

Why Confession? Why Every Week?

Luke 13:6-9

First Presbyterian Church
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Every now and then somebody asks me, “Why do we say a prayer of confession every week? Sometimes we pray things in that prayer that I’m not guilty of. Is this prayer meant to make me feel bad about myself?”

These are excellent questions.

By way of an answer, I invite you to consider these observations.

We pause near the beginning of worship each week in our prayer of confession to remind ourselves that we are not God. *God is*. This moment of prayer is a way of adjusting, a way of checking our compass (are we pointing in the right direction?), a way of symbolically turning to God (*repenting*, is what Jesus calls it), a way of emptying ourselves humbly before God, of getting ourselves out of the way.

A musician tunes her guitar every night before stepping on stage. A family washes its hands before sitting down for Grandmother’s big dinner. Similarly, we confess our sins near the beginning of every service of worship to figuratively wash our hands of things that distract us from God. We spiritually retune. We humble ourselves. We bow. We turn away from “self” to God.

So, rightly, we pray:

- Forgive me for all the ways I let other stuff get in the way of better serving you, O God.
- Forgive my pride, which tricks me into thinking that I am the master of my universe.
- My anger often blurs my vision. I’m sorry.
- Forgive me for the grudges I insist on holding that make me sick inside and keep me from right relationship with you and with others.
- I am sometimes apathetic about other people’s pain. Cleanse me from this selfishness, O God.
- I know it’s not all about me—but sometimes I forget. Forgive me.
- Sometimes I think I’m better than everybody else, smarter, wiser, prettier. O God, forgive me.
- For my greed, my sexism, my racism, my agism, my idolatry, my ableism, my insisting on my own way, O God, I repent.

God is not some hateful old man in heaven eager to crush us for doing wrong. God loves us and, like a good parent, wants us to be our best selves. We can’t be our best selves if we insist on

clinging to our worst selves. And we can't step into new ways, unless we let go of the old ways. And we can't fix what is broken until we name it. So, we repent. We confess our sins. We admit how we often are stuck on ourselves. We admit that we see from narrow blinders and fail to take a wider, more generous view of our neighbor.

These 'sins' get in our way. In confession, we ask God clear away those things that distract us from loving and serving both God and neighbor with joy.

Fredrick Buechner puts it this way: *To confess your sins to God is not to tell God anything God doesn't already know. Until you confess [your sins], however, they are the abyss between you. When you confess them, they become the Golden Gate Bridge.*

* * *

Today we find this parable: A man planted a fig tree in his garden, but after three years it had not yielded fruit so he told the gardener to chop it down, dig it up, make space for something productive.

The gardener—and *how can one not be reminded of God when one looks at the gardener?*—slows the man down. *Look, this fig has had its chance. But what harm does it do to allow it a little more time? I'll put manure on it. I'll give it good care. I'll aerate the soil. I'll water. I'll tend. If it doesn't bear fruit by next year, let's cut it down then. But for now—for now let's give it more nurture and more time.*

Jesus wants life for his followers, and he wants them to have it abundantly. To have such a life means first and always, always, always to turn to God. This 'turning' is repentance. We do it each week in our prayer of confession. We affirm that we rely on God and God's grace alone, not . . .

- self
- country
- church
- president
- pastor
- supreme court
- mom/dad
- popular opinion

To 'repent' is to renew our attention upon God. This holy turning is what we do when we come to the font and confess our sins.

Jesus reminds us in this parable that God, the gardener, is patient with us—always giving us the love we need, the time we need, the care we need. When we turn to God, God is there. When we ask God to help, God helps. When we apologize, God forgives.

AMEN.

I.

O God,

forgive our wanton waste of the
wealth of the soil and sea and air;

forgive our desecration of natural
beauty;

forgive our heedlessness of those
who shall come after us;

forgive our undue love of money;

forgive our contempt for small things
and our worship of what is big;

forgive our neglect of struggling peoples.

For such wrongs to our natural and human
heritage,

and for many things left undone, forgive us, O God.

(Forgive Us, adapted from Willard L. Sperry)