

Sermon for Sunday, September 19, 2010
Delivered by Rev. Judith Watt

Part of a Four-Part Series on Worship, Worthship, and Work of the People

Isaiah 53: 6-9
Acts 9: 3-6, 13-19

Confession

Jack, an avid golfer, came in from the golf course one Saturday. His wife, Maureen, asked him with whom he had played that day. He said, “Oh, no one in particular.”

She asked, “Why don’t you play with Bill anymore?”

Jack replied, “Would you like to play golf with someone who throws his clubs, swears all the time, lies about his scores, moves his ball in the rough and won’t stop talking while you’re trying to play a shot?”

“Well, no, of course not!” said Maureen.

Jack said, “Well, neither does Bill.”

I think Jack would have understood the scripture from Isaiah. “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way.” (Isaiah 53:6.) Jack had a sense of his own shortcomings, at least those related to his golf game, and he had a sense of how his shortcomings affected others around him. The act of confession is our attempt to admit our own shortcomings and sins and failures and struggles to stay on the right path, to stay on a path that is in God’s will or plan or desire for us.

This is the second of a four-part sermon series on worship. Because so many of you were away last week at a retreat in Saugatuck, I'm going to repeat some of what I explained last Sunday. The idea for this series came from a small chapel garden that exists on Garrett Evangelical Seminary's property in Evanston. At four places within the low lying hedge- boundary of that garden, there is a station, each one marked with a sign, like the one you see projected. Last week we focused on Vision, the first station in the chapel garden and this week we focus on Confession, the second station. The third is Renewal and the fourth is Dedication.

Vision, Confession, Renewal and Dedication are four significant signposts or stopping places or important blips on the spiritual journey and they are also four aspects of worship. They aren't the only aspects of worship but they are significant aspects of worship and aspects of the spiritual life. Our worship service each Sunday is constructed using roughly the same categories. Call to Worship or Vision at the beginning – a time to name blessings and allow ourselves to be lifted up into God's presence, to hope to glimpse God again. After that, Confession of Sin, because as we've allowed ourselves to be aware of God's presence, and the awe that comes with that, it becomes apparent that a gap exists between us and God – a gap – sin – failures. And so we confess. And it makes sense – because the closer we get to God and the more of a glimpse we get of God's wonder, the easier it is to see how far away we are from that. It's like looking in the mirror – the closer you get to the mirror, the bigger the blemish on your face becomes.

After confession, the hope is that there is renewal - a renewal that comes through hearing the Assurance of Pardon and continuing on to hear the scripture read and

proclaimed, the children's time, the music throughout. Hopefully, we are becoming whole again in that part of the service – restored, built up, strengthened. Renewal.

And finally, Dedication – committing ourselves to going out from this place once again – to live as best we can in the coming week as a follower of Jesus - to be a blessing, hopefully, to those who cross our paths, in our actions or with our generosity of giving, or in our compassion, or with our prayer lives, or with our fervent work in causes that are causes that align with God's vision for the world, or sometimes in our resistance, to ways that have been destructive. Each and every Sunday, every worship service is a mini-reenactment of the life of faith. Vision, Confession, Renewal, Dedication.

In the chapel garden, the sign for Confession, says, "*All we like sheep have gone astray, we have all turned to our own way.*" And under those words, there is a prayer from the Psalms. "*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.*"

The admission of failure and then the request for help from God. That is what confession is. The admission of failure and then the request for help from God.

The Old Testament concept of sin is more generalized and not so individualized as the New Testament's concept and especially not so individualized as today's thinking is. We are a people so focused on individualism, sometimes at the risk of neglecting to think about our actions as a community. Wouldn't it be something if nations had an attitude of confession or if political party leaders had an attitude of confession – admitting imperfection as a group and asking for help, and forgiveness.

When we come to the time of the Unison Prayer of Confession in our worship service, we're acknowledging that this world and our human lives are clouded by

sin – there’s smog that hangs around us. In traditional language, we come to the time of confession and admit our humanity’s fallenness, the tremendous gap that exists between the holiness of God and the reality of humanity.

. Whether we’re aware of our own sin or not, the effect of sin is that it clouds our potential, it hinders our actions, and it affects our daily living. And in the Unison Prayer of Confession we admit that we are all caught up in it.

