

“STANDING NAKED BEFORE GOD”

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My friend, the Rev. Shawnthea Monroe, the UCC pastor in Shaker Heights, Ohio, tells of a man visiting her office to discuss their order of worship. “The prayer of confession has got to go,” he said bluntly. “All that talk about sin is depressing. I don’t come to church to feel bad about myself.” She tried to explain how essential confession and pardon are to our Christian way. Her words fell on deaf ears. Shawnthea writes: “Going to church and not talking about sin is like going to the gym and paying a personal trainer to tell you that you look great: you know it’s not true and that’s not truly why you came.” I had a trainer in Greenwich like that.

But let’s extend her analogy. How long would Yale Law School exist if they soft-pedaled how humans make commitments only to renege on our promises? How would New York-Presbyterian Hospital do saying, we no longer believe human flesh is vulnerable to breakdown and corruptible by disease? It is all in your head. Or can you imagine Darien High School not taking seriously human ignorance, just passing it off? “Our kids here are already smart enough. We want to affirm them to feel good about that.” How quickly would you pull your child out of DHS?

Similarly, as we ignore the deep spiritual fact of sin and how it marks people, the church will cease to exist. If human sin isn’t real, and if it isn’t a deep, abiding blot marring life on the earth, then Christ’s church really has no reason to exist. You see, the church doesn’t exist just to make nice people nicer. The church exists to reconcile heaven and earth, end age-old enmities, and to deeply transform us. And if we are serious about any and all of those, we need to go deeper than nice.

Reinhold Niebuhr, America’s greatest theologian and ethicist of the 20th century, and a pastor from our German side of the UCC, wryly observed he had no idea why liberals refuse to believe in the Christian teaching on sin. It is our only doctrine, he said, that empirically repeats and proves itself with each new generation.

Our Christian description of life doesn’t shy away from its tragic side. Yes, we believe God created the world and it was good. We never lose track of that. But we also know life can be dark, violent and brutal. Our hope isn’t naïve. Our eyes are wide open. So we notice both this world’s glowing beauty and deep cruelty. Now, because our calling is not to smooth things over in a feel-good way, but to tell the whole truth in a world where lies too often carry the day, we hold the two--hope and truth--in tension. Our message becomes paradoxical. Yes, this life is God’s wondrous gift. But the world is also painfully fallen, broken by *our* human offense.

Not just Isis and drug cartels and human traffickers. We are all made out of the same stuff. Sin isn’t about the accumulation of even the worst things humans do. Sin is living in rebellion against God, like Adam and Eve in the garden. Martin Luther said, “The essence of sin is that in everything, even in seeking God, we seek

for ourselves.” That means even as we try to sound noble and do the right thing, we typically sneak in our personal agendas, God’s will and way coming second. Yes, our faith is about proclaiming God’s victorious love. But without the whole deep truth, face it, love becomes soft and sappy, lacking power to transform life.

We confess sin not to wallow in despair over how terrible we are. We confess our sin so that we might be free of it and move on. As Luther said, sin is always self-involved, behaving like *we* are the center of the universe, and expecting all things to array themselves around *us* and conform to *our* whims. As we confess, we restore God back at the center of all things. As we do, we can’t help but find our rightful place in the scheme of things. I tell you, there is great freedom in that.

Jesus didn’t come to increase burden but to alleviate it. He criticized the religious leaders of the time who piled more burdens upon the common man. He sought to replace burden with blessing. Leaf through the gospels and hear how often he proclaims, “Your sins are forgiven.” Jesus said it as blessing, not as accusation. He was freeing them, not condemning them. So confession works paradoxically. C.S. Lewis commented on how Christianity seems like bad news in the short run, but how there could not possibly be ever better news for humans in the long run.

Psychiatrist Scott Peck rightly says, “evil arises in the refusal to acknowledge our own sins.” We hold with that paradoxical affirmation, that our admission of wrong keeps evil from getting out of hand. It keeps humans from denying, rationalizing, projecting on to others, scapegoating and even destroying them in extreme cases.

