***CONFESSIONS OF THE HEART***

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Texts: Psalm 51:1-10 and Romans 10:8-17

This past week in chapel with our preschool children I talked with them about this liturgical season when purple appears all around us; to his credit, one of our Covenant kids knew right away that it was Lent. I talked with the kids about Lent as a time to prepare for Easter but also a time to think about things we had done that we shouldn’t have done and to say “I’m sorry” to God. I asked them if there were any things for which they might want to say to God, “I’m sorry.” There was the expected, “I knocked down my brother” and “I hit my sister” and “I didn’t share with my friend”, before I got the unexpected five-year-old’s confession, “I accidentally smoked a cigarette.” Now you will be relieved to know that we are not going to repeat that exercise here. Lent is a good time for you to try that exercise in the privacy of your own home – a time to confess what you have done or failed to do and to say “I’m sorry” to God. One writer has described Lent as “the equivalent of putting ourselves through a regimen of spiritual Pilates”[[1]](#endnote-1); if so, then confession is one of those contorted positions of the spirit which may be painful in the moment but is good in the long run for the heart and the soul.

Perhaps the most basic confession is simply, “I am a sinner.” That is a confession of sin like those uttered by our preschool kids that is the prelude to “I’m sorry, God”. But there is another kind of confession that is also part of that regimen of spiritual Pilates – a confession of faith – and the most basic confession of faith is simply this: “Jesus is Lord.” I am a sinner, and Jesus is Lord. They are both confessions of the heart, exercises in faith and faithfulness. Lent is a season for such confessions of the heart and such Pilates of the spirit. It is a season to examine our hearts, our lives, and our faith and to confess with our lips what we find there.

We don’t always like what we find when we look into the chambers of our hearts. Amid good-hearted intentions and light-hearted joys are hard-hearted stains that darken our lives. They are things we have done or do or fail to do that conflict with God’s will, and their sordid discovery leads to the first confession: I am a sinner. The sins are those we acknowledge and those we refuse to admit. They include those we spoke together this morning as corporate transgressions confessed in unison, personal wrongs confessed in silence, and sins tucked away in the recesses of our hearts that we fear to name at all. Unspoken, they may gnaw away at the fabric of our faith and the health of our hearts, and no cardiac surgeon can excise those stains.

In the Russian novel *Crime and Punishment*, Fyodor Dostoevsky tells the tale of Raskolnikov, a young Russian who murders two elderly sisters. One woman is killed for her money, the other because she stumbles upon the crime. The murders are the crimes. Raskolnikov’s anguish, more than his exile to Siberia, is his punishment. The poison of the crimes eats away at his spirit, for as he searches his heart, Raskolnikov hates what he finds there. Throughout the book he struggles down a dark, torturous road toward confession, in increasing conflict with the world, with himself, and with God. Only when he is able to confess his crimes does Raskolnikov find any peace. That confession begins the healing of his heart.

The psalmist too, speaking for David, is not pleased with what he finds in his heart. The confession raised from his lips in Psalm 51 is an anguished cry: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.” The words could have come from the lips of Raskolnikov –or from us. It is a clean heart and renewed spirit we seek this Lenten season, for when we search our hearts we are apt to find with the psalmist that our sin is ever before us, that our hearts are stained and in need of cardiac cleaning. We may not be Raskolnikov murderers, but we are all sinners in need of God’s cleansing grace. Have you found any of those dark nooks or desolate crannies where sin lurks in your heart? Have you dared to confess them, to name them before God, and to ask for God’s mercy and forgiveness? Might the words of the psalmist be your words? “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.”

If so, then know that your confession of sin is not an end, but a beginning. For, while the psalmist confesses his sin, he also confesses faith in the One who can save him from his sin. God alone can cleanse our soiled hearts and heal our wounded souls. God alone can renew and set aright our broken spirits. For, it is God alone who saves! The psalmist who offers up his confession of sin points us in that divine direction – toward the God who created us and re-creates us in mercy and in love no matter how tarnished we have become, a God who is waiting for us, longing for us to repent and turn back to the God from whom we so easily turn away.

