**CONFESSION AND ASSURANCE**

**1 John 1:5-10**

5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.

 6 If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true;

 7 but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

 8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

 9 If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

 10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

**Psalm 51**

<To the leader. A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.>

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.

 13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

 14 Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

 15 O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

 16 For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.

 17 The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

**Luke 15:11-32**

11 Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons.

 12 The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them.

 13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.

 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need.

 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs.

 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

 17 But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!

 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;

 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."'

 20 So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

 21 Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

 22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe-- the best one-- and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.

 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate;

 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

 25 "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.

 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on.

 27 He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.'

 28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.

 29 But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.

 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'

 31 Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

 32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

**SERMON – Confession and Assurance**

I had to put one of our babies down this week. Natalie was 14; my constant companion since I came to the States. She had some arthritis, but was still going strong, until she started seizing on Monday. Wednesday, I had to say goodbye…. I am not telling you this to get your sympathy – well, maybe just a little – but more to demonstrate a different point.

See, in her old age, Natalie became a bit of a grumpy granny. She came after me and the other dogs and the cats often; growling, biting, chasing, barking. And yes, it would make me mad. But, here’s the thing… even though I couldn’t always get close anymore, or always pat her little head, I could not hold any of it against her… I love this dog. She made me think that this is how God must feel at times… we forget, chase, walk away, curl our lips and what else, but he never let go, and never stops loving us.

Maybe the analogy is not the best in the world, since Natalie really never asked for forgiveness, but then, she followed me everywhere, making sure I never got out her line of sight (even in the shower). But it surely tells us something about God.

So, why am I telling you all this? We have reached the point in our liturgy where we come to the confession and assurance. Since I took on this gig as becoming a pastor in the church, people would come to me with a question: “Why are we doing this – I did not commit all those sins this week… why do I have to confess to these things? Let us do something more uplifting; more positive.” We hate to think of ourselves as sinners. It is unbecoming and harsh, and hell may await us, but that is a story for another day. But as long as we turn away from God and the way he has shown us; as long as we follow our own will, we are sinners.

We live in an age where few people confess - they just don’t like to admit the truth. Even when they do wrong, they just say, “Let’s forget about it” and go on. Confession or asking forgiveness may show signs of weakness, of giving up power, of admitting that you are not always right. It is so much easier to blame someone else or circumstances, than it is to take responsibility for our own deeds. It shows vulnerability, and who wants to do that?

And I bet all of you, or most anyway, are thinking – “Oh, here we go, a sermon about sin again”… Yes, I am against it also… But really, it is not so much about sin as what we do about it. I don’t have to tell you that sin is just part of the equation; we are all guilty, we all do it, and we are all aware; and it seems like we can just not get away from it.

It is clear from the Bible that it has been present since Eve ate that apple after the snake told her so, and then Adam fell for it and ate some also. It is present in the shame of hiding from God and not wanting to face him. We see it in Jacob, fleeing from Esau, Joseph’s brothers when they had to beg him for food, David once Nathan came to him about his adultery, the Israelites once they are in captivity in Babylon, Peter once he realized that the cock crowed, and the criminal on the cross next to Jesus.

That’s the thing with most of us… It is the shame; it is the consequences we have to live with after we made really bad choices; it is the hiding and guilt that drag us down. And of this David speaks in the psalm we read today; of his bones been crushed. In Psalm 32 he says that his body wasted away when he was hiding his sins. Peter went away to cry about what he did.

We see the same in the story of the prodigal son today – very familiar; in fact, so familiar, that I wonder if we are still shocked by the parable at all. This is what the son says: “Dad, you are dead to me. And since once you’re dead your last will and testament kicks in, I’ll take my share now.” It’s a truly awful thing this son did, and it makes him, properly, a loathsome character. He is a jerk. He’s a fool, too, of course, but he’s just not nice. Not pleasant. It’s hard to imagine anyone wanting to keep his picture up on their piano. But that was just the point. In Jesus’ triplet of stories here, we go from a lost sheep who was of some value to a lost silver coin that was of significant monetary value to a lost son who, though once valued as a son, makes himself into a very grotesque and undesirable character. He’d be easy to write off. In fact, most people would write him off. But his Father didn’t, just as I could not get mad at Natalie forever.

