

‘True Confessions’. Sermon first preached at FUMC Palmetto, 24<sup>th</sup> August 2008

Let’s face it: we all like to hear someone confess. Being human seems to give us a sort of fascination with confessions. So people tune in a few weeks ago to hear the latest from John Edwards. Having long denied having an extra-marital affair, he finally confesses. He isn’t the first to confess after much denial and he won’t be the last. There is probably something rather unhealthy about our interest in other people’s downfall, their confessions of sin. Far healthier is our own confession of sin, be it small or large. So, we say together as a congregation a prayer of confession. We say such a prayer every Sunday morning. Why do we do this? Well, I would ask you to turn again to the prayer of confession in our bulletin this morning: *‘Holy and merciful God, we confess that we have not always taken upon ourselves the yoke of obedience, nor been willing to seek to and to do your perfectly loving will. We have not loved you with all our heart and mind and soul and strength, and we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.’*

Is there any one of us who does not need to admit this, to confess our lack of perfect obedience? The prayer goes on: *‘You have called to us in the needs and suffering of our brothers and sisters, and we have passed unheeding on our way. In the pride of our hearts, and our unwillingness to repent, we have turned away from the cross of Christ, and have grieved your Holy Spirit. We stand in need of forgiveness.’*

That last line is the key, isn’t it? We stand in need of forgiveness. Why do we offer a prayer of confession? Because we need to. We need to articulate the fact that we have turned away from the cross of Christ. We need to confess our recurrent acts of pride and lack of love. Such confession is healthy. Indeed, it is vital to our release, to our forgiveness and fresh start.

To be a true confession, we need to say it and to mean it.

As with God, so with other people, it is not sufficient simply to feel sorry. We need to say sorry. We need to articulate whatever it is we have done. ‘Sorry is the hardest word’, so the song goes. Is that true? Not always. When we are not really involved, when we aren’t really admitting getting it wrong, then it’s easy to say sorry. It’s easy to rattle off such a confession. But when real pain is involved, then saying sorry can be very hard. True confession is costly. And we wait, keenly, for forgiveness.

Then there is another sort of confession; not a confession of sin, but a confession of faith. Many of you will remember the series of sermons we had last year on the Apostles’ Creed. Let us affirm or confess our faith we say, also every Sunday morning. Usually, we follow this with all the statements in the Apostles’ Creed. Sometimes, we use another vital statement of our faith, such as this morning’s from Romans 8. Again we can rattle off such confessions without them really impinging on us, but a true confession of faith is a big thing. As you know, when the gospels were first being written, to confess that you were a Christian could result in physical persecution, even death. In some parts of the world, a confession of the Christian faith might still have such consequences. For any of us, however, to truly confess our Christian faith is a demanding thing. So let’s reflect this morning on Peter’s confession of faith and what it tells us about true confessions. It tells us that true confessions are both personal and relational.

Firstly, a true confession has to be personal. That is, only I can confess my faith in Christ. No one else can confess it for me. A true confession of sin is the same. If I've hurt someone, then I need to admit it and say sorry, however hard that may be. Imagine someone had deeply hurt you and you get a message saying that person is sorry. Does that really mean anything? To hear second or third hand a person's confession of guilt carries very limited weight, I believe. Each of us has got to make his or her own confession. I've got to sign on the dotted line, as it were; no one else can do that for me. Articulating the confession is a crucial part of making the confession my own, of truly meaning it. It's the same with a declaration of love. Imagine that the first time someone told you that he loved you, he did not do it in person but sent a message. Imagine a friend told you: 'He says: he loves you.' That is a very different experience from hearing someone tell you himself: 'I love you'. There is nothing like a declaration of love heard. No one else can love for me, so no one else can truly confess a love. And so with faith. No one else can believe for me. No one else can commit to Christ for me. Only I can articulate this commitment for myself.

