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## **The ABC's of Faith: Confession**

1 John 1:8-9 NRSV If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

James 5:16 NRSV 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.

Proverbs 28:13 NRSV No one who conceals transgressions will prosper, but one who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.

Those of a certain age will likely never forget the image of Governor George Wallace, barring the door at the University of Alabama, vowing that two African-American students who wanted to attend would never, ever do so, as he followed through on what he'd said in his inaugural address as governor: "*Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.*" It is but one of a collage of images from those years that we now look on in horror:

- The tiny bodies of four little dead girls carried out from their Sunday School class in a firebombed church in Birmingham.
- Police Bull Connor unleashing fire-hoses and vicious attack dogs on college students, teenagers, and children in the streets of Birmingham.
- The Selma, Alabama, sheriff commandeering police officers and state troopers to beat, tear-gas, and cattle-prod men, women, ministers, nuns, rabbis, all dressed in their finest, as they sought to walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge to petition for voting rights for all Americans.
- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – whose legacy, inspiration, and witness we

oh-so-rightly honor today – courageously striding along the same highway where civil rights workers had been harassed, beaten, and shot, and courageously standing firm for the moral power of non-violence against those who would understandably want to respond with violence in response to these evils perpetrated on them.

Less well known, but also powerful in its unexpectedness was what Governor Wallace did and said thirty years later. Do you know that story? This time, it was not a moment of defiance, but a moment of **confession**, three decades to the day after that march from Selma. It happened in a church in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1995, where Wallace, then 75, first held hands along with 300 others singing “*We Shall Overcome*,” and then confessed that he had been wrong. It was the same confession he had made a few years earlier in the Dexter Avenue Church in Montgomery – where Dr. King had been the pastor – when he said “*I have learned what suffering means. In a way that was impossible [before I was shot], I think I can understand something of the pain black people have come to endure. I know I contributed to that pain, and I can only ask your forgiveness.*”<sup>1</sup> In response to Wallace’s confession, Congressman John Lewis – whom Wallace had also harassed and sought to intimidate when he was a civil rights leader in the ‘60s – said “*Mr. Wallace deserves recognition for seeking redemption for his mistakes, for his willingness to change and to set things right with those he harmed and with his God.*”<sup>2</sup> One writer pointed out the irony of the Governor’s confession, spoken in

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/daily/sept98/wallace031795.htm>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.nytimes.com/1998/09/16/opinion/forgiving-george-wallace.html>

Dr. King's own church, as being a perfect example of what Dr. King had once said from that very pulpit: *"Forgiveness does not mean ignoring what has been done or putting a false label on an evil act. It means, rather, that the evil act no longer remains as a barrier to the relationship."*<sup>3</sup>

**Confession.** The story of Governor Wallace's actions and subsequent confession may be a powerful and poignant one for this weekend, but there are also so many other confession stories – ranging from the profound to the trivial and tawdry – that we could also name from the last few years: Anthony Weiner, Ted Haggard, Rob Ford, Lance Armstrong, Bill Clinton, David Petraeus, Jim Bakker, Marion Jones, Mark Sanford. Apparently confession is good for the soul – or at least it can sometimes be a prudent political tactic – but let's face it: we're not so sure about confession in the church or about its role in our lives as Christians. In fact, when I planned this sermon series, I thought there would be lots of materials and sermons I could look at on this topic, but I was surprised. Virtually no mainline church preacher that I could find has preached much on this topic and the ones who do preach on the passage from James that is one of our scriptures for the morning speed right past the word "confession" and head quickly instead to "prayer." A member of a former church once said to me that she expected to be warned whenever there was a litany of confession in the worship bulletin so she could stay home that day because, as she said, *"my sins are my own damn business and no one else's!"* 19<sup>th</sup> century journalist – she was the "Dear Abby" of her day – Dorothy Dix would have agreed with that sentiment when she said

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<sup>3</sup>Quoted in <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/daily/sept98/wallace031795.htm>

*“Confession is always weakness. The grave soul keeps its own secrets, and takes its own punishment in silence.”*

Yet, the fact is, the Bible just does not agree, does it? For the Apostle James says it plainly “..confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another.” And John reminds us with those very uncomfortable words that “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” Yet, he continues, again with **that word**, “If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us....” So, this morning, as I continue this Epiphany sermon series on “*The ABCs of Faith*,” let us see what we might discover about this notion of “confession” which indeed is one of those theological concepts and practices that goes back to the earliest days of the Church. To do so, let us start with a quick historical trip. In the first two centuries of the Church’s life, these verses from John and James were interpreted by those early house-church congregations as **imperatives** and worshipers indeed would confess their shortcomings and failings and sins to those gathered with them. But we also know that those earliest congregations took great pains to keep what was said within the fellowship, because confessing, say, that you did not truly mean and believe the oath you had been forced to swear to the emperor was something that could get you killed if word got out. It was only in the fifth century that confession similar to the practice we now know in the Roman Catholic church began, where folks were instructed not to confess their sins to one another but to the priest in secret. For you see, in early Church theology, the practice of confession became joined with an interpretation of Jesus’ words to the disciples where he had said “whatever you forgive your Father in heaven will also forgive” so that the priest was now the one to both hear a person’s confession but also

to offer forgiveness and whatever penance or punishment or restitution he deemed appropriate.

