

“If We Confess Our Sins...”

In the name of our crucified Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace.

“We have sinned against you by what we have done and by what we have left undone.”

The words of the Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness, that we used this morning, to begin our worship on this the First Sunday of Lent are old. They are classic. For centuries, Christians have offered up to God their brokenness and short-comings with these words, but the words have not been eroded by the rivers of prayer or the tides of the passing years. The sentences stay sharp. They cut through layers of self-deception and false security. They slice open the veils we draw across our failures. They probe the places where we hurt and where we have hurt others.

“We have sinned against you by what we have done and what we have left undone.”

Other traditional prayers may strike us now as being archaic, museum pieces of our Christian heritage, but these words are timeless. The day has not dawned to which they do not speak. They are appropriate to every age, every occasion, every person.

The words are magnificently democratic, overcoming every distinction of class, race, gender and even religion. They express the human situation of every man and every woman, saints and sinners, wise and foolish, great and small, rich and poor, young and old, married and divorced, widowed and never married, gay and straight. The best and the worst of us are cemented together in pained solidarity by this prayer. If we heard more than the words, if we could only hear the inner reverberations stirred by this prayer, we might even be moved to treat one another with the gentleness and patience we all need so badly.

“We have sinned against you by what we have done and what we have left undone.”

The words are ingeniously practical and undoubtedly fitting, but we do not pray such words because they have somehow occurred to us. People protest that Christianity is an insidious religion, one that teaches guilt and nurses inferiority feelings by precisely such exercises as prayers of confession and Lenten disciplines. Christians take advantage of the worst of human life, they say, and tame people into submission by creating a sense of guilt and sin that only the church can cure.

These accusations are pointed and certainly ours would be the sickest sort of religion if all we were doing were merely looking at ourselves and deciding that we are a pretty scary lot. And, yes, this season called Lent, which we are now in is a season of repentance and repair and restoration, but Lent does not summon us simply to examine our lives. Rather, Lent calls upon us to examine our lives in the light of God's life and God's hope for us.

To begin to know God is to know something also about ourselves. John Calvin, a contemporary of Martin Luther and the father of the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition wrote this at the beginning of his master work entitled “Institutes.” “Without knowledge of God, there is no knowledge of self.”

When we come to know God even slightly we know also how much in us is unlike God. When we glimpse even for an instant what God hopes for us, what can we do but say something like: “We have sinned against you by what we have done and by what we have left undone.”

When we were young we were brought to Sunday School and Mrs. Jones played the piano and taught us the words: "Jesus loves me, this I know." But if we know, we forgot." We misplaced that vision of someone who loved us not matter what. We acted as if no one loved us or cared about us at all.

We stood in the midst of the congregation on our Confirmation Day and we announced that we wanted to follow Jesus, to be his disciples, that all our trust was in Christ. And now, to think back on that moment – the hopes, the ideals, the promises. Did we mean what we said?

We faced each other, hand in hand, and with our hearts in our throats and "before God and these witnesses" promised to love and cherish "in plenty and in want, in joy, and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live." And as long as we shall live, and as long as there are people willing to make daring promises like these, we shall also seek out words with which to ask for forgiveness.

One day we come to church with all our love and hopes wrapped in a soft blanket and white gown and promise to love and protect this tiny child, to teach her of God's love, to be an example to him or her of Christian grace. Is there not a parent in this room who hasn't stood in a darkened doorway of their young child or teenager sleeping and not thought something like: "We have sinned against you by what we have done and by what we have left undone."

The words are troubling and disenchanting. This is not the way we usually talk. This is not the way we customarily think about ourselves. Much more familiar to us are the excuses we make for ourselves. "We're only human," we say as if we are brushing lint off the sleeve of a suit. "I do the best I can," smoothing the wrinkles on a skirt.

But the words of the Order for Confession probe beneath the surface, reminding us that by no means do we do the best we can. And as for being "only human," well, isn't that precisely the problem? So much of what "we have left undone" are exactly those things that would qualify us for being human. So much of what "we have done" is what calls our humanity and humanness into question.

It is a disturbing thought. So disturbing is it that many modern and forward thinking churches are just too busy to schedule Lent on their frantic social calendars, let alone individuals doing it. Some churches have begun omitting the Order for Confession from the worship services all the time. It is just so negative, they say, better to think positively.

But how are we going to think positively or even think well of ourselves until we have come to terms with the simple, honest fact that much of what we do and have done is negative and we know it? Much as we would like to avoid it. "We have sinned against you by what we have done and by what we have left undone."

Here John's word from his first letter encourages us. You said these words today as well. "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Now to say, "We deceive ourselves," doesn't sound all that momentous, "Oh, he's just a little self-deceived," we might say, nothing really serious. But in the vocabulary of John's church, "deception" is serious indeed. Deception, you see, is the opposite of truth. "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free," says John in John's Gospel. "The truth shall set you free, but deception enslaves." "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."

But there is a way toward the truth. "If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our

sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” The way forward does not consist merely in turning our backs on what we have done and left undone but begins with a solemn accounting.” “We have sinned against you by what we have done and by what we have left undone.”

With these words we begin to take ourselves seriously. We embrace the high dignity of standing before God as women and men. To confess our sins is not grovelling in the dust. Rather, we take the responsibility of speaking for ourselves, refusing all these self-deceptive comforts that suggest we really aren’t responsible for what we do. We strip away the crazy illusion that we are only passive victims. Standing before the God who is Truth we come to know the difference between saying: “Mistakes were made” and “I made mistakes.”

One last thought. The Hasidic Rabbis of Eastern Europe, were great story tellers. One of their stories had to do with Adam and Eve who were cast out of the Garden of Eden because of their disobeying God, because of their sin. As the story goes, God ached when that happened, when God saw the brokenness of creation. So as the man and the woman left the garden, never to return again, God bent down and whispered to them a secret. God did not share with them the secret of how to begin life – no, the mystery of how to begin life is God’s alone to know. God alone is the giver of life. God did not share the mystery of how to begin, but God whispered to the man and the woman the secret of how to begin again.

My brothers and sisters in faith. You won’t find that story in the first chapter of Genesis. You won’t find it anywhere in the Bible. And, yet, the whole Bible is animated by the secret of how to begin again. John writes: “But if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” In exactly this way we are freed to begin again. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. AMEN.