

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Spirit at Work: Commitment
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2 Samuel 12:1-14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17

Before I get to the reading from the new testament, I wanted to spend some time with David. The overriding impression David has left on history is that he is the epitome of a godly man and king. As a boy he is chosen by God to be King. When David is just a lowly shepherd God helps him to care for his flocks by blessing him with a deadly aim against bears and lions. When his older brothers go off to fight in the war David is too young and small, yet God brings him to the frontline, gives him the courage to volunteer to fight Goliath and then God flushes David's muscles with the strength to defeat the giant enemy.

David then goes to serve the King – even though he has this call to BE king, David must first serve the king, which he does well. He is humble and helpful and stays in his lane even when he could step up and take the throne for himself. Through all the trials of getting to the throne David remains level-headed and worthy of the title God's appointed king...until he sees Bathsheba.

When David sees her bathing he loses all level-headedness. He plots ways to meet with her, he schemes ways to kill her husband, and eventually he successfully makes her his wife. He succumbs to lustful and murderous temptations and commits outrageous sins. Yet, we still remember him as a great king of God's own choosing. Why? Because of confession.

After David has had Bathsheba's husband killed, a prophet named Nathan comes to the palace to report a terrible crime and sin against God. He tells David about two men: one who is rich and has everything he could ever want, and one man who is poor and only has one little lamb. Then the rich man has a friend visit, and instead of taking one of his own lambs for a feast, the rich man takes the poor man's one possession in life, his little lamb.

David is furious to hear about this injustice happening in his nation and demands the rich man be killed for his crimes. That's when Nathan reveals the rich man he was talking about is David. David had everything, yet stole the wife of a man who only had her. David stole from the less fortunate to fulfill his own sinful desires.

David immediately feels the shame and guilt rise in his stomach and confesses that he has indeed sinned against God. The psalms tell us exactly how David felt. In them he writes that staying silent about his sins make his bones feel brittle, that his energy was taken out of him like the sun on a hot day. Psalm 51 is David's plea to God after hearing Nathan's truth

Psalm 51

1 Have mercy on me, O God,

according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.

2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.

3 For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.

4 Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.

5 Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.

6 You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

8 Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

9 Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

10 Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.

11 Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.

12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

This is the cry of a broken heart. Someone who is fully aware of the monster they have become. Nathan has held up a mirror and David sees a fearsome monster staring back at him. A monster with horns and claws, ready and willing to devour anyone in his path.

We have all had a moment where the person looking back at us through a mirror bears more resemblance to a monster than to ourselves. And if we haven't seen that monster, then maybe the monster looking back is too prideful to even notice its horns and claws.

Becoming the monster happens little by little. Unconfessed sins sit in the shadows of our soul, becoming stronger and a more dominant part of our personality secretly and quietly. We let sins sit because the process of confession is distressing. Confession means lifting out of ourselves all our guilt, shame, and regret, and looking at the mess we created. It can hurt so much that sometimes we think it is easier to let the stain of sin sit where it is. It's easier to cover it up, ignore the stiffness in our soul, and live another day without confessing.

Letting sin sit inside us allows the sin to change us. A sin left unconfessed can quickly become a part of our identity. It overrides the image of God we have been gifted and the sin can take control of our actions.

One day, when I worked in a first-grade classroom, I noticed the birthday oreos had been pillaged. At recess, a student came up to me and as they talked to me they kept wiping their mouth with their hand. After a short conversation I asked them why they kept wiping their mouth and they ran away. Later, a friend of theirs came to get me because this student was crying in the slide. I went over to see them and they slid down into my arms, their face wet with tears. Honestly, they were dripping all over because the plastic slide was so hot to be in that day, but they felt better in the sweltering slide than facing the world. The student told me they were wiping their face because they were afraid I could see the crumbs. This was hours after they had eaten the cookie. They had been to gym and lunch. There was no way the Oreos crumbs were still there. But this student had stolen Oreos at home before, and the crumbs had incriminated them then. The ghost crumbs haunted them. They thought I could see them because it was the only thing they could think of. Their actions became odd because the guilt of the stolen cookie told them everyone could see their crime and they needed to keep covering their tracks. The crumbs had become a part of their identity, until they confessed and received forgiveness.

We avoid confession because it is uncomfortable and oftentimes painful, but 1 Timothy shows us what confession feels like for someone who relies on God's grace. 1 Timothy says, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen."

We should not see confession as a panicking child, but as people becoming stronger, mercy overflowing onto us, The Holy Spirit tickling each horn, and claw and turning us back into the serene image of God's creation.

From the beginning God has given each human God's own image to carry and present to the world. God's image is like the shapes from the children's book. There is a way to present them that is a welcoming happy scene. But sin twists those shapes out of order and instead of the peaceful home we get a monster. When we sin, and especially when we hold onto our sins, we can't show God's image to the world because we are out of order. The peaceful moon becomes a terrifying horn, and the soft trees become fearsome claws.

But once we brought attention and a tickle to each shape it went back to where it belonged. And instead of a monster we have a welcoming home. Confession is that tickle that brings attention to our sin and releases it so that our identity can return to the image and shape God has entrusted to us.

If we confess, we must trust that God's love shown through Jesus will be strong enough to put us back into the right order. When David talks about confession he says he confesses according to God's unfailing love, according to God's great compassion. The size of David's confession corresponds with the size he believes God's love and compassion is. Because David believes God's love is powerful he openly confesses his deepest sins and trusts grace will put him back together.

If you believe God's love is small you will only be able to confess the small stuff. But if you believe God's love is huge, abounding, overflowing, then bring it on! Get it out, let it go, and let God overpower your sins with love and compassion. We don't need to be afraid of confession because we know God's love is strong enough to handle anything. No matter what shape we have let our sins beat us into, God has the tool to make it right. It still may be painful, especially when our confession needs to be made to other people who will need time to process their own hurt feelings. But if we are afraid of hurting someone with confession, we should be more afraid of who we are letting our unconfessed sins turn us into. When we hold onto our sins will also cause harm as we slowly turn into resentful, defensive monsters. We need to trust that love and forgiveness will win every battle against sin.

Then comes a part of confession we usually forget to do. Our images of confession often look like a business transaction: I unload my sins, you give me forgiveness and we go our merry ways. But in scripture there is another step beyond the dumping of one's sins and receiving forgiveness.

Every confession of David and even these verses in 1 Timothy have a heavy helping of confessing God's glory. Confession without affirmations can become a pity fest, "Oh Lord, I am such a sinner. I'm terrible. I'm worthless." If we stop there it's no wonder we hate confession. But for every sin confessed, an affirmation should take its place. I have lied, but today I told only truth.

The mirror that used to trigger negative hateful words, where we saw a monster looking back at us, we need to reclaim that mirror for God's glory. Write words of praise on the mirror. Where you use to show hate for your crooked teeth, affirm that your smile still inspires joy. Where you used to look for flaws to cut and punish yourself, write "Grace happens here."

The energy you used to spend covering up the crumbs you were sure everyone could see, use that energy to notice the good parts of yourself, and let them thrive in the absence of guilt and shame. When the image of God has been covered by sin we can forget who we are. So, after we unburden ourselves we need to take time to reacclimate ourselves to what that image looks like in us. I don't know where each of you are in the confession process. Some of us are just now becoming aware of the dull pain in our soul.

Some of us are fully aware of what we need to confess because we have been actively wiping away the crumbs so no one will learn our secret. Some of us have been unloading for a while now and need to begin affirming the great things God is doing in us and through us.

Let us pray.