

“Confession”

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, July 5th, 2020
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
A Sermon from the front row
Matt Matthews

Every Sunday near the beginning of most Presbyterian services of worship, and, indeed, many Christian services of worship, we gather around the font to remember and confess our sin. We say to God, *I’ve fallen short of your glory, and I’m sorry.*

We gather at the baptismal font and we say, *help me turn away from sin and turn towards you, O God.*

We gather at the font and we admit to God that it’s hard to walk with God when we spend so much time walking *away from God*. It’s hard to focus on God when we spend so much time focusing on ourselves. It’s hard to serve our neighbor when we spend so much time serving only ourselves and our own family.

We gather at the Baptismal font to confess our sin and “repent” of it. Repent means to turn away from sin and turn where? Towards God.

At the font we admit our sin, confess our sins, and are reminded that God forgives us and redeems us to live a fuller life of service.

Why do we do this at baptismal font?

Because baptism reminds us that God created, loves, and redeems us. The living waters of baptism remind us that we are washed not by human hands but by God’s grace. Paul uses the metaphor of baptism to describe our newness of life in Jesus.

Romans 6:3-4 **3** *Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?*
(“Death” is another metaphor Paul uses.)
4 *Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead . . . so we too might walk in newness of life.*

We gather at the baptismal font to admit our reliance upon this grace. Since we know we can’t wash ourselves from such serious stains, we call upon God. O LORD: *Let me die to my sin, so that I can live in the manner that Jesus lived: gratefully and humbly in service to others in Your holy name.*

This baptismal font is a powerful image of God’s justifying grace and of God’s sanctifying work. This story of God’s redemptive work in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is all broadly symbolized here in this puddle of holy water.

Sin is a big deal for Paul. For Paul, “sin” isn’t something that’s “out there,” it’s inside. (Paul would love our modern day conversations about the sin of system racism. Many of us—particularly white people—are saying we are not guilty of that sin. Paul would laugh out loud.) Paul describes being at war with himself because of sin.

Listen:

In fact, I don’t understand why I act the way I do. I don’t do what I know is right. I do the things I hate . . .

18 I know that my selfish desires won't let me do anything that is good. Even when I want to do right, I cannot. . . .
With my whole heart I agree with the Law of God. **23** But in every part of me I discover something fighting against my mind, and it makes me a prisoner of sin that controls everything I do.
24 What a miserable person I am. Who will rescue me from this body that is doomed to die? **25** Thank God! Jesus Christ will rescue me.

And so, we gather with our sin at this baptismal font and, by God's grace, we die unto sin in order that we can live unto Jesus. Paul knows that he cannot "get right" right with God by his own efforts. He knows that God is the one who "gets right" with us.

Two stories are worth remembering here.

The first is the story of Paul's conversion. Remember, he loved God and was a staunch and faithful man of the Jewish tradition. He thought that serving God meant ridding the temple of those who claimed to be followers of Jesus. Paul thought he was getting right with God by persecuting Christians. This clearly did fit God's plan.

So, God came to Paul on the Road to Damascus. Remember the story? Jesus came to Paul in a flash of blinding light. Jesus literally and figuratively knocked Paul off his high horse. *Saul, Saul* (that was Paul's old name) *why do you persecute me?* (See Acts 9.)

The point is, Jesus came to Paul. Jesus turned Paul around. And for Paul's Christian theology which sprung from that event, we cannot "get right" with God. God "gets right" with us.

Verse 24: "What a miserable person I am. (What a 'wretched' man I am.) Who will rescue me from this body that is doomed to die? **25** Thank God! Jesus Christ will rescue me.

The second story to remember as we think of our struggle with sin, is the story of Jesus. Any story about Jesus that comes to mind will do. For God so loved the world, that God sent Jesus (John 3:16ff). The word became flesh (John 1). God is with us, Emmanuel (Luke 2). And God in Christ is with us always, even to the close of the age (Matthew 28).

In the story of Jesus, we see that God doesn't meet us half way, God meets us all the way.

The baptismal font, then, isn't an ending place, it's a starting place. Each week, we step out fresh. "Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ. And Christ died for us, Christ rose again for us, Christ ascended to heaven for us, Christ prays for us. Anyone in Christ is a new creation; the old life has begun. The new life has begun."