

on the liberation of confession and repentance, looking up, looking at

As some of you know, I was not raised within the Episcopal tradition, but rather Lutheran. And, for the most part, this doesn't mean *that* much, except that sometimes different things may catch my attention within the service since I remember praying them when I was younger.

Within the Lutheran church I was raised in, the service began similarly to how ours does today, with the confession not just before communion, but rather at the start of the service. We would sing one hymn, then instantly move into the confession. And it began with the pastor saying, *if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us*, and we would respond *but if we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness*.

During Lent here at Atonement, we have used a form of the liturgy that moves our confession out of its "normal" position to just before the Eucharist, to the start of the service. And we are also saying those words that I find so strangely comforting, *if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us, but if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness*.

And I want to pause for a moment, before bringing in today's passage from the Gospel. These words about confession from 1st John, when I was younger, struck me as harsh. I very much wanted and still do want the truth to be in me, and due to my anxious tendencies, was very nervous that if I did not confess properly, did not remember *every little sin* that somehow God's truth would not dwell in me, and would not receive forgiveness.

Unsurprisingly, I do not believe that is what God is intending confession and absolution to be, where if we do not confess properly or somehow miss a sin that we are withheld absolution, withheld truth, withheld life.

The act of confession is not to somehow make us worthy or gain new access to God's forgiveness or grace.

As 1st John says, *God is faithful and just*. God does not become faithful when we confess. God does not become just when we confess. God is always faithful and is always just.

And so, confession becomes out of our own need for confession, our desire from God to not continue to deceive ourselves, and to name the truth. It is not only the absolution of our sins by the priest that is restorative, but the confession of them as well, the coming into the light, the naming.

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

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The act of coming into the light, of naming what is true, that is what is true. It is not that we have done only good deeds that is what allows us to come into the light and the truth to dwell within us, but that the very act of stepping into the light before God is what brings us to life.

And we see this with the Israelites today, newly freed from slavery from Egypt, and in the wilderness. The Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, which is also strange and complicated, and when the Israelites ask the Lord to remove the serpent, the Lord does not remove the serpent, but rather tells them to set a serpent on a pole. and the Lord says, *everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.*

The serpent has not been removed, but it no longer kills. And in order to not die, the Israelites have to look at what has killed them, what is killing them, what is killing us.

And so we are invited to do the same. We are invited to put our sins on a pole not to glorify them, but so that we can look at what is killing us, what is drawing us away from love of ourselves, of God, and of our neighbor. And it is through this looking, this looking at our sins with the knowledge that they do not have the final word, that there will be no judgement, that we are loved beyond all doubt, that this is *how* our looking at sins through Christ save us. There is not a point that we have to suspend God's goodness in order to look at our own sin. It is only through God's goodness and grace that we are able to look at what wrong we have done and what wrongs that have been done against us and are able to stand and live at all.

And I wonder about how this act of looking up that saved the Israelites. Most often within our own worship context, we do not look up during confession, but are invited to kneel, to look down, to bow our heads.

Not to go back to my Lutheran upbringing, but we did not have kneelers in my pews growing up. Yes, we did bow our head, but we did not kneel during confession.

And this is not to discuss what physical acts constitute as proper piety, because that is I do not think that forcing our bodies to do things during worship necessarily delights God, but how what we do with our bodies during the liturgy and during our lives help to shape our thinking and our actions.

But I wonder how our act of kneeling during confession, of looking down, could draw us away from an idea of confession as looking up at our sins, as looking up at our pain, as considering our sin not as things to be kept in the dark, but as things we look up at honestly.

Our sins need not to be things that we have to look at only privately, but things that we can all look up at together.

It is not that we have done good enough deeds that we are not worried about coming before God, but that we know that we have turned and do turn and will turn away from the love of God, ourselves, and our neighbor.

It is not that we have prayed enough or any of this. . .but as Paul writes...

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ-- by grace you have been saved-- and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-- not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

Because we have been saved through grace, through nothing of our own doing, we do not have to fear this looking at our sins. We no longer have to look down at them, but can look up.

And it is by looking up at our sins, we are able to look at the collective around us. We are able to not only bow our heads, but open our eyes, look and to live and to look at those around us.

I've heard a few times from parishioners from a few parishes that worshipping on Zoom allows them to look at the faces of those they are worshipping with and how much they have appreciated that. And, I personally find eye contact very difficult, so the intensity of multiple sets of eyes on a zoom call can be a bit much for me, I understand the sentiment. When I have worshipped around a dinner table or in a circle, there is a different dynamic of noticing and looking at others and ourselves during worship. The unspoken vulnerability of confession, of worship, becomes slightly less unspoken. You can notice people shift during confession, you look at someone as you say *we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves*.

And this looking upward at our sins, I think it can allow us to imagine a life beyond our sins, a life beyond what is in front of us when we look down.

As the German reformed theologian Moltmann writes in *theology of play*, *"Where repentance is understood as spiritual return to the evil and rejected past, it deals in self-accusation, contrition, sackcloth, and ashes. But when repentance is a return to the future, it becomes concrete in rejoicing in new self-confidence and in love."*

By looking up at our sins, by looking up at the Crucifix, by looking at our neighbor, we do not repent through the wearing of sackcloth and ashes. We do not repent in order to dwell in the ways we have turned from our God and our neighbor, but we repent in order to look towards the future, to look towards the cross as we approach Holy Week, to look towards the future.

Our confession becomes not one of self-punishment, but one of authentic reimagining of our lives and the life of the world that we help to shape through Christ. We are given the space not to look downward, but to look within in order to look up and to look around.