So, the purpose of the Unison Prayer of Confession is not to get us “warmed up” for the time of silent confession. The Unison Prayer of Confession is a communal act in which we as the community of faith confess our corporate sin – our communal sin – the sin we all bear - our imperfection, our blindness as a people. The silent time of confession then, is our confession as individuals, children before God.

In my own Statement of Faith, which I was required to write in the process toward ordination, I wrote this about sin. *“God’s love and trust in us is shown in the freedom God has given us. We often choose to abuse that freedom and turn away from God. We grasp for power and control that is not ours, or we obscure the unique and powerful gifts God has given us to use. In either case, we are separated from God and from one another. Our separation causes us and all of creation to suffer. This is the nature of sin and evil. But, instead of discarding us as we sin, God aches to save us and continues to pursue us. Even God’s righteousness is an act of love and mercy.”* I wrote these words in September of 1993 and they still hold true for me – that God has made us free – that our freedom is often misused by us – in a gazillion different ways – but that God doesn’t discard us. Instead aches to save us and continues to pursue us. The fact that we have a time of confession built into a time of worship and praise speaks volumes to who God is

and to what we proclaim about God— a God who knows we sin – a God who invites us to confess our sins – a God who wants to save us – and offers salvation and forgiveness to us as we trust in Jesus Christ. Jesus’ words on the cross, moments before he took his last breath, were “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.”

The act of confession is a repeated experience of taking a position of getting down on our knees and admitting our helplessness and our need, admitting that we do go astray, and that we turn to our own way, forgetting God’s way. Most of the time we’re just plain scared of God’s way, because we have such control issues. And we keep running because we’re scared, but it’s like there’s a pebble in our shoe – a pebble that keeps making us aware that something isn’t quite right.

The really cool thing about this journey of faith is that God doesn’t wait until we are perfect to love us or to use us. The story of Saul’s conversion is that story. Saul, whose name after his conversion became Paul, had been a pain in the you know what – to God’s hopes and to the early disciples. He had been taking every opportunity to slam the church. He was out to murder the disciples. Out of the blue, he was struck to the ground in an experience of encounter with God asking him “Why are you persecuting me? Why are you acting this way? What are you doing, Saul?” Saul was struck helpless by the power of God.

Sometimes our own powerlessness is where God catches our attention. Because as we realize that we really have little control over a certain situation and when we realize our repeated tendency to screw up, that’s where we can’t do anything except turn to God – and God is there – waiting for us. The good news is that despite our weakness and our powerlessness and our sinfulness, God chooses to use us, if we desire to put our lives into

God's hands. To let go of the control and to ask God to take the wheel. When that happens, that's when scales fall from our eyes too – like they did from Saul's and we begin to see more clearly – to See god's love – to see our sin, but to see and trust that God keeps working with us.

In a book titled Lit, the memoir of recovery from addiction by Mary Karr, there is a scene she describes of her interaction with Jack, another recovering alcoholic and how he helped her see her need for God, and for confession or perhaps surrender. She says to him, “But *what if I don't believe in God?* It's like they've sat me in front of a mannequin and said, Fall in love with him. You can't will feeling.

What Jack says issues from some still, true place that could not be extinguished by all the schizophrenia his genetic code could muster. It sounds something like this:

Get on your knees and find some quiet space inside yourself, a little sunshine right about here. Jack holds his hands in a ball shape about midchest, saying Let go. *Surrender, Dorothy*, the witch wrote in the sky. *Surrender, Mary*.

I want to surrender but have no idea what that means.

He goes on with a level gaze and a steady tone: *Yield up what scares you. Yield up what makes you want to scream and cry. Enter into the quiet. It's a cathedral. It's an empty football stadium with all the lights on. And pray to be an instrument of peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is conflict, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope . . .”* (p.234)

The act of confession is our surrender – it is our yielding up to God all that makes us want to cry and scream – all that hinders us – all that seems like that annoying pebble inside our shoe. In the quiet of that surrender – there is a cathedral – an empty football

stadium with all the lights on – the loving arms of Jesus Christ – waiting to receive our sobs and our tears, our shame into his arms. He waits to assure us that his love for us is greater than any sin we are capable of committing and that with him at the wheel of our lives, we can live into a life that is better than we could have imagined, even if we don't have the first clue as to how that will be. Alleluia. Amen.