

Tree of Life Church
October 20, 2024—Twenty second Sunday After Pentecost
Breathing Underwater: Spirituality and The Twelve Steps
#5 Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of
our wrongs.

PSALM Psalm 32:3-5

While I kept silent, 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. *Selah*
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.

LETTERS James 5:16

Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

GOSPEL John 20:23

If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

SERMON Accountability is Sustainability, AA Step #5 Rev. M. Courtenay
Willcox

In Step #5, Alcoholics Anonymous says we admit to God and ourselves, and to another human being, the exact nature of our wrongs.

Isn't this just what we did in our prayer of confession? We confessed to ourselves, to God, and aloud to one another. Did we, though, offer a genuine confession? Do we feel like we even need confession? Do we feel ashamed or put off by acknowledging that we have sinned? How do we feel about the word, sin? I know some churches that have taken the prayer of confession out of their worship service because it makes churchgoers feel "uncomfortable." I'm curious that in our high-achieving culture we are challenged in confronting the reality of our actions. Do we believe that telling the truth about ourselves, that we fall short, that we miss the mark, that we sin, is an embarrassment, shameful, something about which we will be judged?

Well, AA, Richard Rohr, and Jesus all say that confession should be part of our practice, but I'm not sure we've worked out that exercise. Just as we talked two weeks ago

about Step #1, the practice of letting go of our control over things, which is an exercise that could take up a lifetime, this week we see in Step #5, and in scripture, the power of confession, admitting we are not perfect, confessing to one another, to God, and to ourselves that we make mistakes—and some of those mistakes are whoppers!!!

Early Christians were encouraged to participate in the healing power of communal confession: The book of James says, “So confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, and this will cure you” (James 5:16). Step 5 of the Twelve Steps says the same thing, “we admit to God and ourselves, and to another human being, the exact nature of our wrongs.” Clearly, some notion of peer accountability and personal responsibility for our mistakes and failures is essential to heal and restore human relationships.¹

Writer and activist adrienne maree brown normalizes making mistakes and working towards accountability, “We will tell each other we hurt people, and who. We will tell each other why, and who hurt us and how. We will tell each other what we will do to heal ourselves, and heal the wounds in our wake. We will be accountable, rigorous in our accountability, all of us unlearning, all of us crawling towards dignity. [So here it is interesting to consider that confession brings us to dignity.] We will learn to set and hold boundaries, communicate without manipulation, give and receive consent, ask for help, love our shadows without letting them rule our relationships, and remember we are of earth, of miracle, of a whole, of a massive river—love, life, life, love.”²

Most religions and cultures believe, in one way or another, that sin and evil are punishable offences, and payback must be demanded of the sinner, not just only in this world but sometimes in the next world, too. I viewed the original plaster cast of Rodin’s bronze sculpture, Gates of Hell, in the Musée d’Orsay last week. A bronze cast, also made in 1917 appears in our own Rodin Museum in Philadelphia. Rodin’s inspiration came from many sources, largely from Dante’s Inferno. It is a terrifying vision of people falling into an abyss, and clawing to escape.

Rodin intended to frame the Gates of Hell with the figures of Adam and Eve, reinventing Dante's hell to include figures who personified his own conception of sin resulting in hell.³ How does Rodin’s reinventions of sin relate to how we see sin? It is interesting to consider that everyone has their own understanding of what it means to fall short and how much apology and asking for forgiveness is necessary for atonement, which means reparation.

¹ <https://email.cac.org/t/d-e-edjkduk-tlkrittuh-z/> (cac.org/daily-meditations/confession-not-cancellation)

² IBID

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gates_of_Hell

Our worldview is a dualistic view [remember, we talked about this when we looked at creation, good or bad, light or dark, healthy or sick, etc.], so we see this dualistic view again, around sin in a system of reward—punishment, good people—bad people, sin—salvation, and all of this makes sense to our ego, the ego. This dualistic system is flawed because even the best that the best prisons, the best courtrooms, the best wars, the best lawyers, and even the best church, the best preachers, and here, God knows, we should know better, and can do better..

