

Called to the Light

1 John 1:3-10
March 5, 2023

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson

In his book “Blue Like Jazzy”, Donald Miller offers an interesting perspective on confession. He tells of a festival on his college campus known for drunkenness, nakedness and drug use, and how one year, he and his friends went and set up a confessional booth. However, the booth was not a place for festivalgoers to confess their sins. Rather, it was a place to hear a confession from the Christians who ran the booth. They acknowledged and apologized for all of the church’s atrocities that stood against the message of Jesus Christ: The Crusades, televangelists, politicized religiosity, our neglect of the poor and marginalized in society. Unchurched festivalgoers came fully aware of these atrocities from church history, but they left with a newfound respect for the church, having been asked to forgive it for its sins. Yes, they left with respect, and curiosity, tears, appreciation and healing.¹

Confession is a power thing. And yet, how much time do we spend thinking about it? What is the purpose of confession when it comes to our faith? Does it have any place in the broader aspects of our lives?

First John suggests it does. “We declare to you in teaching about Christian confession, it says “what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. Here we see that confession brings us into fellowship with one another. And not only that, but fellowship with God and Jesus.

Wow! To think that our most important and sacred relationships hinge on something that we must admit we don’t spend a lot of time thinking about. That’s huge. The good news is the season of Lent is the perfect time to give more thought to what such truth-telling means to us and to our lives. And 1st John is a perfect guide to help us think it through. “This is the message we have heard from (the Lord) and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.”

If God is light or truth and in him there is no darkness or deception, this means in fellowship with God, we can’t be close to God in those areas of life where we practice deception, lying to ourselves and/or others.

To better understand this, think of that one thing about yourself that you are hiding from others. Can you think of something? OK. Now consider that whatever came to mind right then is actually God speaking to you. God is already aware of these things. So really, confession isn’t an information exchange; it’s a relational healing.

¹ On the Donald Miller confession booth: christianitytoday.com/1e/2005/003/4.62.html.

Coming to terms with our shortcomings – owning up to the ways we have not been faithful to Christ and honest with ourselves and others – this brings us closer to God.

And when we bring God into it, that's when we begin to see a better way. We think we have to hide these things from God and from others. We don't. That just gives these negative thoughts and actions more power.

As 1st John says, "If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." Think of it this way. When you were a kid, did you ever lie awake at night believing there were monsters under your bed or in the closet? Or do your kiddos have those fears today?

Well, two things are true of these nighttime monsters: They lose their power when Mom and Dad come into the room, and they lose their power when the lights get turned on.

In other words, when we are open to God about our shortcomings – our sinful ways – they lose their power and no longer control us. Brought into the light shining forth from God, they're just not as tempting or attractive or tolerable. And yet, the hard part is keeping that light shining in your life. These dark, monstrous thoughts and actions have a way of creeping back in when nobody else is around. But when we find the courage to tell another what we're wrestling with, that brings somebody else in, the lights get turned on, and the monster loses its power.

It's like the kids in a Catholic school going to confession. Since they often forget their sins after getting into the confessional booth, the teachers have the students make lists. One day, a boy sat down in the booth, unfolded his paper, and began his confession, saying, "I lied to my parents. I disobeyed my mom. I fought with my brothers and ...". Suddenly there was a long pause, followed by a small, angry voice. "Hey," said the boy, "this isn't my list!"

Yes, it's good and powerful to bring somebody else in, but to really shed light on the situation, you have to focus on yourself and not somebody else's shortcomings. Having Jesus in your life requires this type of self-examination and repentance. That's what leads to the new and more joyous life God wants for you. So, how can you step into the light of God and begin growing closer to the Lord and, in Christ, closer to the people in your life? How can we discover those dark and destructive things we need to focus on?

The first step is to realize that everyone sins, everyone stands before God in need of forgiveness and repentance. "If we say that we have no sin," says John, "we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." Everyone sins and falls short of who they'd like to be with God's help. So, it's OK to let someone know what we're struggling with. It not only restores our relationship with God, but it puts us back on common ground with other followers of Christ.

As 1st John says, “We are writing these things,” “so that our joy may be complete.” This shows us that Confession is a communal act, calling all to self-examination for the benefit of everyone in the community, everyone sharing in the faith. In the clearing, in the space that’s created by such forgiveness there arises a new place in which you can act and speak.

As you look forward to that place of new life, new possibility, ask yourself, who might you need to talk with about how you’ve been feeling and behaving lately? What do you need to be praying about when it comes to your fears and insecurities? Where are those places of darkness and discord in your life?

Take them to God in prayer. Be open to how God would shine light into the darkness. And then move forward boldly, in anticipation of the new relationships that await you – relationships that bring more joy, make you feel better about yourself and others, and leave you thanking God for his place in your heart.

Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Merciful Savior, God of redemption, salvation and restoration, we praise you that nothing is beyond your ability to use for your purposes.

You desire our holiness and wholeness. Even our mistakes, failures and regrets are fodder for good in your hands.

We ask your spirit of comfort and peace upon all who are grieving.

We ask your healing touch upon those dealing with illness and disease.

And for all of us, Lord, grant us vision and eternal hope to shape the living of our days to your will, for in all that we do, we belong to you.

For the sake of Christ we pray, saying together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**