

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
September 6, 2009

***Summer Sermon Series – Credo: Living Truth***

**The Forgiveness of Sins**

Romans 5:6-11; Matthew 18:23-35

The mall in Colorado Springs is of the usual variety.  
The glitz and glamour of the gorgeous models on life-size posters;  
all the latest fashions,  
form fitted on rock-solid mannequin physiques,  
perfectly accented by carefully placed lighting,  
seducing shoppers into a purchasing frenzy  
that feeds their addiction to beauty.

Our culture's obsessive consumption of new clothing surely suggests  
we have something to cover up.

For all our sophistication,  
are we not just sewing together so many fig leaves,  
in a futile attempt to hide our shame?

A few old men in Colorado springs have figured this out.  
In a small office next door to the Burlington Coat Factory,  
priests from the Capuchin order  
have opened a little confessional.

Three friars in their simple brown habits  
man the confessional for 11 hours a day, six days a week,  
hearing about 8,000 confessions a year,  
an average of about 22 confession a day.

These friars were featured a couple of years ago,  
the Wall Street Journal ran a story entitled  
"Confession Makes a Comeback:  
Churches are encouraging sinners to repent  
by modernizing an ancient rite."

The report cited the statistic that  
just 26% of American Catholics  
said they went to confession at least once a year,  
down from 74% in the early 1980s.

In an effort to revive the rite of confession,  
in February 2007, Pope Benedict instructed priests  
to make confession a top priority.

Even some Protestant churches are re-examining the practice

of individual confession and finding it to be of value.

The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod,  
recently voted to revive the practice of private confession,  
arguing that while the Protestant reformer Martin Luther  
criticized the way the rite was administered,  
he never suggested abolishing it.

Some Protestants have gotten creative,  
inviting believers to write their sins on rocks  
and cast them into a desert  
symbolized by a giant sand-pile in the sanctuary  
(sure the custodians loved that one!)

Others have gone for a more modern method,  
writing their sins on pieces of paper  
which were then inserted into paper shredders in the sanctuary.  
(I guess that would be called “liturgical shredding.”)

Still others have instituted the practice of weekly small group confession,  
focusing more on how confession can be  
a form of self-improvement,  
lifting the burden of secrecy,  
diverting that energy to more productive,  
life-giving pursuits.

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What are we to make of this? I have no idea!

But surely, it seems fair to say that  
as goes the proclamation of *the forgiveness of sins*,  
so goes the church!

There is no act, no message, no truth more central to the Christian faith  
than the forgiveness of sins.

Confession is the means by which we seek  
this primal Christian experience:  
the experience of knowing that the Almighty God  
is also the Merciful God,  
of knowing that our Heavenly Judge  
is also the Redeemer  
who came to earth for our sake,  
and took on himself the full consequence of our sin.

The confession of sin is rooted in our core beliefs as Christians.  
First, that the human race has fallen hopelessly into corruption;  
    our condition is beyond our help;  
We have this damnable compulsion  
    to go our own way  
    blatantly disregarding God's good purposes for us,  
    perhaps even knowing what God would have us choose,  
    but thinking, rather insanely, that we know better.

Even when we try our best to follow God,  
    our situation is pure futility;  
    we are our own worst enemies.  
We will screw up and offend the perfect righteousness of God.

But, in response to this first conviction is a second and equal conviction:  
    that God is merciful;  
    that God will grant forgiveness to those who confess their sins,  
    who repent and strive to turn in a new direction.

Back in the early 90's, when I was going through seminary,  
    I remember reading a few "church growth experts" (so-called).  
They said things have changed.  
They told me that for eons  
the primary spiritual issue people would bring to church  
    was their *guilt* .  
So the primary good news they needed to hear  
    was the *forgiveness of sins*.

But since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, said the experts,  
    the primary spiritual issue people have been bringing to the church  
    is their *doubt*!

So the primary good news they need to hear  
    is assurance that there is a God, a God that we can know.

Now, this may be true to an extent;  
    but I wonder, in the 15 years that have followed,  
    how much this thinking has taken hold;  
    and how many pastors and churches in recent times  
    have downplayed the forgiveness of sins,  
    in favor of reasoning with the doubts of this generation?

