

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on July 25, 2021.

CONFESSION

But they shouted even more loudly, “Lord have mercy on us, Son of David!”

Matthew 20:31

This summer we are seeking to learn what our experiences from the pandemic might teach us to improve our worship of God. Last week we began our focus on the major elements of our liturgy. We learned how the bell, prelude, introit, hymn and prayer of invocation call us to seek the presence of God. Today we move on to the confessional part of our service. This part of the service includes the call to confession, the prayer of confession, the kyrie, the assurance of pardon and the response.

All through this summer I have asked for your response to help us improve our liturgy. Your comments, positive and negative, help me be more responsive to the needs of our congregation. I have found it a great privilege to have the opportunity to preach week after week to the same congregation. One of the most important aspects of this process is that in many ways preaching over time becomes a dialogue. The response from you helps me to learn.

Several years ago, one of our members asked a wonderful question following the service. She wondered about the purpose of the confessional part of our service. Each week we recite words acknowledge our faults and sins, sing “Lord have mercy” and hear words of pardon. She wondered “Does not this practice just re-enforce a person’s feelings of inadequacy?” She also wondered that “When we first professed faith in Christ were not our sins forgiven? Why do we bring them up every week?” These insightful questions made me ponder why we have this part of worship.

I would like to make several points concerning the purpose of the confessional parts of our worship.

First the function of this part of worship is not designed to make people feel bad. It is not the intent of our liturgy to create a sense of guilt. The purpose of confession is not to manipulate people into feeling bad about themselves. The word “liturgy” comes from two root words which mean “work of the people”. A good order of service does not impose feelings and ideas on people, but rather reflects the emotions and feelings brought by the people to worship. The purpose of this part of the service is not to impose feelings of guilt, but rather to name those feelings people bring with them.

A second point I would like to make is that almost every worship service serves as a model for prayer. Worship serves an educational function. Thus, during the course of worship, we seek to experience a full diet of prayers. These reflect the many different types of prayer found in the Bible especially in the Book of Psalms. In each service the prayer of invocation gives glory to God. In our confession we share our brokenness with God. In our prayers of the people there are prayers of thanksgiving, intercession and petition. Thus, each service reminds us of the elements of prayer that we can follow in our private prayer. Worship is a school for prayer.

A third point is that our prayer of confession in worship connects us with the larger community of faith. Asking God for mercy is one of the oldest elements of worship that connects us with the earliest days of the Christian Church. The language of Christian worship, for most of Jesus' followers, was Greek. The common language uniting Christians in Alexandria, Jerusalem, Ephesus and Corinth was Greek. Paul would have prayed Kyrie Eleison.

When the Christian faith moved to the west the language of worship changed. Churches were planted in Rome, Spain, Gaul and the western portion of North Africa. Over time these Churches no longer worshiped in Greek. Latin was the language that was the common tongue for these congregations. The elements of worship were therefore translated into Latin. All of the service was translated into Latin, all except for one, the Kyrie. During all the centuries when Christians in the west worshipped in Latin the Greek petition Kyrie Eleison remained to link all Christians in prayer before God. When we pray today, "Kyrie Eleison" we link our voices with

Paul worshipping in a house church in Corinth,
St. Francis praying in Assisi
Martin Luther singing in Wittenberg
Russian serfs worshipping in Siberia
Irish farmers kneeling in Kerry
The Korean factory worker praying in Seoul
And the person sitting next to you
in seeking God's mercy.

These words help make us one in Christ.

A fourth reason for the prayer of confession is to remind us of our need for God's mercy.

Some of you were alive to remember the trial of the Rosenbergs. In the early 1950's this Russian couple was accused of spying for the Soviet Union. They were convicted of selling nuclear secrets. The trial was a long and bitter one. As the final sentence was pronounced, the lawyer for the Rosenbergs cried out, "Your Honor, what my clients ask for is justice!"

Judge Kaufman replied, "What the court has given them is what they ask, Justice! What they really want is mercy, but mercy is something this court has no right to give them."

The One who has the right to give mercy is God. That is what we ask in our prayers of confession. We are not asking for justice. We want God's mercy. Remember the story Jesus told in the Gospel of Luke that we call the prodigal son. Recall that after he squandered his wealth he came and asked his father to take him back. He did not come seeking justice he wanted mercy.

