

## “To Be Continued”

Psalm 32:1-5, John 8:1-11

Confession, being good for the soul and all, is where we’re going to begin today. It’s also where we’re going to end today.

Confession is not baked in here at First Congo. We don’t encourage you to come by the office in the week and tell us all your sins. Really, please don’t do that. I think I’m safe speaking for the whole pastoral staff here in saying – we do not want to spend your time or ours that way. We are a people of festivals. We relish celebrations. We don’t stand up every Sunday and become a Greek chorus of our corporate sins. Yet I think some part of us hungers for it – not because we want to stand around feeling guilty and immobilized, but because we cannot be in real community if we are not honest with one another and honest with ourselves.

Confession is a powerful practice that shows up over and over again in scripture. It means professing the things we hold deeply, Romans 10:9 *that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved;*

And coming clean with one another:

1 Samuel 15:24 *Then Saul said to Samuel, “I have sinned; I have indeed transgressed the command of the Lord and your words, because I feared the people and listened to their voice.*

There’s confession of little things, the things that might embarrass us: I went through a lengthy stage in life where all I wanted to be was a cheerleader for the Chicago Bulls. I went to more than one N Sync concert as a tween and I loved every second of it. Confession is also the more somber truths: Like I confess to you that there are some things that are really hard to stand up here and say, because I love you, and I love this community, and I want to give you whatever measure of healing I can in the reassurance of God’s love for you. And also sometimes we just don’t want to deal with the fallout that come from lovingly challenging our community to be better than we are.

Before we go any further – an assertion: Confession is not about guilt. It’s not about shame. It is not about wallowing, the rehearsal of memories of our darkest moments and worst impulses. No, confession is about freedom. When I confess to you, to God, from the embarrassing or mundane to the deep and life-altering, I am choosing my own liberation – and I am inviting yours - because I am choosing to be in authentic community with you, honest with you, honest with myself. I am choosing to tell God that my trust is sufficient to look, with Christ at my side, at the parts of my soul I’d rather nobody ever see.

Confession: When I was in fourth grade, my friend Kenzie stopped eating lunch. I got really worried about her. Another dear friend’s older sister had recently been hospitalized for anorexia and I was convinced that that was what was happening to Kenzie. So I pleaded with her to eat. I talked my mom into packing extra dessert in my lunch bag to try to bribe Kenzie into eating. I was and am relentless when I get focused on something – as some of you have already experienced, and so I bugged Kenzie every single day. Finally my worry got big enough to tell our teacher, which I felt conflicted about because I didn’t want to get her in trouble but I was sure I had to do what was right. I was sure what was right. Then my teacher patiently explained to me that Kenzie was participating in her religious tradition by honoring something called Ramadan, something I’d never heard of, but that meant a safe and thoughtful period of giving up food during the day to focus on

her faith. I knew so much in my good, Christian sensibility about what was right and what was real and what was true. I was rocked to realize just how wrong I could be. Good grief do I wish that was the last one.

Confession: When I was in college at the University of Illinois, I learned that my dear friend Amy spoke Mandarin at home with her family, and that her parents did not speak English at all. They ran a Chinese restaurant in Chicago. So I asked Amy where she was born and she, clearly, concretely, informed me that that was a question rooted in racist assumptions. And I reacted like an absolute jerk. I was offended. How could she say something like that about me? I'm not a racist. I talked to mutual friends, seeking affirmation of my rightness, trying to hold at bay the ugly knowledge that Amy was right, that I would have to look at a part of myself that I didn't want to see. The part that was raised with a single story – that anybody who doesn't speak English at home was clearly not born here, because why wouldn't they just speak English? The part of me that then and now perpetuates harmful stereotypes, that believes things that are just wrong, that hurts people I love as a result. I churned for days trying to squirm out of my guilt on that one.

Never mind that we were friends in a context where every football game featured a halftime show with a young, white man dressed up as "Chief Illiniwek" to dance for a stadium full of almost entirely white people. Never mind that, during our time in college together, a spate of violence towards Asian American women led to us walking Amy places around campus out of fear for her safety. Never mind the countless micro and macro aggressions she and other students of color experienced that never even crossed my mind. I had a big paper due. I was infatuated with my new boyfriend. I was a nice white girl and I had had my feelings hurt.