That is concerning  
    since people who are saved from doubt  
    might become a little too sure of themselves.

And people who are sure of themselves

and who no longer engage much in the practice of  
confessing sins,  
might begin to think the Christian faith is more about *certitude*  
and not so much about *humility*.

But then we have a problem right?

We have people who have downplayed their guilt and sin  
and who have built up their certainty  
that their belief system is the one that is right and true.

In short, we have religiously arrogant people  
who are more likely to see the sin in others than in themselves.

We have a religiously arrogant culture  
that becomes a little big for its britches.

But if we stay close to this indispensable message of the forgiveness of sins  
we will be grounded in the ancient faith of the Church:  
that while we were helpless in our sin, Christ died for us.

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In Presbyterian worship,  
that is, worship in the Reformed Tradition,  
we emphasize the confession of sin  
each week in our worship.

Most of the time  
we pray together a written prayer of confession  
which attempts to express our common sinfulness  
in general terms;

Other times, as on communion Sundays like today,  
we share in a time of silent confession of sin,  
which allows for more specific prayers.

Occasionally, I've had Presbyterians say to me that  
they don't care for the written prayers of confession,  
since these prayers don't quite to express the specific sins  
they're dealing with.

Even worse, sometimes these prayers ask them confess things  
for which they do not feel guilty.

But the point of the common prayer of confession  
is to offer confession of our sin *as a community*  
As a community of believers we commit all sorts of sins,  
and confessing them as a community reminds us  
that we are all in the same boat;

Though our specific sins,

be they sins of commission or sins of omission, may vary,  
we all are caught up in the same sinful corruption.  
While a particular prayer of confession  
may not apply directly to your week,  
it is surely a reminder of your general condition  
as one who has fallen short of the glory of God.

And each week, after we confess our sins,  
we are assured that God has pardoned our sins,  
because Jesus has gone to the cross  
for the sake of all humankind;  
Christ has borne our sins in his body on the cross,  
that we might be dead to sin and alive to God.

Each week, we hear the good news  
that God has taken upon himself the consequences of our sin  
and thereby set us free from what we ourselves  
are helpless to overcome.

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When you get right down to it,  
the *form* of our confession matters much less  
than whether we have truly received the forgiveness of sins  
*in our hearts*.

This morning Jesus has troubled us with a story of a man  
who did not appreciate the mercy that had been shown to him.  
Forgiven of an astronomical debt that he could never have paid,  
this man proceeds to demand every penny of a lesser debt  
that is owed to him.  
He has been released from bondage to his debt,  
yet he refuses to release one indebted to him.  
In short, the man lacks gratitude,  
and shows no awareness of his position before the King  
who has forgiven his debt.  
The tremendous generosity of the king has not found its way  
into this servant's heart.

This is the answer to Peter's question,  
"how often should I forgive my fellow Christian?"  
Jesus answers him:  
If you are counting, Peter, you have missed the point.

We were enemies of God;  
we stood condemned and without hope;  
and at the point of our greatest darkness,  
God gave up his perfect righteousness  
and took all our sins upon himself  
so that we would not have to bear their  
deadly consequence.

There is a paradox at work here  
which Jesus teaches us in the simple petition of his prayer:  
*Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*

Listen to this, my dear fellow Christians,  
God's forgiveness has been offered to you;  
God does not withhold it for any reason.  
But the extent to which you offer the same forgiveness to *your* offender,  
is the sign to God, to you, and to the world  
of whether you have truly received that forgiveness *in your heart*.  
If you do not forgive, the imprisonment and torture of your soul  
is self-imposed.

But if you are moved to tearful gratitude for God's mercy to you,  
then you are set free from your prison  
and you are deputized by God, given the jailers keys,  
and sent to set others free from their sins against you.

We cannot cover ourselves.  
Even with the finest attire from Abercrombie or a Ann Taylor,  
these are just so many fig leaves.  
But God has covered our sin;  
though our sins were like scarlet,  
in Christ they are white as snow.

We are clothed in the purity and perfection of Jesus,  
the sinless One who takes away the sin of the world.

Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.