The revelations that come to us from the cross and the Twelve Steps, however, show that sin and failure are, in fact, fertile and verdant grounds for a people's transformation and enlightenment when they have fallen short, missed the mark, or sinned. This opportunity for transforming and enlightening the offender, the addict, and the sinner, which is all of us, is what we are to focus on.⁴

The act of confronting our sin and being open to allowing it to transform us is a holy act based entirely on God's "economy of grace,"⁵ receiving a forgiveness or pardon we don't deserve. God's grace is extended to us before, during, and after our sinful acts and God is waiting to love us even more, in spite of the best and worst we can do. God's grace comes to us not because we've done something to earn it, never because we've done something to earn it, but because it is freely given. And, there are examples of this in scripture. In Ezekiel, God punishes the Hebrew people by loving them. "Yahweh says to Ezekiel, 'I take no pleasure in the death of a wicked man, but in the turning back of a wicked man who changes his ways to win life. Come back, come back! Why are you so anxious to die, House of Israel?,' God asks. (33:11) And we know, again and again, that Israel is the standing metaphor and symbol for the individual soul and all of history. What hope this gives us all!⁶

As Christians, **will we** engage in the commonly sought justice with its basis in retribution, turning the knife, getting our pound of flesh, or are we able to stretch ourselves toward restorative justice?

Restorative justice begins in us as we admit what we have done wrong. We also hear about reparations in our country and around the world, from Native Americans to African Americans to South Africans. And even before we consider financial reparations, we need to wade through the critical component of truth-telling, admitting our wrongs out loud.

In the United States, Congress and individual states have debated the details of who will bear the costs of a **reparations** program. These hearings and deliberations have

⁴ Rohr, Richard. Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps (p. 57). Franciscan Media. Kindle Edition.

⁵ IBID

⁶ IBID, pp. 60-61.

overlooked one component crucial to addressing the ongoing structural racism in the United States: truth-telling. The Washington Post asks the question, “Can community reparations—which will prioritize African Americans’ access to services, institutional reform, scholarships for African American children, symbolic measures such as a public apology for past wrongs—make a difference? Yes, but only if accompanied by a public truth-telling project that addresses continued white denialism, exposes the realities of racism, and makes clear the consequences of decades of inaction.”⁷ Truth-telling, not the truth that we wish for but the truth of what has happened, and honest assessment are crucial components **of** reconciliation and reparation. AA’s Step 5 does not let anyone slide by too easily, insisting on the sharing of “the exact nature of our wrongs.” Step 5 restores an idea of peer accountability and personal responsibility for our mistakes and failures.⁸

In looking at restorative justice, we move sin from the individual to the corporate arena, and peer into the notion of social sin—offenses against the common good, the family, the neighborhood, the rest of creation—which we peered into last month in the Season of Creation, or the future.⁹

As we look at the sin we carry, is it personal or is it corporate? If you have the bandwidth to hold this all, it is a case of **both, and**. We are responsible for acknowledging our individual sins as well as those that have been participated in against a community, a nation, a race, an ability or disability group.

So, we all have work to do. Our work is in the light. We have no perfect moral ground to stand on, shaped as we are by this toxic and complex time. We may not have time, or emotional capacity, to walk each path together. We are all flailing in the unknown at the moment, terrified, stretched beyond ourselves, ashamed, realizing the future is in our hands because we must all do our own work. We must be accountable and go heal, simultaneously, continuously. It’s never too late.¹⁰

God knows, God knows. God knows when and where we have fallen short, missed the mark, sinned. From two weeks ago, the scripture from Romans reminds us, I fail to carry out the very things I want to do and find myself doing the very things I hate. We can rest in the understanding that God’s grace proceeds us and has forgiven us even before we sin, even as we find ways to admit our sin, to ourselves and to one another, and to work to repair our sin in the world. Amen.

⁷ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/06/25/what-south-africa-can-teach-us-about-reparations/>

⁸ Rohr, Richard. *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps* (p. 64). Franciscan Media. Kindle Edition.

⁹ *IBID*, p. 63).

¹⁰ <https://email.cac.org/t/d-e-edjkduk-tlkrittuh-z/> (cac.org/daily-meditations/confession-not-cancellation)