

Scraping Off the Barnacles

Psalm 32

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them. You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you. Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD. Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

I don't personally know much about barnacles, those white round crustaceans that like to attach themselves to the underside of boats. I've never been much of a boater. But apparently, they can be quite a nuisance. A boat left in the water for six months can become so encrusted with barnacles that it will use up 50% more fuel to maintain the same speed. If it can get to high speeds at all. Barnacles can really weigh down a boat.

So why not just get rid of them? Well, that's easier said than done. First, they accumulate only on the surfaces that are below the water line. So it's hard to see them. Second, once you have discovered them, they are notoriously difficult to remove. Barnacles secrete a concrete-like substance that adheres them firmly to whatever surface they choose. Getting rid of them generally requires several steps: power washing, scraping, scrubbing with acid, and sanding. Once you manage to remove the barnacles, you have to beware. Because you know they're just going to return again as soon as you put your boat back in the water.

So what's a boater to do? They have two options. First, they can paint the boat's hull with a copper-based paint. Copper is toxic to barnacles, so they won't attach to the boat. This preventative measure is obviously the easiest way to avoid the issue. But if can't do that, you can check your boat frequently. Like every time you use it. Because once a barnacle attaches, there is

a very brief window before they get their concrete set. If you can scrape it off within a few hours, it takes almost no effort at all.

They accumulate below the surface, where it's hard to see them. They are hard to remove, especially if you wait to let them get a good grip. And even after you put all the effort into removing them, they just keep on returning. I could be talking about barnacles, or I could be talking about sin. Sin can cling to our souls like barnacles cling to boats, dragging us down and keeping us from being our best selves.

Unfortunately, there is no copper paint solution for our lives. We can't really do anything to prevent ourselves from ever sinning. I know this, because many people have tried. The only one who ever managed it was Jesus. So rather than focusing on prevention, we need to be aware so that we can remove the sins when they happen. Before they get a strong foothold on our lives.

Fortunately, we know how to remove sin. And while it's less physically demanding than scraping barnacles, sometimes it can be just as intense. Our sins are removed not by acid or scraping, but by forgiveness. But although God is ever more ready to forgive us than we are ready to ask forgiveness, there are some requirements. We do have to participate in our own forgiveness.

And that brings us to our spiritual discipline of the week – confession. Confession is what we have to do in order to take hold of the forgiveness God is already holding out to us. That sounds pretty good, so we better be sure we know how to confess. It's really a three-step process.

First, we have to admit what our sin is. We have to name the things we have done or left undone. Not that God doesn't know, but it is good for us to put it into words. The first step of Alcoholics Anonymous is to admit that there is a problem. This is probably the hardest step for most Christians. Richard Foster, a pastor who has studied the spiritual disciplines explains:

Confession is a difficult discipline for us because we all too often view the believing community as a fellowship of saints before we see it as a fellowship of sinners. We feel that everyone else had advanced so far into holiness that we are isolated and alone in our sin. We cannot bear to reveal our failures and shortcomings to others. We imagine that we are the only ones who have not stepped onto the high road to heaven .therefore, we hide ourselves from one another and live in veiled lies and hypocrisy.

Everyone turn to your neighbor right now and say, “I am a sinner.” Making that simple admission is hard for Christians, who often feel like once we are baptized we should never sin again. But for many people, the hardest part of confession is not admission, but repentance.

The word ‘repent’ literally means ‘to turn,’ or ‘to turn away.’ Remember when you were a kid, and you did something your parents didn’t like? When you said you were sorry, you also had to say, “I promise never to do it again.” That’s what repenting is. It’s saying that not only can I admit what I’ve done, I can admit that it was wrong. And therefore, I fully intend to never do it again. Of course, being human, sometimes even our best intentions can’t keep us from sinning again. Remember what Jesus told the disciples? “If the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive.” Jesus knew it was entirely possible that we might honestly repent and yet return to the same sin.

Okay. You’ve admitted your sin and turned your life in a different direction. The final step of confession is restoration. Sin is anything that damages our relationship with God, with creation, with others, or with ourselves. Sin, by definition, causes damage. One of the ways we demonstrate that our repentance is sincere is to do what we can to repair the damage we’ve done. And that can be a lot easier said than done.

Sometimes it’s possible to undo the physical damage done by a sin. Superglue and duct tape have amazing restorative powers. But neither one of them can fix a broken heart or a broken relationship. God’s forgiveness does not insist that all relationships are fully restored, but God

does want us to have that in mind. If what you're looking for is human forgiveness, much of the time it does wait until the damaged relationship is healed.

How do we confess? We admit, we repent, we restore. And why do we go through all of that? So that we may be forgiven. The Bible reminds us that "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." In other words, we do it not just to feel better, but to actually BE better. That's what forgiveness does for us. In the gospel of Luke, we read that the forgiveness of sins actually gives us the knowledge of salvation.

That's why Richard Foster says, "Without the cross, the Discipline of confession would be only psychologically therapeutic." The entire process of redemption is illustrated in the cross and the resurrection. Many people understand the work of the cross in this way: People were so evil, their relationship with God so broken, that God was too angry to forgive them. Only a perfect sacrifice, not an imperfect sacrifice of the old temple system, would be enough to bring restoration. But I'd like you to think about the work of the cross in this way: God's love for people was so great that their evil choices broke not only their relationship with God but also God's heart. So out of his great desire to forgive people, God sent Jesus to redeem them. It was love, not anger, that brought about forgiveness.

And that's why it's so important for us to admit our sins. Remember the three steps of confession? 1) Admit we've done something wrong. 2) Repent, and turn our lives around. 3) Restore the broken relationships. Jesus was able to complete step three for us on the cross. Our broken relationship with God is already restored! All we have to do is work the first two steps. Admit what we've done, and turn our lives around. That's why Jesus proclaims, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Your homework challenge for this week should be obvious. Each of us needs to confess. We opened our worship with a prayer of confession. But sometimes it's not enough to read the preprinted words along with everyone else. Sometimes it can feel as if we have confessed to ourselves, but not to God. In the worship book of the Episcopal Church, after a prayer of confession, they name that feeling. The priest invites those who may still be feeling the weight and guilt of their sin to come privately to the priest or some other Christian to confess their sin and grief.

In the book of James, we are commanded "Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another." Confession doesn't require a priest or pastor. It doesn't require a private booth like many Catholic churches have. It doesn't require a formulaic way of coming to God. All it requires is for two Christians to come together, to admit what they have done, and to pray that they both might turn their lives around. Because when two Christians come together, a third is present with them. Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Amen and amen.