sins is central to our worship tonight. We may even begin our day of penitence by fasting, to focus our bodies and our minds.

So what does Martin Luther say about “confession”? Contrary to popular Lutheran belief in previous generations, Luther did NOT do away with confession. In fact, Luther saw the great value in confessing our sins to God, as well as private individual confession to a pastor or priest, to receive the gift of God’s mercy. He was opposed to what human beings have too often made of confession: a ritual one had to go through weekly before going to Mass and receiving communion. Too often it was done out of “obligation”, simply done by rote. The priest might assign acts of penance to perform, which could make the penitent think they were atoning for their sins or “earning” their forgiveness (when God’s forgiveness is a free gift!). Or priests might withhold absolution, leaving the confessing person burdened with guilt, barred from the mass. The requirements for absolution too often became oppressive, a way for the hierarchy of the Church to control the faithful. So the gift of confession and forgiveness had become a burden.

So Martin Luther sought to return confession and forgiveness to its rightful place as a gift to the Church and to Christians. In the *Small Catechism* Luther defines confession, what it is for and what it does. First, he asks, “*what is confession?* Confession consists of two parts. One is that we confess our sins. The other is that we receive the absolution, that is, forgiveness, from the pastor as from God himself and by no means doubt but firmly believe that our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven.”

Which sins is a person to confess? Luther says that “before God one is to acknowledge the guilt for all sins, even those of which we are not aware, as we do in the Lord’s Prayer. However, before the pastor we are to confess only those sins of which we are aware and which trouble us.”

Which sins are these? Here Luther reminds us to “reflect on your place in life in light of the Ten Commandments: whether you are father, mother, son, daughter, employer, employee; whether you have been disobedient, unfaithful, lazy; whether you have harmed anyone by word or deed; whether you have stolen, neglected, wasted, or injured anything.”

Today, on Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Lenten season, we focus on the disciplines of Lent which help remind us of our need for repentance and God’s promise of forgiveness. Self-examination, repentance, prayer and fasting, sacrificial giving and works of love are actions we take which help remind us of our Christian calling, and return us to the path of following Jesus. In our corporate confession of sin today [tonight], we speak the words that remind us how we have not loved God with our whole heart or our neighbors as ourselves; that we have neglected God’s call to serve Jesus Christ; that we have been unfaithful, prideful, envious, hypocritical and apathetic in our lives; that we have been self-indulgent and exploited other people; that we have neglected worship and prayer, and the sharing of our faith with others; that we have neglected human need and suffering;

that we have judged our neighbors harshly and held prejudice and contempt toward others; that we have been wasteful and polluted God's creation. It's a complete list of our failure to measure up to the promises we have made to follow Jesus in the ways of God – and all these things we are invited to confess before God.

And on this day of penitence, we are invited to receive the mark of our mortality as ashes are drawn on our foreheads, with the words reminding us that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust....But in baptism, we have the promise of forgiveness of sins, life and salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

But we also need to recognize that confession is never just private. Confession always involves at least one other person, the one hearing the confession, whether it be a human being or God. Confession is a first step in returning our relationships to wholeness, when they have been broken by sin. Then the response of forgiveness brings closure and healing, restoring us to a right relationship once more.

The prophet Isaiah also reminds us that sometimes a whole community or people need to confess. Isaiah reminded the people of Israel that making ritual confession did not negate their need to act with justice in their communities. Making a spiritual fast does nothing to heal the injustices that occur in our world today. Fasting and saying "I'm sorry" are insufficient when too many people are hungry or homeless, unemployed or without health care. The true fast that God chooses is to share our bread with the hungry, clothe the naked, and shelter the homeless; it is to work for. So our calling as Christians is not to leave our confession at the altar or in the pastor's study, but to take it out into the world with renewed energy and faith to glorify God by serving others, and working for justice. May God make our Lenten fast and our confession true this day [night], by leading us to greater witness in our community, by showing God's love through our words and deeds of love for our neighbors and for one another. By doing God's work of mercy with our hands. May God bless you in your journey of faith this Lenten season, and may all our thoughts, words, and deeds show the loving mercy of God for all the world. Amen.