

# Confession and Forgiveness

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**July 3, 2022**

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When I was 18, I left the church. I left the church because it was so incredibly disappointing. There's nothing like being 18 to have a clarity of observing hypocrisy, right? That kind of thing that adults say to children and youth? *Don't do as I do, do as I say*. What a lot of bologna that is, and the church is famous for it.

*Love your enemies, except if you're our enemy in that case, we're not going to try to love you.*

The war in Vietnam was raging, civil rights were crazy, and my church had absolutely nothing to say about that. I did not understand that. I had gone to church school grades one through eight and heard daily—because I was there five days a week for school, on Saturdays for confirmation class, and on Sundays, of course, went to church and Sunday school—*God is love*. But they had a hard time practicing it.

So I left.

They had no room for my questions, and they certainly didn't want to hear my challenges to any kind of authority. It was a painful leaving. I actually had nightmares about that.

Eight years later, I found a different church. It was wonderful. People were welcoming and friendly; it was just really remarkable. It kind of redeemed the whole church thing

for me. And one of the things that they did really well at Christ Lutheran in Long Beach, California, was small groups.

If any of you have ever participated in a small group, hopefully it was a good experience. That certainly was mine.

One of the vehicles for conversation in small groups was that we would read a story from scripture, and then we would go around the circle and say, *well, who are you in this story?* That was a lot of fun. It was very engaging, and conversation was always really lively. Nobody had to fit in a particular slot. It really was life giving to me.

In the course of small groups at this wonderful church, my pastor took me aside one day and asked if I be interested in leading a small group. After having done that, he said, *well, I think you ought to go to seminary. Wow.*

That was affirming, so off I went. That congregation, God bless them, paid my tuition the whole time. In fact, they paid the tuition of five of us that whole time. They were really committed to people who had questions and challenges and would remake and renew the church in particular ways. I thought to myself, *this is the kind of church that I want to belong to, that I want to serve.*

My second year of seminary, I had a professor at the Baptist School. We could take electives at different schools, and I thought, *you know, I've heard a lot about Baptist preaching.* (I think one of my small goals is that at some point during this

sermon, some will stand up and say, *Amen, sister!* So feel free at some point, if you're moved by the spirit).

In any case, I took this class from this Baptist preacher, and he asked the same question that we had asked in small groups. We would read a passage of scripture and he'd say, *well, who are you in this story?* And I thought, *oh boy, I know how to do this. This is going to be fun. I love this kind of thing!*

But it was a trick question.

It was the kind of trick question Jesus used to ask. Jesus told a lot of stories that caught people off guard, that kind of unraveled them and maybe embarrassed them a little. You remember.

*Who is my neighbor?*

*What must I do to be saved?*

It always got turned on its head, didn't it? That was Jesus' way.

Well, this Baptist preacher knew what he was doing. *Who are you in the story?* He wanted us to unpack like Jesus hopes. As we read scripture, he wanted us to unpack those things that we are often unwilling to acknowledge about ourselves.

We might turn to Luke this morning and we might ask, *who are we in this story?* Kelly gave a lovely children's sermon about how we're sent out in pairs and how we're meant to bring the kingdom of God near. That actually was my first reaction: the story is about us.

We're the ones, right? We are sent out to bring the kingdom of God near in our world, to tell people about God's relentless forgiveness, God's resolute love and mercy, God's unwillingness to turn aside when we plead for God's presence. We are the ones who are meant to be bringing the kingdom of God near.

Luke describes this God nearness in some really specific ways. He talks about it as people who would go out expecting hospitality. When we encounter it, we are to just simply accept it, even when the hospitality is simple.

I can remember being in Mexico on a mission trip down in Cuernavaca, qnd, and we had occasion one day to go into a hut with a dirt floor. The woman who lived there had to wait hours every night to get water, so her ability to offer hospitality was very humble. She offered us a Coke. It was warm, because she didn't have electricity for refrigeration. And Luke would say, *just go ahead and take it. Don't embarrass her by saying, "Oh no, we can't..." Let her be generous.*

That's what Luke is encouraging as you and I go out: that we take what is offered with a sense of humility and loving kindness.