For the people of Israel that good news was a source of hope and promise that inspired them to keep the Law as those whom God would save. In the early church the message of Jesus brought fresh hope and a renewed perspective of salvation through Christ’s death and resurrection. But tensions arose among those early believers as Jewish Christians asserted the need to keep the Law while Gentile Christians asserted that faith in Christ was all that was needed. In writing to them, Paul suggests that all those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and believe in their hearts that God raised him from the dead are saved – Gentile Christian and Jewish Christian alike. “No one who believes in him will be put to shame,” writes Paul. In doing so, he is affirming their unity in Christ – specifically in the Lordship of Christ – over against all their other differences.

Too often this passage is cited as a determinant for salvation between the Christian and the non-Christian. But that was not the issue with which the Church in Rome was wrestling. Paul was addressing the conflict among Christians, and his conclusion was that their divergent practices – whether to keep the law or not – was not a basis for salvation. Their common faith in the resurrected Christ as Lord saved them all!

Friday the Pope and the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church met in an historic meeting. For over a thousand years the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox Church have been divided, and while the meeting of these leaders did not conclusively bridge the gap, it was a beginning. In comments on the PBS Newshour Friday evening, a representative of the Roman Catholic Church affirmed the unity of all Christians around the world – Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant – in this belief: Jesus is Lord. It is that affirmation that Christians have been making for 2000 years, and while we have been divided in many other ways over that time, it is that confession of faith we still hold in common: Jesus is Lord!

What does it mean to confess “Jesus is Lord”? In the New Testament the word *lord* is often used as a title of respect or authority for anyone with power over another. At other times it is a title of address like “sir” as in the hymn, “Lord, I want to be a Christian”. The *lord* in the song was not Jesus, but the minister, perhaps Samuel Davies here in Virginia, whose permission was sought by a slave aspiring to be a Christian. Is a confession that “Jesus is Lord” no more than this, a statement of respect? If so, then Jesus is a good person, someone to be respected, perhaps even honored, but no more. He would be a lord among a host of lords.

But our confession “Jesus is Lord” is a confession of faith that Jesus is THE Lord over all other lords. At the time that confession of faith arose, Caesar claimed to be Lord. Thus the confession “Jesus is Lord” was a rejection of “Caesar as Lord”. In the Hebrew scriptures the name of God is too holy to be spoken, so God is addressed as *Adonai* which means “LORD”. *Lord* is the divine name by which we address God. It is this “Lord” that we confess in “Jesus is Lord”. He is Lord over all things and all people, for as George MacLeod declares: “Jesus is Lord of all, or he is not lord at all.” He is Lord of Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, male and female, gay and straight, old and young, the Lord of all races and all nations in all places. He is Lord of all!

As Lord of all, he alone can save all people and all things as Lord over life and death. That is the good news of Easter toward which we journey this Lenten season. “Jesus is Lord” affirms that we belong to Christ and to no other. We are dependent upon him and seek to do his will. It is a bold confession of faith despite its brevity – just three short words that have the power to transform our lives. It is in the power of transformed lives, not just the speaking of the words, that we find salvation. “Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven,” says Jesus. “But only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.” Not just with our lips, but also with our hearts and lives we confess “Jesus is Lord”. Words alone are hollow. Actions alone are empty. “Jesus is Lord” is not just a confession of faith; it is a way of life.

I am a sinner and Jesus is Lord – these are our confessions, a confession of sin and a confession of faith. We need both, for without confessing our sin we would not appreciate the salvation offered to us in Jesus Christ. Without confessing Jesus as Lord, we would have no hope of salvation from our sin, for we cannot save ourselves. As you walk the road through these forty days of Lent to Jerusalem, to Calvary and the empty tomb, carry with you these confessions in your heart and of your heart. For, they are reminders of why Jesus walked this road before us and for us – so that all who call on the name of the Lord, even sinners like you and me, might be saved. To God be the glory – now and forever. Amen and amen.

1. Jodi Craiglow, “Extending Our Spiritual Stamina: Lenten Exercises from Christian Education”, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, Feb. 15, 2015, p.15 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)