Remember our gospel passage this morning. Jesus first asks his disciples who people are saying that he is. They reply with varying answers: all hearsay. What do these answers mean to Jesus. Well, it may be interesting to him that some conclude he is his cousin, John the Baptist, come back to life, that some think that he is Elijah, the one expected to herald the coming of the Messiah, and that others think he is Jeremiah or another prophet. This is what people say. This is a matter of information. But then he asks the disciples directly. 'But who do you say that I am?' One of them is prepared to give an answer. Simon Peter makes a personal confession. He declares: 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'

Unfortunately, we are so familiar with this story that it is hard for us to recapture the drama of this declaration. I believe, says Peter to Jesus, that you are the one. You are the one we have been waiting for, longing for, hoping for. You are the Messiah, the Christ, God's anointed. You are this, not in some abstract, intellectual way. You are this for me. I confess my faith in you as God's Messiah, God's Christ, God's anointed. A true confession is a great leap of faith. I recently came across a little saying, which I liked and wrote down. Unfortunately, I don't know the source of it, but I share it with you anyway. Jesus speaks to one of his 21<sup>st</sup> century disciples. He says: 'I've stopped expecting you to make leaps of faith, but it would be nice to see a hop now and then.' Peter, and the Gentile woman with the sick daughter we focused on last week made a leap of faith. Jesus says to each of us: can't you at least make a hop of faith. What is a hop of faith? What is a hop? How big is it? I kept hearing the word hop as I watched the women's gymnastics competitions at the Olympic Games last weekend. Perhaps you saw them, with all the emotional highs and lows for the American competitors. In between each performance and the declared results, the commentator would speculate on the upcoming score. He would say: it depends how big they consider the hop as to how much the judges deduct. For instance, did she take a little hop or a big hop on landing from the vault? Did she take a hop after her wonderful tumbling in the floor exercises? In this case, the smaller the hop the better. In the case of faith, the bigger the hop the better. Jesus asks us to make a big hop. Actually, I think he hasn't given up expecting

leaps of faith from us. What he wants is more like the Olympic gymnasts leaping from one bar to another in the uneven bar competition. It is very risky but it is essential to the exercise. A true confession is a leap of faith. It has no guarantees of a safe landing, but the very leap is a release.

Secondly, a true confession is relational. Jesus himself is in a relationship with God. Remember that Messiah means 'anointed'. Of itself, this means nothing. Anointing, literally having oil poured over your head to set you apart' must be done by someone else. You cannot anoint yourself in this way. So Jesus is called God's anointed because he has been set apart by God. Remember that at his baptism he hear God telling his who he is. It is not so much what he is or just what he is going to do. It is who he is. He is God's beloved; he is God's anointed, Messiah, Christ. He is God's son. Peter confesses Jesus not just as son. 'Whose son?' would otherwise be the question. No, he confesses Jesus as Son of the living God. Jesus is in relationship with God. And by confessing his faith in this, Peter is in relationship with Jesus and his God.

Being in a relationship is not something static, but something dynamic. Confessing Jesus as Messiah is an ongoing, unfolding process. It is not a matter of once stating this belief and then going on as before. It is a matter of repeatedly confessing this belief in the sense that it demands an allegiance. It asks for commitment. It demands surrender – again and again as life goes on. If someone says to us: 'Well, I did once tell you that I loved you.' it immediately suggests that he no longer loves us. The declaration has to be made again and again. A relationship between two people can only exist in the present. A relationship between any one of us and God can only exist in the present. What counts is what this relationship is now. A true confession in some sense actually creates the relationship. When something is said out loud, that act calls whatever is said into existence. When Matthew (and Mark and Luke for that matter) record Peter's confession, they are not just stating a remarkable claim by Peter. They are calling on each generation of believers to make the same claim. They are asking each person here today to affirm a living faith in Jesus as the Christ. This gospel story challenges each of us to make a daily confession. After Peter's confession, you may remember, Jesus says that any one who wants to be his follower must leave self behind and take up his cross – daily. A true confession is relational in that it affects not just our mind, but our heart, and soul, that is, our whole self. 'When we answer for ourselves, "You are the Christ", we claim both victory over death and the promise of the resurrection. When confession is only knowledge, then the cross is only death on a tree and the resurrection is only reward.'<sup>1</sup>

So a true confession is two things: it is personal and it is relational. 'The individual response of Peter suggests that each believer must offer a personal reply. It is not enough to respond to Jesus' question with what other people think, to repeat what others say, to accede to popular assent. Confession demands belief, but it also necessitates articulation, for the sake of our own affirmations and for the sake of that which is confessed.'<sup>2</sup> The question is not: what do you say I am going to do? The question is not about function so

---

<sup>1</sup> Karoline M Lewis, 'Reflections' on the Lectionary', in *The Christian Century*, August 12 2008, p 19

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

much as about identity. It is not a matter of what we do to please God. It is who we become. It is about our identity as his beloved children. It is about our identity as those who gather to worship God fully, both when we gather in the sanctuary and when we live our lives like people really committed to Christ's way. Let each of us confess: 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.'