Remember King David's reaction after Nathan confronted him with his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah. David did not ask for justice he wrote Psalm 51, which begins, **have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love; according to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.**

Remember the story of the Pharisee and the Publican who came to the temple to pray. The Pharisee in effect asked to be treated according to his worth. He was asking for God to treat him justly. The Publican simply approached God by saying **“God be merciful to me a sinner!”** His only plea was for mercy. Kyrie Eleison! Without this prayer Christianity would be a philosophy, a history, a code but not a religion that saves.

We are to come into God’s presence asking for mercy, mercy that is available because of the love shown in Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, we come asking Lord have mercy upon us!

A fifth reason that we include a prayer of confession is because of its role in spiritual growth. One of the paradoxes of the Christian faith is that the closer we grow to God the more we are aware of our imperfections.

When we lived in Attica, I had the opportunity to go into the prison with a couple of different groups. One of the groups dealt with prisoners about to be released. Almost to a man they denied that they were responsible for anything they had done.

At the same time, I was reading a book about some of the early saints of the church. In their writing they were acutely aware of their sins. At first, I wondered how could this be? It seemed paradoxical.

When you look at your house in the night it looks very clean. Then comes morning the sun is out in full and you can see every streaky window and every bit of dust.

The same is true in our Christian life. The closer you are to the light of Christ, the more clearly you see where you have failed him. Thus, each step of growth in faith reveals some area in our lives that needs to be given over to God and transformed. Our growth in loving God and neighbor requires continuous confession and change.

A sixth reason for confession is that it is the password for heaven. C.S. Lewis tells an interesting story in his book “The Great Divorce.” A busload of ghosts is making an excursion from hell up to heaven with a view of remaining there permanently. They meet the citizens of heaven and one very big ghost from hell is astonished to find there a man, who on earth, had been tried and executed for murder.

“What I would like to know,” he explodes, ‘is what are you doing here, you a murderer, while I a pillar of society, a self-respecting decent citizen am forced to walk the streets down there in smoke and fumes and must live in a place like a pigsty.

His friend from heaven tries to explain that he has been forgiven, that both he and the man he had murdered have been reunited before the judgment seat of Christ. But the big ghost from hell replies:

I just can’t buy that! My rights he keeps shouting, I have got to have my rights the same as you! Oh no his friend from heaven keeps reassuring him, “It’s not as bad as all that! You don’t want your rights! Why, if I had gotten my rights, I would never be here. You’ll not get your rights; you’ll get something far better. You will get the mercy of God.”

Confession reminds us that when we are humble enough to ask for mercy God grants us entrance to his kingdom.

All of these previous purposes for confession are true, but for me the major reason I look forward to this part of the service is that it brings healing to my soul.

Listen to these words taken from a book from Eastern Christianity called "Orthodox Worship":

The word mercy in English is the translation of the Greek word eleos. This word has the same ultimate root as the old Greek word for oil, or more precisely, olive oil; a substance which was used extensively as a soothing agent for bruises and minor wounds. The oil was poured onto the wound and gently massaged in, thus soothing, comforting and making whole the injured part. The Hebrew word, which is also translated as eleos and mercy, is hesed, and means steadfast love. The Greek words for "Lord, have mercy" are Kyrie Eleison, that is to say, Lord, soothe me, comfort me, take away my pain, show me your steadfast love. Thus, mercy does not refer so much to justice or acquittal a very Western interpretation but to the infinite loving-kindness of God, and his compassion for his suffering Children! It is in this sense that we pray 'Lord, have mercy,' with great frequency throughout the Divine Liturgy.

The mercy that God can give us extends to all our hurts, desires and concerns.

In the prayer of confession,
I bring all my failings in the previous week,
All the ways I have hurt others,
All the ways I have let God down
All the things that weigh me down like a great stone.

And I share them with God saying Lord have Mercy. The great relief to me is that God takes away the burden, purges my guilt and makes me whole.

I pray for you that you too might allow our prayers of confession to give you the great peace that Jesus seeks to share. You and I have a great need, deep within us, for the mercy of God. May we pray with a sincere faith,

Lord have mercy upon us.
Christ have mercy,
Lord have mercy.