It took me an embarrassingly long time to realize how grateful I am to Amy – for loving me enough to tell me when I hurt her, and having the patience to keep loving me when I handled it so badly, and to keep showing up to our relationship as I learn and grow and mess up again.

In today's scripture, Jesus was inviting confession. The woman who has committed adultery – we don't get any indication that she denied it, or tried to defend it. But the action in the story lies in the folks who are so quick to adjudicate, who are so certain that they are right and they are responsible for correcting the behavior of others. Jesus doesn't just tell them to knock it off and go be better. He sets parameters – that in order to be in the kind of relationship and community where accountability and justice can occur, these folks have to be willing to be honest about their own shortcomings. This isn't just a passage about Jesus putting people in their place. It's about him setting the prerequisites for the only type of community from which real justice can arise – one where we confess who we really are, all of us broken, all of us messy, all of us taking turns at being wrong. Then when we call for justice we are doing so from a position of truth telling – that my life, my liberty, my salvation are all wrapped up in your life, in your liberty, in your salvation.

Confession is uncomfortable and frankly radically countercultural, which is so like Jesus. It is the call to admit that we might be wrong. That we have things to learn. That we aspire to be people of love and welcome at all times and to all people, and we fall short of that aspiration. None of us likes to feel shame, and when we are told we've caused harm, we squirm, we defend, we point away, away, away, anything to avoid having to look ourselves in the mirror and reconcile who we wish we were with who we are.

Confession: There's this book I've been quietly evangelizing. I've wanted to shout about it, and I know some of you have read it and gotten so much from it too, but I've been cowardly about it.

Because I don't want to cause friction. I'll lose some folks as soon as the title is out of my mouth - when I tell you it's called "When They Call You a Terrorist". I might lose more when I say it's co-authored by Patrisse Khan-Cullors, whose name you might recognize as one of the genesis points for the Black Lives Matter movement. In her harrowing, convicting autobiography of her family's brutal experiences with racism, violence in policing, and her brother's mental illness that was not only untreated but maltreated during his incarceration, she also shares about the deep beauty of Black love and community she experiences, including a line, something she said to her father once as he was finding the courage to share his difficult story with her. *There is nothing about you I am not willing to know*

That book is more than worth your time, and would be just for that one line. *There is nothing about you I am not willing to know*. Can you even imagine?

I hope you can because that, my friends, is love. At the fulcrum of Christian love is vulnerability, authenticity, bringing our full selves to the story and being prepared to meet others in the fullness of their journey. Even the parts of us that are ignorant and cause harm, even the parts that we think are unworthy and unlovable.

God looks at us with that same love Patrisse extended to her father and then some. God loves us so well that there is nothing about us considered too small or too terrible, too mean or too insidious, to bring before our God and say – yes, I am also this. Can you still love me?

None of us are free until all of us are free, and none of us are free until we can acknowledge what we've done, what we are doing, when we fall short of the life to which God is calling us.

Because when we tell that truth, we get to begin writing a new story.

So this Sunday is a cliffhanger of sorts. In my home tradition, we pray a confession every week, and then are immediately absolved. Forgiven. And I know God's love is that quick and quicker. I wonder if, just this once, we can sit with discomfort. If we can be moved to contrition, to confession of our sins to God, to seeking the radical loving Christ who asks us to search our own souls first. I'm inviting you to spend the next week considering confession in your own life, to join me in intentionally looking at the things we'd rather stay hidden. To apologize and make amends where we need to. To seek understanding rather than digging in and defending.

And that's it. Confession is where we began today and confession is where we will end. We are going to sit with some hard feelings for a week. I preach next week too – so don't worry, forgiveness is coming. But for now, just for a week, we confess.

We have, each of us, fallen short. We come to the table insufficient on our own. And we are invited to the table anyway, sins and all. I'll see you there.