

**Sermon - Lent 4, Year B**  
**3/10/24**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sometimes people are surprised to discover that the Episcopal Church offers a rite of confession. We confess together each Sunday in our liturgies, recalling the things we have done and left undone and asking forgiveness of God, but in the *Book of Common Prayer*, on page 447, you'll find a few pages dedicated to the Reconciliation of a Penitent. For two years, I received confessions twice a week, every single week, in every season of the liturgical year. There were no dimly lit confession booths or assignments of Hail Marys. I would sit up by the altar in a small chapel, and over the course of two hours or so, people from every walk of life imaginable would enter and kneel, one at a time, near the altar rail, and they would talk to me, but mostly to God.

In the Episcopal Church, the rite of reconciliation has nothing to do with some magical capacity on the part of the priest to forgive sins in any uniquely powerful way. It is about pronouncing the forgiveness of God. It is God who forgives: first and always. And it is the priest who says the words out loud.

Now, there are many faithful Episcopalians who say things like, "well, why would I do that? Can't I just confess my sins directly to God?" Yes, of course. We are encouraged to do this in the Bible. Confess your sins to God, turn your heart toward the light, and joyfully receive your forgiveness. This is a full and sufficient blessing.

But what surprised me about hearing confessions most of all was never the type or the number of sins. What surprised me was how many people needed to hear the forgiveness part out loud.

At the very end of the rite, the priest declares: “Now there is rejoicing in heaven; for you were lost, and are found; you were dead, and are now alive in Christ Jesus our Lord. Go in peace. The Lord has put away all your sins.” The Lord – not the priest – has put away all your sins, and you have been found again. You have come home again, recognizing that you were not so very far away after all. Sometimes we need to hear the forgiveness part out loud.

A part of the power of confession, whether to a priest or in community or in our own prayers, is that we are stepping into the light that Jesus speaks about in the Gospel of John this morning. Jesus says: “the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” When we confess the things we have done and left undone, we are bravely stepping out into the light, trusting that the One who is this light himself shines with a brightness that does not condemn us, but saves us.

In the desert, the Israelites complained against God and then begged Moses for relief as they began to die from the gaze of the poisonous serpents. The Lord told Moses to then make a serpent and set it upon a pole, and every poisoned person who looked upon it would be saved. In order for the poisoned person to live, they needed to look upon what should have killed them. They needed to fix their own eyes upon what should have brought them certain death. And only in beholding it, face to face, would life be restored again.

Confession of our sins is like this. When we confess, we look at what should have killed us – perhaps in body, perhaps in soul – and we see that we are, by grace, restored to life.

And so at its heart, the act of confessing our sins is about proclamation of the truth in two parts. The first truth that we must proclaim is that we sin at all. It can be awful to do this

sometimes, especially when we remember parts of our past or the ways that we have continued to disappoint ourselves. It is so much easier to try to forget them. Believe me, I have tried to do this – I have tried very hard to simply not remember certain ways I have hurt others, or myself, or God. But the whole of scripture – which tells us about the heart of God – all of it insists that we tell the truth, even about sin. Jesus tells us to be people who walk in the light, people who come before his mercy holding all of the broken pieces of our hearts.

The second truth is the marvelous part, but it can sometimes be just as difficult. If the first truth that we proclaim in confession is that we have stumbled, the second truth we proclaim is that we have been completely, joyfully forgiven by the grace of God. *“You were lost, and are found; you were dead, and are now alive in Christ Jesus our Lord. Go in peace. The Lord has put away all your sins.”* We have stepped into the light. We have looked, face to face, at what should have destroyed us, body and soul. And we have not perished, but received eternal life.

One of the most common things I heard while listening to confessions was disbelief in the magnitude of God’s mercy. It did not matter how large or small or brief or long-term a person’s vice had persisted, there was a common refrain: “Sure, God forgives, but probably not me.” “Sure, God forgives, but probably not this.” “Okay, maybe God forgives me, but I don’t deserve it. I don’t feel it. It’s probably not real.” I don’t have to tell anyone in this room how long and how powerful things like hurt, resentment, grief, or anger can persevere.

**Sometimes we need to hear the forgiveness part out loud.** We need to hear it from each other. Maybe we need to hear it from a priest. We certainly need to hear it from our own hearts. But whatever way we hear it, we do so because it is the constant song at the heart of Jesus Christ: “You are forgiven. Go in peace. The Lord has put away all your sins.” Jesus bids us to look upon the Cross – the thing that should have killed him – and live.

He calls us to step into the light. He invites us to gather every broken piece of our hearts and our lives and stand before that Cross with full knowledge that there is not a single thing it cannot repair.

And when this mercy is hard to believe – when this eternal life is hard to receive – say the forgiveness part out loud. Practice – truly – practice. Start right now. Gather some small resentment from the shadow of your heart, hold it up to the light, and ask Christ to heal it, especially when you cannot. Forgive your friends. Forgive your family members. Forgive yourself, and if that’s too painful for the moment right now, ask God to help you want to forgive. Even hoping for forgiveness is the beginning of knowing it to be true and real and good and fully, joyfully meant for you.

Jesus proclaims the forgiveness part out loud. “God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ-- by grace we have been saved-- and raised up with him and seated with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” Amen.