

God, Life and Everything "Confession"

One of the more prominent features of Lent is Confession. It is, in many traditions, a penitential season, after all.

In our Anglican tradition, we often begin our weekly Eucharists with what we call the "penitential order," which is to say a recitation of the ten commandments followed by a confession.

Actually, that's not all that different from our regular worship. In the Episcopal Church, we say a general (communal) confession every week. The penitential order just moves it up front.

We Episcopalians also make use of the private confession in Lent; more than at any other time of the year. Granted, it's still not that much. I'll bet a lot of Episcopalians don't even know we have private confession.

So what is this confession thing, and why do people do it?

In the New Testament, there are a couple of places where Christians are admonished to confess their faults. In particular, the letter of James says, "Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed." (James 5:16) Paul also says, "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup." (1 Corinthians 11:27-28).

Interestingly, virtually every Christian denomination encourages some sort of confession - but they all seem to be different. Do we do it as one big group? Do we confess to a priest? A confessor? A friend? Is it an obligation and duty or something else?

In Roman Catholic tradition, it must be to a priest in order to receive absolution. This is based in part on John's gospel when, in Chapter 20, Jesus breathes on the apostles and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

There is an obligation to confess before first communion, and while I do not belong to that denomination, it's my understanding that Catholics are expected to go to confession regularly, falling in line with Paul's admonition for worshipers to examine themselves before they "eat of the bread and drink of the cup."

The Orthodox have the tradition of the spiritual father or spiritual mother - a sort of spiritual mentor who is just about the only person you confess to. Ever.

In many protestant traditions, there is no particular person to whom you must confess. If your heart troubles you - find a spiritual friend and confess it to them. Anyone you trust is as good as anyone else.

To be honest, I don't think it matters who you confess to or how you do it.

In our Episcopal tradition, as I said, we have private confession, and it is primarily to a priest. It is different from in collective "general" confession which is a regular reminder that all of humanity is fallen - that we are in this thing together, as it were. But the private confession is to a priest - largely because this is one person who has taken vows to uphold the confidentiality of the confessional, one person who is

trained to listen, admonish and give counsel. And yet, we aren't that worried about who hears. God, in the end, is the one we're talking to.

So why even have confession?

The quasi-theological answer is that we are fallen beings and need to acknowledge our fallenness, some would say, to get right with God. Really, all that means is, we have to acknowledge who we are in order to acknowledge who God is. We are weak, fallen, self-centered and easy swayed by others.

Recognizing where we fall off the tracks can help us get back on course. The reason we take time to recollect what we have done to separate ourselves from God and our neighbors is so we can heal the breach. Or, to be more precise, so we can allow God to heal the breach. That's one reason why we have lately taken to calling confession "Reconciliation."

The human reason people confess is that they need to get things off their chest. They need to hear - from the mouth of another human being - that they are still loved. People simply need to hear that what they have done does not exclude them from the community, that they are forgiven, that there is a chance to make things right, that there is still a place for them at the table.

I don't care who you are or what you believe, if you're human, being forgiven for whatever sin - real or perceived - removes a huge weight from your shoulders. When people come to me for private confession, it is because they have something too hard to keep to themselves, too heavy on their heart. When they leave, having received some (hopefully useful) guidance and an assurance that God never stopped loving them, it is with a lighter heart.

One thing confession ought not be viewed as is an obligation - a hoop to jump through in order to get something else like communion or eternal life. I've never been a fan of forced confession of any sort. When people feel required by an outside authority to confess, they do a lot of making things up. One kid once confessed to a friend that he had been required to go to confession but couldn't think of anything bad he'd done. So he made stuff up. Then he felt guilty and had to confess that he had made stuff up.

That's not what confession at its best is.

Rather, it's a chance to not only acknowledge our fallenness - which we do anyway - but to get rid of those burdens that weigh us down.

So think about confession this Lent - not as an obligation. It may not be for everyone, but it's nice to know it's there if you need it.