When Bill and I used to live in Southern California, we had this friend that we invited over, and I would always ask him weeks in advance. *William, will you come for dinner?* He'd say *I'd love to come for dinner.* And I would say about half the time, 24 hours before he was supposed to be there, he'd call with what really was that he'd gotten a better offer. I'm serious. It was just

kind of amazing. He wouldn't show up; he'd go with the better offer. Maybe they had a pool; I don't know.

Don't do that.

Luke says the other thing is to offer peace when we go out, no matter where we find ourselves. Especially when things get a little riotous or heated or angry, we can offer a word of peace when we go out. *Shalom, wholeness, kindness.*

Luke is very clear that when we offer that, people are cured in ways. You know when you're mad and someone is really just genuinely kind, how that kind of settles you a bit? That's a cure we all need.

So, this is who we are in this story: the seventy sent out to bring God nearness.

Well, if my Baptist preacher professor was here, he would nod, and not quite smile. And I'm imagining that Jesus, as we said, *yes, we're the seventy in this story!* Jesus would smile and nod and invite us to go a little deeper. Invite us to enter into this particular Luke story about the nearness, the seventy, the hospitality, and the wholeness that peace brings, wondering what truth you and I might find in there that makes us a little unraveled, a little uncomfortable, a little more accurate.

Do you ever imagine that we are the wolves into which lands people sometimes wander? That people who might come among us hoping for hospitality—a bite to eat, a welcome, an offer of

peace in return to their giving us peace—and that they experience us as wolves?

I've been a wolf. I don't like it when people change the way I want to do stuff. Like church. There's a right way to do it, isn't there? Of course, there is.

You're supposed to sit in the right way.

You're supposed to stand up and sit down repeatedly.

You're not supposed to make waves.

Things that have been done this way forever, we shouldn't suggest maybe a change.

Sometimes God invites us—gently and kindly—to consider that sometimes **we are the wolves.**

That happens in families. It happens in our house: someone comes hoping for a bit of kindness. Scripture is full and very clear that when the vulnerable come to us—the little ones, those looking for friendship, those looking to offer an idea about how things might be done differently—that we're supposed to welcome them, that we're not supposed to scare them or repel them.

I'm guessing that over the course of the history of this congregation—as is true of the church, all the churches throughout the ages—people have left shaking the dust from their feet.

Luke is so clear as he reports what Jesus says: that when you and I do not welcome the little ones who come among us, we have not listened to Jesus.

And Jesus ups the ante. He says *if they don't listen to me, they're not listening to God.*

I hope that you have some room to consider how we are both things. We are the seventy who are sent out. I see that in so many ways here: in the food bank, in the way you welcome each other, in the way you are eager to spend time with one another, in the way you offer hospitality and community. And at the same time, we are wolves. Martin Luther said it:

*Simul Justus et Peccator* – At the same time, sinner and saint.

Part of the task of the church is that when we gather, we are meant to discern when we have been God-near and when we have not. And that's an ongoing process.

Sometimes I am a great Christian, but I am an intermittent Christian. Sometimes there's static. **That's why I come to church!** I look forward to the confession. I want to say aloud with you. *I am a sinner. God have mercy*, because I know where we're going after the confession. We're going to the bread and the wine. The confession **and then** the forgiveness. Forgiveness that is abundant.

So, Paul writes in Galatians: *do not grow weary in doing right, for will reap at harvest time if we do not give up.*

Let's not give up! Correcting ourselves when we have been wolfish and rejoicing together when we have been God-nearness to those who come among us. For you and I in the midst of our brokenness—we said it in our confession—have been made clean of heart by our loving God.

So, who are you this morning in the story?

Amen.