It was this role of the priest that the Protestant reformers like Martin Luther, 500 years ago, said was wrong. Rather, in the most fundamental claim that has animated Protestantism down to this day, Luther and others instead championed what he called *“the priesthood of all believers,”* meaning, among other things, that each and every Christian has direct access to the forgiveness of God. But here’s the thing: Over the years, in rightly rejecting the notion that an intermediary, a “priest,” is needed in order to experience God’s forgiveness, the role and importance of confession also dropped away. And then combined with the traditional American emphasis on “rugged individualism” we ended up with perspectives on confession like that of Dorothy Dix or of my former church member. Yet what I want to say this morning is that it is indeed time for a re-emphasizing of the notion of “confession” in both our individual lives and in our worship life together. Now, why in the world would I say that? Well, let me make two points:

First, why should “confession” be re-emphasized in our lives as individuals? One word: **accountability**. What do I mean? Well, long before the time of Jesus or the Church, the writer of Proverbs – our third scripture this morning – rightly observed *“No one who conceals transgressions will prosper, but one who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.”* Now, taken one way, we might well question this, for we have all known folks who did some pretty ugly things and yet “prospered,” as the world measures such things. But if we understand “prosper” in a deeper and less pecuniary sense, the writer of Proverbs **is** right: the things we’ve done or left undone that no one

knows about but which **we** know about can eat at us, corrode us, sap us.

Shakespeare's Lady MacBeth goes slowly goes mad because she knows she has blood on her hands from the murder of King Duncan and she cannot wash away that stain.

And while we may not go mad, nonetheless the unconfessed sins and hurts that we have done **will** eat at us. They will also make us feel more and more alone, more and more isolated, and there is then a vicious circle that can spiral us into dispiritedness and even despair.

So confession of such things to someone whom we know loves us, someone whom we can trust to be honest with us and not B.S. us, someone who has seen us at our worst and our best, can be healing and freeing. You can't move forward in righting a wrong until you are forgiven, and you can't be forgiven if you cannot share with someone who will help you move forward. That's what I mean by saying that confession is not about masochism or beating yourself up, but is about **accountability**. Every single person needs folks in their lives who help them to be accountable to the best that they want to be, and who offer forgiveness and hope and a way forward when they have failed to live up to those things. As one preacher puts it, "*Confession is naming the sin, before someone else, in the presence of someone you trust, and then claiming forgiveness as a reality.*"<sup>4</sup> My prayer is that each of you has such a person or two in your lives who can indeed help you do just that.

But, secondly, what about confession in the church, in worship? I continue to think that it is a vital and important and even essential practice. And so, from time to

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<sup>4</sup>[http://day1.org/1436-to make the wounded whole](http://day1.org/1436-to-make-the-wounded-whole)

time, we will continue to have a “Litany of Confession,” and in the pastoral prayer there will be references to the sins and shortcomings, the hurts and harms, that we have done and a petition to God for forgiveness. Why? Well, Willie Nelson once wrote a song entitled “*The Most Unoriginal Sin*,” and part of what we do in worship is to be reminded that we are indeed not alone in our sins and shortcomings, and, frankly, most of those sins and shortcomings are not as original as we sometimes fear in those 3:00 a.m. moments. It can be a comfort – even if a chastening one – to be reminded that others share our condition, that what we have done and messed up on others have done too! But most of all, we confess in the context of **worship** because we are reminded that way that being a Christian is never a do-it-yourself proposition; there are no self-made Christians and you cannot be a Christian apart from a community that loves the Lord like you do, that encourages your questions, that cares for you when you’re hurting, that gives you an opportunity to invest yourself in things far greater than yourself, that assures you that in death or in life God is there. It’s just very, very hard to deepen your Christian faith all by yourself. Yes, you and I do and should have our alone moments with God, but they do not substitute for coming together with other Christians in a community. For as preacher and teacher Tex Sample once put it, saying you’re a Christian but you aren’t part of a church makes as much sense as saying you’re a pitcher or a quarterback but that you aren’t a pitcher for or quarterback for any team – you just pitch and quarterback all by yourself.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Inexactly quoted from memory

Congressman John Lewis had one more thing to say about George Wallace: “.../ had to forgive him, because to do otherwise -- to hate him -- would only perpetuate the evil system we sought to destroy.”<sup>6</sup> And his colleague, Rev. Joseph Lowery of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference said this of Governor Wallace after his confession: “You are a different George Wallace today. We both serve a God who can make the desert bloom.”<sup>7</sup> These are men who know – as did Martin Luther King, as did the writer of Proverbs, as did John and James – that confession is always for the sake of forgiveness, and forgiveness is always in the hope of transformation and new life, of washing away what had stained and making things bright and blooming and new and full of hope. Because that is what God wants for you and me and everyone. May it be so, may it be so. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup><http://www.nytimes.com/1998/09/16/opinion/forgiving-george-wallace.html>

<sup>7</sup><http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/daily/sept98/wallace031795.htm>