

Blowing Up the Confessional Booth

**Psalm 32:1-5
James 5:16-18**

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Mark Dunn**

"Congregationalists don't believe in confession." Someone from a liturgical tradition could perceive this after worshiping with us. There isn't a confessional booth or a place designed for that. There is no list of church membership responsibilities that indicate that confession is a routine part of church life.

I received the same impression from the Southern Baptist tradition which nurtured my spirituality in an earlier period of my life. All we had to do in that tradition was to shake the "preacher's" hand and "confess that Jesus Christ was our Lord and Savior." In the place of penance the same preacher baptises you in this fiberglass tub filled with warm water. Symbolically, this washes away one's sins. It was suggested that I take a bar of soap into the baptismal pool, since I needed extra cleansing.

The subject for this morning's reflection centers around the act of confession. This is a subject which has been mentioned in previous sermons, but today might we approach it directly. Hopefully, without complicating matters, could you place in the back of your memory banks the possible connection of confession to the experience of healing and community. But, before we move to the connection, I want to present a short history lesson that only serves as a reminder.

I. PROTESTANTS AND THE CONFESSIONAL

When Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses on the church door in 1517, he proclaimed that God's children are justified by faith alone, not by works. He said that God freely forgives our sins. We do not earn forgiveness by works or by penance. Christ's atonement is based on God's love for us and not merits. This meant that people of the day didn't have to buy the indulgences that Tezel was selling to free themselves from sin.

Luther learned this from his own experience. He was very scrupulous in doing all the church required to be a monk. He underwent long confessions trying to sense that he had received God's grace. He discovered that God freely gives his grace; we don't have to buy it. This theology brought about change in church policy. And it wasn't popular because it affected the sale of indulgences.

No longer was the priest a mediator between the believer and God. When feeling heavy of heart, we can pray directly to God, "Be merciful to me a sinner." This is theology that is assumed by us as protestants. This is good theology which I was nurtured in and believe in.

As the Protestant reformation ran its course, other reformers took up the cause to destroy the "confessional booth." John Calvin, with his attitude, severely criticised compulsory confession. He wrote: "Whatever all these hired wranglers of the pope may prate, we maintain that Christ was not the author of this law which compels men to list their sins" (Vol I, p.631). Oliver Cromwell, on the other hand, put that same attitude into action. Proclaiming that his army was his church, he went over England

destroying the religious symbols of the Catholic Church. Maybe one of those symbols was the confessional booth.

People, our protestant ancestors threw a bomb into the confessional booth. They didn't literally blow that "sucker" up, but eliminated its use in the Protestant Church. Thus the impression that we don't have to confess or disclose our sin or our pain to anyone other than God.

The Reformation brought about change in confessional practice. But I want to make you aware of one perception in this change. It is ironic but as this practice of regular confession to another person has declined, therapy and psychoanalysis has increased. I say that to indicate that private and corporate confession to an individual may be still necessary.

II. CONFESSION IS NECESSARY

In fact, I will go as far as to say that confession to another individual is necessary. In this case, what is meant by confession is much broader. The act of disclosing to another individual one's deepest ambiguities and woundedness would come under the umbrella of confession. Confession is necessary for healing and for the experience of community.

Confession or disclosure is necessary to heal painful memories. Everyone in this worship this morning can probably look back on life and remember some event or crisis which you wish you could erase. Dick Brown was only two feet away from President Kennedy when the sniper's bullet struck the president. Now, he can't seem to erase that from his memory.

Painful memories wound us psychologically, physically and hinder spiritual growth. For us to heal those memories we need to expose the scars and what caused them. A mother shared with a close friend how she would become very impatient with her young son when the ladies from her circle would come over for a meeting. Privately she was much more patient with him. What she discovered was that she feared being rejected by her friends if her son didn't live up to their expectations. Then she looked into her past and viewed her woundedness from the rejections she experienced. She found healing when she exposed her scars to God and to another person.

A husband was always contradicting his wife, even when she was sharing a good story or something most interesting. (It was suggested that I confess my sin in regard to this one!) He reflected on his past and found that he was treating his wife the way his mother had always treated him. Once he exposed the scar, he could be healed and begin to change the way he treated his wife. Confession is the way to heal the wounds of the past.

Second, confession heals or diffuses our grandiosity. Dr. Robert Moore, professor at CTS said that grandiosity is the disease of modernity. He even went on to say that if we do not get a handle on this disease, the survival of this planet may be in jeopardy. There is a little voice in us that speaks to us while we are standing in a long line at McDonalds, "Don't these people know who I am?". They should take my order

first." We don't want to wait our turn because we are great. Or, sometimes when we make a mess of something, we want someone else to clean it up.

Most all of us struggle with grandiosity. If you are not certain if this is a problem for you then I just want to ask you a question. Do you look forward to certain medical tests. After you arrive at the clinic where you are to have your x-ray, you are instructed to remove your new suit and fashion tie to put on this split-tail gown. I just had one of those tests this last Friday. After putting on that split tail gown, I had to go sit in this waiting room with other people dressed in a split-tail gown. And everyone had their heads down reading a book or magazine. One lady, who probably couldn't stand the tension any longer, remarked "how humbling this was." If you experience these feelings, then you have a problem with grandiosity.

Alcoholics Anonymous and the subsequent recovery groups understand that confession is the road to healing. The first step in the 12 step program is to admit that you are "powerless over alcohol." We can't be great and powerless at the same time. When you introduce yourself at a meeting, you give your name and the response "I am an alcoholic." I have wondered if, in the church, we had to introduce ourselves with the words, "My name is Mark Dunn, I am a sinner, saved by God's grace."

It is no accident that, included in the 12 steps to recovery, is the fifth step and instructions similar to the words in the Bible: "Confess your sins to one another.....that you may be healed." After taking a personal inventory and acknowledging ones "defects", then you are to share those with another person. The AA book even issues a warning that if you try to skip this step or hide certain facts about yourself, you may not overcome the disease (P.72). Confession and disclosure to another person is a way to heal and diffuse our grandiosity.

B. Confession or disclosure is the only way to experience community. About two weeks ago I went to a conference in Racine on developing community with small groups. There were about 35 people there who were strangers except for a few. We were asked to divide into groups of four persons per group. Then to those perfect strangers we were to share how we were taking care of ourselves and some pain in our lives. To be honest, it was scary, but once we opened the door to our souls, then community could be experienced.

During my chaplaincy training in the hospital, we had one conference each week in which we were to deal with interpersonal relationships. There were five interns other than myself and any one of us was free to disclose any feelings. On one occasion, we sat around a table with the CPE supervisor without saying a word for one hour. The next hour we had to spend time rebuilding the community spirit. We could only do that by confessing our feelings each to the other. Disclosure is the path to community. (Omitted because of time at the pulpit.)

CONCLUSION

Do Congregationalists believe in confession? Protestant churches don't have confessional booths in their buildings. There is no policy that requires one to go to confession and even engage in corporate confession. Our protestant ancestors blew up the booths and the symbol of confession. Yes, we do believe in confession. Today

we blow up this symbol of confession like you would blow up a balloon. Confession is a part of our life together. People are experiencing healing. Friendships are developing and community is experienced.

It is said that the geographical center of London is the Charing Cross. On one occasion a lost child was picked up. They questioned him to try to find out where he lived but he couldn't tell them. Finally, among sobs and tears, he said, "If you will take me to the cross, I can find my way home." Confession in either case brings us to the cross and the path home to healing and fellowship. Amen.