Pastor Molly Phinney Baskette, of the UCC church in Somerville, Massachusetts, has a new book called *Standing Naked Before God: the Art of Public Confession*. Baskette traces her congregation’s slow and steady return from the brink of death.

“Our miraculous growth has been manifested in the scads of millennials in our pews, the buzz of babies in the back of worship, the wild games of tag that happen in our sanctuary during coffee hour.” (*Does that sound familiar?*) “Where once we were a graveyard, now we are a three-ring circus...People keep asking me: what’s the one thing you did to turn things around? ... I say this one, this one thing is the most important—to make space for telling the truth about our lives.”

“Sin has fallen out of favor in mainline Protestant churches. In a backlash against the perceived severity and bigotry of the Catholic and fundamentalist churches, many of the people in our pews have left behind, have denied ourselves much that is helpful, liturgically and theologically. ‘It seems so negative to talk about sin,’ is what I often hear. Maybe, I respond. But: better out than in. I want my sin where I can see it, in the clear light of day. It is much less of a threat there—I can track its movements. Bringing our sins and slipups out where everybody can see them means we can learn to laugh at them. The monster in the closet at 2 a.m. is terrifying, but in the full daylight sun of morning, it is a house mouse, with antics.”

“One reason some fundamentalist sects have grown, sometimes exponentially, when kinder, easier churches have declined and died, is because they’ve asked their followers to do hard things. They have made religion akin to a great adventure. Challenged to heroic tasks, their people found out what they were capable of...For decades the mainline Protestant church has settled for something less than total truthfulness. We have not asked each other to do hard things, like give generously, or serve sacrificially, or reveal our wounds. But if we don’t ask that of each other and of ourselves--to do these--we never find out what we’re made of.”

Thank you for listening to Molly’s longish quote. I share it because it recalls a talk Gary and I shared last week. We’re at a special moment in our common life. It is a moment of tremendous opportunity we haven’t known for a long while. How will we handle it? Will we dare to traverse distant seas, led out of our comfortable, at ease selves, for something greater, like Pilgrims of old who endured a dangerous voyage only to create a whole new way of life here within a hostile wilderness? We still remember and talk about their greatness for good reason. Or are we content merely to remain in the shallows, splash a little, and congratulate ourselves?

Interestingly, every great journey outward must begin inwardly with a searching gut-check of an inventory. Who am I, really? What do I hold most dear? Is that where I offer myself, and my resources of time, talent, and treasure? Do I experience the wholeness and integrity that only results from complete transparency? Is my Saturday night self seamlessly congruent with my Sunday morning self? The intrepid Pilgrims, I am telling you, were as searching as that and much more.

A community daring such a life, a life of trust and strength in mutuality together and partnership with God, is going places. We see glimpses of that in the church, but all too rarely its consummation. Often we see it more in the world around us.

We have five AA meetings that gather here at First Congregational Church. We all know the complete candor of self-disclosure they risk within their gatherings. We can learn from them, not just such searing honesty, but how they show up and stick up for each other. This is why I say in the church we are meant to venture sharing more of the truth of our lives and what we observe rather than less. Until we take off the masks we complain about others wearing, are we any better?

Poet T. S. Eliot once declared that humankind “cannot stand very much reality.” As Christ’s church, we try for a stronger dose of reality than the rest of the world. Such honesty is a basis for a community changing individual lives and the world.

I end with this quote from Anne Lamott. I find it curious that most of my quotes today, deeply grasping confession and sin, are from women. My theory on this? They likely understand it so well because they must live with men. “Your problem,” writes Lamott, “is how you are going to spend this one odd and precious life you have been issued. Whether you’re going to live it trying to look good and creating the illusion that you have power over people and circumstances, or

whether you are going to taste it, enjoy it, and find out the truth about who you are." I for one recommend the latter. And the church is where we get that chance. Amen.