In fact, Dad continues to watch for his son, while he is living it up in some foreign country, squandering everything he has with his wild lifestyle. He keeps on watching every day, even when he son is flat broke, and hires himself out to a Gentile pig farmer, which is about as un-Jewish as he can get. The Father keeps watch while his son is sleeping in a pigsty, not even able to eat the slop; as the son becomes a man without dignity.

Dad is still on the lookout, when, in the midst of piles of pig poo, the boy "came to himself" and decided to go home. He realized what he has done; that he has been short sighted about all he had in the first place, and that he royally screwed up. Just as he had left the Father in the beginning, now he leaves everything else behind to go back home. He thought his sonship was lost but there is a possibility that maybe the old man will make a deal. And I can imagine that, as he was traveling back to his father's house, his pace slowed down, he wondered if he was making a right decision; whether his father would accept him. And as he got closer and closer his heart was pounding, his hands were sweating. He knew that he was in the wrong, and only he could take responsibility for his own choices and ask for forgiveness.

But Dad was on the lookout and, even with near-sighted vision, saw the glimpse of his son. And although he didn't see the full image of him approaching, he knew by his walk that it was his own. Then the Parable tells us that the Father ran to meet his son. The young man, emaciated, goes up to his father and begins the speech he had rehearsed, but the father didn’t let him finish. Instead, he welcomes him home with open arms. He tells the servants to bring the best robe for his son and even throws a party,

The young man had the burden of sin and guilt upon him, and the load was so heavy for him to carry, but the Father shows us that it is in these times that God is willing to meet us in our situations of despair. God meets us in overcoming our troubles, to heal the deepest of wounds, to endure the greatest of hardships for our sake. God is our hope for the hopeless. God is our strength when we are weak. All we have to do is to turn back around; to the feast that awaits us. To turn away from our disgusting circumstances, caused by our own doing. To turn towards the longing on our souls to be reconciled with the One that made us and will always love us.

This is what God requires of us as well. It is not enough to say that we’re sorry and then go on with our lives without true change taking place. When we truly confess our sins to God, it should be a gut-wrenching, wholehearted acknowledgment of our sin and plea for forgiveness. Whatever our words, the result of our confession should be life change.

There is an important thing to remember, however, regarding our personal confessions. Confessing our sins to God does not always equal a free pass on consequences. There may be times when God offers unexplainable mercy, but more often than not, we will still have to face the earthly consequences of our sins. Our own consequences vary, but it is important to realize that God’s forgiveness is worth far more than earthly consequences.

Robert Farrar Capon, and American Episcopal priest and writer said: "Confession is not a medicine leading to recovery. If we could recover-if we could say that beginning tomorrow or the week after next we would be well again-why then, all we would need to do would be to apologize not confess. But we never recover. We die. And if we live again, it is not because the old parts of our life are jiggled back in line, but because, without waiting for realignment, some wholly other life takes us residence in our death. Grace does not do things tit-for-tat; it acts finally and fully from the start."

This is the grace we read about in 1 John 1. We are told that when we confess – naming our sin, seeing ourselves for who we really are, humbling ourselves, God will forgive us; wash us clean; release us of the sin and guilt; of death to new life. And all God sees when God looks at you, is not see the sinful acts you have done, but he sees the sinless purity of Jesus Christ who stands in your place.

Because, there is another Son at the Feast. The Son who left his Father’s home not to squander a perishable inheritance, but to secure for us an imperishable one; the Son who was obedient to his Father, even unto death, not out of resentful duty, but out of humble love; the Son who is the spitting image of His Father. The Son who hung out with all the wrong people to bring them back home. Back to the One who imagines that those who are lost in a life they swore they’d never live, those who try to hide that shame or hurt they fear can never be understood, those at the point where they cannot even accept themselves, will come to know they are His beloved children and take their place at the Table; the Table for anyone who will permit their name to appear on the lost and found list.

If we can begin to imagine ourselves in that way, I bet that before long we not only will dance with abandon in the celebration of God’s love, we also will act in a way that uncorks the imaginations of others as they see us watch and wait and run out to anyone who might revel with us at the banquet of our God.